

The Post-Modern President

Deception, denial, and relativism: what the Bush administration learned from the French.

By Joshua Micah Marshall

Every president deceives. But each has his own style of deceit. Ronald Reagan was a master of baseless stories—trees cause more pollution than cars—that captured his vision of how the world *should* be. George H.W. Bush, generally conceded to be a decent fellow, tended to lie only in two circumstances: When running for president, or to save his own skin, as in Iran Contra. Bill Clinton famously lied about embarrassing details of his private life, and his smooth, slippery rhetorical style made some people suspect he was lying even when he was telling the truth.

George W. Bush has a forthright speaking style which convinces many people that he's telling the truth even when he's lying. But in under three years, Bush has told at least as many impressive untruths as each of his three predecessors. (See *The Mendacity Index* ®, p.27) His style of deception is also unique. When Reagan said he didn't trade arms for hostages, or Clinton insisted he didn't have sex with "that woman," the falsity of the claims was readily provable—by an Oliver North memo or a stained blue dress. Bush and his administration, however, specialize in a particular form of deception: the confidently expressed, but currently undisprovable assertion. In his State of the Union address last January, the president claimed that Saddam Hussein had ties to al Qaeda and a robust nuclear weapons program, and that therefore we needed to invade Iraq. Even at the time, many military and intelligence experts said that the president's assertions probably weren't true and were based on at best fragmentary evidence. But there was no way to know for sure unless we did what Bush wanted. When the president said on numerous occasions that his tax cuts—which were essentially long-term rate reductions for the wealthy—would spur growth without causing structural deficits, most experts, again, cried foul, pointing out that both past experience and accepted economic theory said otherwise. But in point of fact,

nobody could say for sure that maybe *this* time the cuts might not work.

This summer, when it became clear that Iraq had no active nuclear weapons program—indeed showed no apparent evidence of any weapons of mass destruction at all—that the economy was still losing jobs, and that the administration's own budget office predicted deficits as far as it dared project, Bush's reputation for honesty took a turn for the worse. By the middle of July, only 47 percent of adults surveyed by *Time/CNN* said they felt they could trust the president, down from 56 percent in March. The president's response to all this was to make yet more confidently expressed, undisprovable assertions. He simply insisted that his tax cuts would create jobs—and who knows? Perhaps someday they will—and that American forces would eventually turn up evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. But by then, the press was beginning to pick up on deceptions in other policy areas—the redaction of evidence of global warming in EPA reports, the administration's refusal to provide Congress with any estimates whatsoever about the costs of the occupation of Iraq. The White House seemed guilty of what might be called persistent, chronic up-is-downism, the tendency to ridicule the possibility that a given policy might actually have its predictable adverse consequences, to deny those consequences once they have already occurred, or—failing that—to insist against all evidence that those consequences were part of the plan all along. By late July, even a

Joshua Micah Marshall is a *Washington Monthly* contributing writer and editor of talkingpointsmemo.com.

paragon of establishment conservatism like *Barron's* columnist Alan Abelson was lamenting the president's "regrettable aversion to the truth and reality when the truth and reality aren't lovely or convenient."

The president and his aides don't speak untruths because they are necessarily people of bad character. They do so because their politics and policies demand it. As astute observers such as *National Journal's* Jonathan Rauch have recently noted, George W. Bush campaigned as a moderate, but has governed with the most radical agenda of any president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Indeed, the aim of most of Bush's policies has been to overturn what FDR created three generations ago. On the domestic front, that has meant major tax cuts forcing sharp reductions in resources for future government activism, combined with privatization of as many government functions as possible. Abroad, Bush has pursued an expansive and militarized unilateralism aimed at cutting the United States free from entangling alliances and international treaty obligations so as to maximize freedom of maneuver for American power in a Hobbesian world.

Yet this is not an agenda that the bulk of the American electorate ever endorsed. Indeed, poll after poll suggest that Bush's policy agenda is not particularly popular. What the public wants is its problems solved: terrorists thwarted, jobs created, prescription drugs made affordable, the environment protected. Almost all of Bush's deceptions have been deployed when he has tried to pass off his preexisting agenda items as solutions to particular problems with which, for the most part, they have no real connection.

That's when the unverifiable assertion comes in handy. Many of the administration's policy arguments have amounted to predictions—tax cuts will promote job growth, Saddam is close to having nukes, Iraq can be occupied with a minimum of U.S. manpower—that most experts believed to be wrong, but which couldn't be definitely disproven until events played out in the future. In the midst of getting those policies passed, the administration's main obstacle has been the experts themselves—the economists who didn't trust the budget projections, the generals who didn't buy the troop estimates, intelligence analysts who questioned the existence of an active nuclear weapons program in Iraq. That has created a strong incentive to delegitimize the experts—a task that comes particularly easy to the revisionists who drive Bush administration policy. They tend to see experts as guardians of the status quo, who seek to block any and all change, no matter how necessary, and whose views are influenced and corrupted by the agendas and mindsets of their agencies. Like orthodox Marxists who pick apart mainstream economics and anthropology as the creations of "bourgeois ideology" or Frenchified academic post-modernists who "deconstruct" knowledge in a similar fashion, revisionist ideologues seek to expose "the facts" as nothing more than the spin of experts blinded by their own unacknowledged biases. The Bush administration's *bêtes noires* aren't patriarchy, racism, and homophobia, but establishmentarianism, big-government liberalism, and what they see as pervasive foreign policy namby-pambyism. For them, ignoring the experts and their

"facts" is not only necessary to advance their agenda, but a virtuous effort in the service of a higher cause.

Tinker Beltway

To understand the Bush administration's need and propensity for deception, one must go back to the ideological warfare of the 1990s, which pitted Bill Clinton's New Democratic agenda against Newt Gingrich's Contract for America Republicanism. Clinton's politics were an updated version of early 20th century Progressivism, with its suspicion of ideology and heavy reliance on technocratic expertise. He argued that while government agencies or our relations with the international community might need reform, they were basically sound, and their proper use was to solve discrete problems. Crime on the rise? Put more cops on the street. Federal budget deficits out of control? Trim federal spending and nudge up taxes on the wealthy. Many in Washington debated whether Clinton's policies would work; some still argue that they didn't. But few ever questioned that their intent was to solve these specific problems.

Newt Gingrich and the House Republicans who came to power in 1995 held a very different, neo-Reaganite view. Deriding the whole notion of a federal response for every crisis, they argued that society's problems could be solved only through a radical reordering, both of government in Washington and of America's relationship with the world. This required tax cuts to drain money out of the Beltway; radically scaling back regulation on business; pulling America out of many international agreements; and cutting funding to the United Nations. The Gingrichites were not pragmatists but visionaries and revolutionaries. They wanted to overthrow the existing structure of American governance, not tinker with it.

The contest between these two worldviews played out during the middle 1990s, and eventually the public rendered its verdict at the ballot box. In 1996, Clinton decisively won reelection and Gingrich's GOP lost seats in the House. Then in 1998, at the height of impeachment, the House GOP lost even more seats—marking the first time since 1934 that the party in the White House won seats during a midterm election—and Clinton's job approval rating soared as high as it ever would during his eight years in office.

Voters had chosen problem-solving moderation over radical revisionism—and perceptive GOP leaders knew it. Following the 1998 electoral setback, they quieted their talk of revolution and mulled over how to soften their image. More and more of them gravitated towards the son of former president George H.W. Bush, the kinder, gentler Republican. Texas governor George W. Bush had a reputation as a pragmatist who made common cause with Democratic leaders in the Texas legislature. He launched his campaign for president not as an ideologue, but as a "compassionate conservative," who spoke the language of progressive problem-solving on issues such as education, and was perfectly willing to use the powers of the federal government to get results. Even when Bush proposed a massive tax cut during the Republican primaries, most commentators dismissed it as a campaign ploy to fend off his more conservative GOP rival, Steve Forbes.

After ascending to the presidency without winning the popular vote, Bush was widely expected to compromise on the size of the tax cut.

It soon became clear, however, that Bush would govern very differently from how he ran. Instead of abandoning the tax cut, for instance, he became more determined to pass it, for rather than being a mere ploy, cutting taxes was a fundamental goal of his agenda. Politically, it was a policy on which each part of the once-fractious conservative base could agree. It also rewarded the party's biggest donors. But most importantly, tax cuts would help shift the very premises of American governance. Republicans had come to view progressive federal taxation as the linchpin of Democrat strength. As Rep. Jim DeMint (R-SC), an up-and-coming conservative, told *The New Yorker's* Nicholas Lemann during the 2001 tax debate, "[t]oday fewer and fewer people pay taxes, and more and more are dependent on government, so the politician who promises the most from government is likely to win. Every day, the Republican Party is losing constituents, because every day more people can vote themselves more benefits without paying for it." By this theory, the more the tax burden shifted from upper-middle-class and wealthy voters to those of the middle class, the more average voters would feel the sting of each new government program, and the less likely they would be to support the Democrats who call for such programs. To put it another way, it was a policy designed to turn more voters into Republicans, particularly the middle class. Without massive upper-bracket tax cuts, DeMint worried, "The Reagan message"—smaller government—"won't work anymore."

But telling the majority of voters that your tax policies are designed to shift more of the burden of paying for government onto them is not a very effective way of eliciting their support. So, instead, Bush pitched his tax cuts as the solution to whatever problems were most in the news at the time. During the election, he argued that tax cuts were a way to refund to voters part of a budget surplus that people like Alan Greenspan worried was growing too big. By early 2001, it became clear that those surpluses were never going to materialize. So the administration cooked up an entirely new rationale: The tax cut was needed as fiscal stimulus to pull the economy out of an impending recession. In other words, the tax cut that was tailor-made for a booming economy made equally good sense in a tanking one. When the economy eventually began to grow again but only at feeble levels, the administration insisted that things would have been worse without the tax cuts (another assertion impossible to prove or disprove). And when, because of that anemic growth, coupled with gains in productivity, the unemployment rate continued to rise, the administration had yet another excuse: A new round of tax cuts, they said, would generate jobs.

The same technique—invoking the problem of the moment to sell a predetermined policy agenda—came to characterize just about everything the administration would do. Take energy policy. Oilmen like the president and vice-president have wanted to drill in places like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) for years because of their gen-

eralized belief that US energy supplies should be exploited as fully and rapidly as possible. But for a public increasingly enamored of the idea of protecting pristine wilderness areas, this rationale was insufficient to get the derricks pumping. Then, while the Bush administration was formulating their energy policy during the spring and summer of 2001, California had an "energy crisis." Suddenly, there was a big problem, and the administration had what it said was the perfect solution: drilling in ANWR and giving free reign to energy producers. But California's shortage had nothing to do with marginal supplies of oil, and we now know it had everything to do with companies like Enron gaming an ill-conceived energy privatization regime in that state. When that became apparent, the administration didn't skip a beat. 9/11 came soon after, and instead of heading off an energy crisis, the administration pitched drilling in ANWR as a way to safeguard national security by weaning ourselves off from foreign oil supplies.

Many pundits have mocked these constantly-shifting rationales as though the administration is somehow confused. But they only seem confused if you assume that the problem needing to be solved actually called forth the policy solution aimed at solving it. Once you realize that the desire for the policy is the parent of the rationale, and not the other way around, everything falls into place.

Trickle Down Deception

Iraq was the most telling example. Many neoconservatives from the first Bush administration had long regretted the decision to leave Saddam Hussein in power in 1991. During their years out of power, as these neocons hashed out a doctrine of post-Cold War American military primacy, Saddam's removal moved higher and higher up their list of priorities. He was, after all, the prime obstacle to US dominance of the Middle East. And holding him in check was generating serious diplomatic and military damage in the region.

Those plans to remove Saddam shot to the top of the White House's agenda within hours of the 9/11 attacks. The neocons believed that the threat of catastrophic terror required not just taking down al Qaeda but solving the root problem of Islamic terrorism by remaking the entire Middle East. And ousting Saddam was at the center of the plan. Outrage over the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia—put there to contain Saddam—had helped Osama bin Laden recruit his jihadists. And installing a US-backed regime in Baghdad could, the neocons believed, help trigger a domino effect against the old order which would spread secular, democratic regimes throughout the region.

But that was just a theory. In practice, Saddam and al Qaeda were largely unconnected. In fact, the two goals were often at odds with each other. When the Pentagon needed its top special forces to lead the search for Saddam Hussein, Michael Duffy and Massimo Calabresi of *Time* reported, it simply reassigned the soldiers who had been on the hunt for Osama Bin Laden. Again, a newly apparent problem—the al Qaeda terrorist threat—was being used to advance an existing and largely unrelated policy goal.

The effort to make the Iraq-al Qaeda connection stick gave rise to the administration's grandest deception: the charge that Saddam was rapidly reconstituting his nuclear weapons program and might slip a nuclear bomb—or the chemical and biological weapons he was thought to have already—to bin Laden's terrorists. "We know he's got ties with al Qaeda," Bush said at an election rally in November 2002. "A nightmare scenario, of course, is that he becomes the arsenal of a terrorist network, where he could attack America and he'd leave no fingerprints behind." To make that scenario seem plausible, the administration had to muscle all manner of analysts at the CIA, the State Department, and elsewhere. These analysts knew the Middle East best and doubted the existence of any Saddam-al Qaeda link. Nor did they believe that Saddam's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons justified the crisis atmosphere the White House whipped up in the leadup to war.

The clash spilled into public view this summer, after American forces failed to find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq at all. The media began to press White House officials on how false nuclear weapons claims had made their way into Bush's State of the Union address and other speeches. Administration officials have given shifting accounts, and tried to frame the story as a matter of procedural breakdown. But one former official of Bush's White House has suggested a more compelling psychological explanation. Writing in *National Review Online* this past July, former Bush speechwriter David Frum argued that "[t]he CIA's warnings on Iraq matters had lost some of their credibility in the 1990s. The agency was regarded by many in the Bush administration as reflexively and implacably hostile to any activist policy in Iraq. Those skeptics had come to believe that the agency was slanting its information on Iraq in order to maneuver the administration into supporting the agency's own soft-line policies."

We have since learned that it wasn't just mid-level aides who knew about and discounted the CIA's warnings, though we still don't know exactly how far up this dismissive attitude went. But Frum's point rings very true for those who followed the infighting between Bush appointees and the Agency over the last two years. Within the White House, the opinions of whole groups of agency experts were routinely dismissed as not credible, and unhelpful facts were dismissed as the obstructionist maneuverings of bureaucrats seeking to undermine needed change.

Indeed, this same tendency to dismiss expertise shaped the whole war effort. Just before the United States invaded Iraq, Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki—who had focused his tenure on peacekeeping and nation building—said that hundreds of thousands of soldiers would be needed to pacify and control Iraq. Days later, Paul Wolfowitz told another committee that Shinseki didn't know what he was talking about; the occupation, Wolfowitz said, would require far fewer troops. At the time, many took Wolfowitz's evident self-assurance as a sign that he knew something the general didn't. Now, it's clear that it was the other way around, and Wolfowitz was engaging in a typical undisprovable assertion.

Senior officials like Wolfowitz set an example that trickled down the bureaucratic ladder. One Pentagon civil servant specializing in Middle East policy described to me how, a few months after 9/11, he was chastised by a superior, a political appointee, for delivering a negative assessment of a proposed policy in a briefing memo to the secretary of defense. The civil servant changed his assessment as instructed but still included a list of potential pros and cons. But that wasn't good enough either. The senior official told him, "It's still not acceptable. Take out all the discussion of the cons and basically write there's no reason why we shouldn't [do this]." I just thought this was intellectually dishonest."

Hide the Baloney

That cavalier dismissal of expert analysis isn't limited to the national security arena. In the summer of 2001, the Bush administration was looking for a decision the president could make on the use of embryonic stem cells for medical research. His Christian conservative base wanted an outright prohibition. But such a ban would have alienated swing voters eager for the therapies that could come from that research, such as cures for Parkinson's disease. As Nicholas Thompson explained in these pages ("Science Friction," July/August 2003), Bush's advisors came up with a scheme they thought would pass muster with both the core and the swing voters: the president would limit research to only those stem-cell lines which existed already. But before the decision was announced, federal scientists warned the administration that there simply weren't enough reliable existing lines to be useful to researchers. The White House ignored the warnings, which have subsequently proved all too accurate, and went ahead with the decision, thereby setting back crucial medical research for years.

Look at just about any policy or department of government, and you're likely to see the same pattern. In July, *Slate's* Russ Baker reported that the Bush administration "muzzles routine economic information that's unfavorable." Last year, the administration simply stopped issuing a report that tracks factory closings throughout the country, the better to hide evidence of mass layoffs. The report was reinstated only after *The Washington Post* happened to notice the cancellation, disclosed only in a footnote to the Department of Labor's final report for 2002, issued on Christmas Eve.

The sidelining of in-house expertise is nowhere more apparent than on the environmental front. This Bush administration came into office just as the consensus was solidifying among scientists that human activity contributes to climate change. That consensus, however, ran counter to key administration goals, such as loosening regulations on coal-burning power plants and scuttling international agreements aimed at limiting fossil-fuel emissions. Rather than change its agenda, the administration chose to discredit the experts. As GOP pollster Frank Luntz wrote in a memo just before the 2002 election: "The scientific debate [on global warming] is closing against us but is not yet closed. There is still an opportunity to challenge the science." The idea that global warming was a reality that actually had to be grappled

with simply didn't occur to Luntz. Indeed, when questioned about whether administration policies might contribute to global warming, White House spokesmen direct reporters to the small, and rapidly diminishing, group of scientists who still doubt that humans contribute to the problem. In June, when the EPA released an Environmental Progress report, the administration edited out passages that described scientific concerns about global warming.

In any White House, there is usually a tension between the political agenda and disinterested experts who might question it. But what's remarkable about this White House is how little tension there seems to be. Expert analysis that isn't politically helpful simply gets ignored.

The Boys in Striped Pants

Educated, liberal-leaning professionals are apt to see this conflict as an open-and-shut case: Expertise should always trump ideology. This has been the case for over a century, ever since Progressive Era reformers took on corrupt city machines and elevated technocratic expertise above politics. Those early Progressives restructured government by turning functions hitherto run by elected officials over to appointed, credentialed experts. And many of the ways they refashioned government now seem beyond question. Few would challenge, for instance, our practice of assigning decisions at the FDA or CDC to panels of qualified scientists rather than political appointees. On the other hand, anyone who's worked as a political appointee at the higher levels of government and tried to get anything new done has been frustrated by the myriad ways in which bureaucrats manipulate numbers and information in ways intended to thwart the new agenda and maintain the status quo. There is a long tradition in American politics of finessing policy initiatives past stubborn bureaucrats. Franklin Roosevelt, for instance, routinely used amateur diplomats and personal intermediaries to sidestep the professionals at Foggy Bottom—the “boys in striped pants,” he called them—for fear that they would slow-roll, walk back or generally meddle in his chosen course in international affairs. As the historian Warren Kimball aptly notes, Roosevelt shared the conviction that foreign service officers believed that they had a “priestly monopoly against intervention by members of Congress, journalists, professors, voters and other lesser breeds.”

All of this is to say that the Bush administration's unwillingness to be pushed around by the bureaucratic experts or to have their ideas hemmed in by establishment opinion isn't by itself a bad thing. Nor is this administration the first to ignore or suppress unhelpful data or analyses from experts that runs contrary to its agenda—foolish as such conduct usually proves. But in this administration the mindset of deception runs deeper. If you're a revisionist—someone pushing for radically changing the status quo—you're apt to see “the experts” not just as people who may be standing in your way, but as people whose minds have been corrupted by a wrongheaded ideology and whose arguments can therefore be ignored. To many in the Bush administration, “the experts” look like so many liberals wedded to a philosophy

of big government, the welfare state, over-regulation and a pussyfooting role for the nation abroad. The Pentagon civil servant quoted above told me that the standard response to warnings from the Joint Staff about potential difficulties was simply to say: “That's just the Joint Staff being obstructionist.” Even if the experts are right in the particulars—the size of the deficit, the number of troops needed in Iraq—their real goal is to get in the way of necessary changes.

Après nous, le déluge

In that simple, totalizing assumption we find the kernel of almost every problem the administration has faced over recent months—and a foretaste of the troubles the nation may confront in coming years. By disregarding the advice of experts, by shunting aside the cadres of career professionals with on-the-ground experience in these various countries, the administration's hawks cut themselves off from the practical know-how which would have given them some chance of implementing their plans successfully. In a real sense, they cut themselves off from reality. When they went into Iraq they were essentially flying blind, having disengaged from almost everyone who had real-world experience in how effective occupation, reconstruction, and nation-building was done. And much the same can be said of the administration's take on economic policy, environmental policy, and in almost every sort of policy question involving science. Muzzling the experts helped the White House muscle its revisionist plans through. But in numerous cases, it prevented them from implementing even their own plans effectively.

Everyone is compromised by bias, agendas, and ideology. But at the heart of the revisionist mindset is the belief that there is really nothing more than that. Ideology isn't just the prism through which we see the world, or a pervasive tilt in the way a person understands a given set of facts. Ideology is really all there is. For an administration that has been awfully hard on the French, that mindset is . . . well, rather French. They are like deconstructionists and post-modernists who say that *everything* is political or that *everything* is ideology. That mindset makes it easy to ignore the facts or brush them aside because “the facts” aren't really facts, at least not as most of us understand them. If they come from people who don't agree with you, they're just the other side's argument dressed up in a mantle of facticity. And if that's all the facts are, it's really not so difficult to go out and find a new set of them. The fruitful and dynamic tension between political goals and disinterested expert analysis becomes impossible.

Doctrinaire as they may be in the realm of policy, the president's advisors are the most hard-boiled sort of pragmatists when it comes to gaining and holding on to political power. And there's no way they planned to head into their reelection campaign with a half-trillion-dollar deficit looming over their heads and an unpredictable, bleeding guerrilla war in Iraq on their hands. At the level of tactics and execution, the administration's war on expertise has already yielded some very disappointing, indeed dangerous results. And if that gets you worried, just remember that the same folks are in charge of the grand strategy, too. ◆

The Mendacity Index®

This summer, after it became clear that President George W. Bush had made false statements about Iraq's nuclear weapons capacity and links to al Qaeda in his January State of the Union address, some commentators accused him of being the most dishonest president in recent American history. There has been, however, no scientifically serious attempt to test such accusations—until now.

To come up with our Mendacity Index®, we asked a nominating committee* of noted journalists and pundits to pick the most serious fibs, deceptions, and untruths spoken by each of the four most recent presidents. We selected the top six for each commander-in-chief, then presented the list to a panel of judges** with longtime experience in Washington. Panel members were instructed to rate each deception on a scale of 1 (least serious) to 5 (most serious). Then we averaged the scores for each deception and for each president. The results can be seen on the following pages. We believe their validity rests somewhere between the Periodic Table and the *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings.

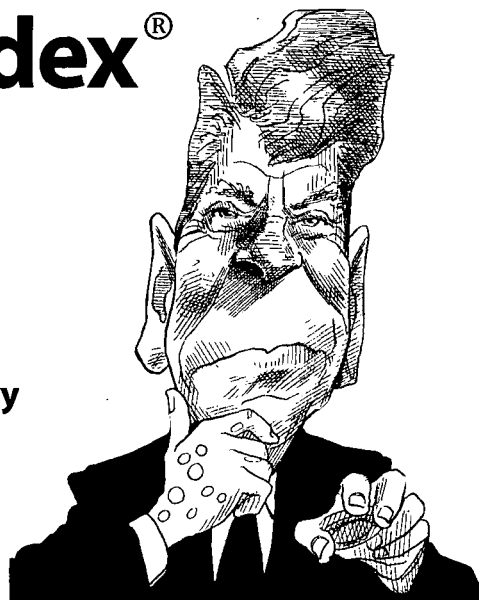
Don't trust our experts? Then we invite you to take the survey yourself. Visit www.washingtonmonthly.com or www.beliefnet.com to rate the presidents. We'll be keeping a running tab of the results. May the best man win!

* **Nominating Committee:** Tony Blankley, Sidney Blumenthal, James Carville, John Fund, Joe Conason, Jonah Goldberg, Hendrick Hertzberg, Haynes Johnson, Hamilton Jordan, Michael Kinsley, Victor Navasky, Bruce Reed, Wlady Pleszczynski, and David Tell

** **Panel of Judges:** Jodie Allen, Russell Baker, Margaret Carlson, Thomas Mann, Norm Ornstein, Richard Reeves, Larry Sabato, and Juan Williams

Ronald Reagan

3.3 Overall
Mendacity
Rating



Killer Trees. After opining in August 1980 that “trees cause more pollution than automobiles do,” Reagan arrived at a campaign rally to find a tree decorated with this sign: “Chop me down before I kill again.” **Score=1.8**

Balance the Budget And Increase Defense Spending? The Reagan administration introduced the 1981 Economic Recovery Act by claiming that it would cut taxes by 30 percent, increase defense spending by three-quarters of a trillion dollars, and achieve a balanced budget within three years. Budget director David Stockman admitted in November of 1981 that, “None of us really understands what’s going on with all these numbers” and that supply-side economics “was always a Trojan horse to bring down the top rate.” **Score=4.5**

Guns of Brixton. “In England, if a criminal carried a gun, even though he didn’t use it, he was tried for first-degree murder and hung if he was found guilty,” Ronald Reagan claimed in April 1982. When informed that the story was “just not true,” White House spokesman Larry Speakes said, “Well, it’s a good story, though. It made the point, didn’t it?” Reagan repeated the story again on March 21, 1986 during an interview with *The New York Times*. **Score=2.4**

The Liberator. In November 1983, Reagan told visiting Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir that he had served as a photographer in a U.S. Army unit assigned to film Nazi death camps. He repeated the story to Simon Wiesenthal the following February. Reagan never visited or filmed a concentration camp; he spent World War II in Hollywood, making training films with the First Motion Picture Unit of the Army Air Corps. **Score=2.9**

Arms for Hostages. “We did not—repeat, did not—trade weapons or anything else for hostages, nor will we,” Reagan proclaimed in November 1986. Four months later, on March 4, 1987, Reagan admitted in a televised national address: “A few months ago, I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.” **Score=4.6**

Cadillac Queens. Over a period of about five years, Reagan told the story of the “Chicago welfare queen” who had 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards, and collected benefits for “four nonexistent deceased husbands,” bilking the government out of “over \$150,000.” The real welfare recipient to whom Reagan referred was actually convicted for using two different aliases to collect \$8,000. Reagan continued to use his version of the story even after the press pointed out the actual facts of the case to him. **Score=3.9**