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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Obama Can't Turn the Page on Bush

By [FRANK RICH](#)

TO paraphrase Al Pacino in “Godfather III,” just when we thought we were out, the Bush mob keeps pulling us back in. And will keep doing so. No matter how hard President Obama tries to turn the page on the previous administration, he can't. Until there is true transparency and true accountability, revelations of that unresolved eight-year nightmare will keep raining down drip by drip, disrupting the new administration's high ambitions.

That's why the president's flip-flop [on the release of detainee abuse photos](#) — whatever his motivation — is a fool's errand. The pictures will eventually emerge anyway, either because of leaks (if they [haven't started already](#)) or because the federal appeals court decision upholding their release remains in force. And here's a bet: These images will not prove the most shocking evidence of Bush administration sins still to come.

There are many dots yet to be connected, and not just on torture. This Sunday, GQ magazine is [posting on its Web site](#) an article adding new details to the ample dossier on how Donald Rumsfeld's corrupt and incompetent Defense Department cost American lives and compromised national security. The piece is not the work of a partisan but the Texan journalist Robert Draper, author of “Dead Certain,” the 2007 Bush [biography that had the blessing](#) (and cooperation) of the former president and his top brass. It draws on interviews with more than a dozen high-level Bush loyalists.

Draper reports that Rumsfeld's monomaniacal determination to protect his Pentagon turf led him to hobble and antagonize America's most willing allies in Iraq, Britain and Australia, and even to undermine his own soldiers. But Draper's biggest find is a collection of daily cover sheets that Rumsfeld approved for the Secretary of Defense Worldwide Intelligence Update, a highly classified digest prepared for a tiny audience, including the president, and often delivered by hand to the White House by the defense secretary himself. These cover sheets greeted Bush each day with triumphal color photos of the war headlined by biblical quotations. GQ is posting 11 of them, and they are seriously creepy.

Take the one dated April 3, 2003, two weeks into the invasion, just as Shock and Awe hit its first potholes. Two days earlier, on April 1, a panicky Pentagon had [begun spreading its hyped, fictional account](#) of the rescue of Pvt. Jessica Lynch to distract from troubling news of setbacks. On April 2, Gen. Joseph Hoar, the commander in chief of the United States Central  
[nytimes.com/2009/05/.../17rich-5.htm...](http://nytimes.com/2009/05/.../17rich-5.htm...)

setbacks. On April 2, Gen. Joseph Hoar, the commander in chief of the United States Central Command from 1991-94, had [declared on the Times Op-Ed page](#) that Rumsfeld had sent too few troops to Iraq. And so the Worldwide Intelligence Update for April 3 bullied Bush with Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." (Including, as it happened, into a quagmire.)

What's up with that? As Draper writes, Rumsfeld is not known for ostentatious displays of piety. He was cynically playing the religious angle to seduce and manipulate a president who frequently quoted the Bible. But the secretary's actions were not just oily; he was also taking a risk with national security. If these official daily collages of Crusade-like messaging and war imagery had been leaked, they would have reinforced the Muslim world's apocalyptic fear that America was waging a religious war. As one alarmed Pentagon hand told Draper, the fallout "would be as bad as Abu Ghraib."

The GQ article isn't the only revelation of previously unknown Bush Defense Department misbehavior to emerge this month. Just two weeks ago, the Obama Pentagon revealed that a major cover-up of corruption had taken place at the Bush Pentagon on Jan. 14 of this year — just six days before Bush left office. This strange incident — [reported in The Times](#) but largely ignored by Washington correspondents preparing for their annual dinner — deserves far more attention and follow-up.

What happened on Jan. 14 was the release of a report from the Pentagon's internal watchdog, the inspector general. It had been ordered up in response to a scandal [uncovered last year by David Barstow](#), an investigative reporter for The Times. Barstow had found that the Bush Pentagon fielded a clandestine network of retired military officers and defense officials to spread administration talking points on television, radio and in print while posing as objective "military analysts." Many of these propagandists worked for military contractors with billions of dollars of business at stake in Pentagon procurement. Many were recipients of junkets and high-level special briefings unavailable to the legitimate press. Yet the public was never told of these conflicts of interest when these "analysts" appeared on the evening news to provide rosy assessments of what they tended to call "the real situation on the ground in Iraq."

When Barstow's story broke, [more than 45 members of Congress demanded an inquiry](#). The Pentagon's inspector general went to work, and its Jan. 14 report was the result. It found no wrongdoing by the Pentagon. Indeed, when Barstow [won the Pulitzer Prize](#) last month, Rumsfeld's current spokesman cited the inspector general's "exoneration" [to attack the Times articles as fiction](#).

But the Pentagon took another look at this exoneration, and announced on May 5 that the inspector general's report, not The Times's reporting, was fiction. The report, it turns out, was riddled with factual errors and included little actual investigation of Barstow's charges.

The inspector general's office had barely glanced at the 8,000 pages of e-mail that Barstow had used as evidence, and interviewed only seven of the 70 disputed analysts. In other words, the report was a whitewash. The Obama Pentagon officially rescinded it — an almost unprecedented step — and even [removed it from its Web site](#).

Network news operations ignored the unmasking of this last-minute Bush Pentagon cover-up, as they had the original Barstow articles — surely not because they had been patsies for the Bush P.R. machine. But the story is actually far larger than this one particular incident. If the Pentagon inspector general's office could whitewash this scandal, what else did it whitewash?

In 2005, to take just one example, [the same office released a report](#) on how Boeing colluded with low-level Pentagon bad apples on an inflated (and ultimately canceled) \$30 billion air-tanker deal. At the time, even John Warner, then the go-to Republican senator on military affairs, didn't buy the heavily redacted report's claim that Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, were ignorant of what Warner called "the most significant defense procurement mismanagement in contemporary history." The [Pentagon inspector general who presided over that exoneration](#) soon fled [to become an executive](#) at the parent company of another Pentagon contractor, Blackwater.

But the new administration doesn't want to revisit this history any more than it wants to dwell on torture. Once the inspector general's report on the military analysts was rescinded, the Obama Pentagon declared the matter closed. The White House seems to be taking its cues from the Reagan-Bush 41 speechwriter Peggy Noonan. "Sometimes I think just keep walking," [she said on ABC's "This Week"](#) as the torture memos surfaced. "Some of life has to be mysterious." Imagine if she'd been at Nuremberg!

The administration can't "just keep walking" because it is losing control of the story. The Beltway punditocracy keeps repeating the cliché that only the A.C.L.U. and the president's "left-wing base" want accountability, but that's not the case. Americans know that the Iraq war is not over. A key revelation in [last month's Senate Armed Services Committee report](#) on detainees — that torture was used to try to coerce prisoners into "confirming" [a bogus Al Qaeda-Saddam Hussein link to sell that war](#) — is finally attracting attention. The more we learn piecemeal of this history, the more bipartisan and voluble the call for full transparency has become.

And I do mean bipartisan. Both Dick Cheney, hoping to prove that torture "worked," and Nancy Pelosi, [fending off accusations of hypocrisy on torture](#), have now asked for classified C.I.A. documents to be made public. When a duo this unlikely, however inadvertently, is on the same side of an issue, the wave is rising too fast for any White House to control. Court cases, including appeals by the "bad apples" made scapegoats for Abu Ghraib, will yank more secrets into the daylight and enlist more anxious past and present officials into the Cheney-Pelosi demands for disclosure.

It will soon be every man for himself. “Did President Bush know everything you knew?” Bob Schieffer asked Cheney [on “Face the Nation” last Sunday](#). The former vice president’s uncharacteristically stumbling and qualified answer — “I certainly, yeah, have every reason to believe he knew...” — suggests that the Bush White House’s once-united front is starting to crack under pressure.

I’m not a fan of Washington’s blue-ribbon commissions, where political compromises can trump the truth. But the 9/11 investigation did illuminate how, a month after [Bush received an intelligence brief](#) titled “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S.,” 3,000 Americans were slaughtered on his and Cheney’s watch. If the Obama administration really wants to move on from the dark Bush era, it will need a new commission, backed up by serious law enforcement, to shed light on where every body is buried.

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