

**THE BLOG**

# The Washington Post Grows A Pair

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By Marty Kaplan

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It's good to see gonads gracing the Washington Post's editorial page.

True, it's on a Saturday, with lower readership, and the word "lie" doesn't actually appear, but here are the words it does use to describe President Bush's truthiness:

heckuva claim  
oblivious  
flat wrong  
shocking...errors  
fail to understand the basic facts  
making things up

The topic of this particular pushback was a claim in Bush's Wall Street Journal op-ed piece that "it is... a fact that our tax cuts have fueled robust economic growth and record revenues." The Post demolishes that assertion, quoting one unassailable source after another, from the chairman of Bush's own Council of Economic Advisors, to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, to his own Treasury Department. Every one of them says it is not a fact. Even with the most generous estimates of the increased tax revenue that comes from economic growth caused by tax cuts, those cuts increase the deficit. They don't fuel revenue; they fuel red ink.

It's refreshing to hear such a regal voice in the MSM punditocracy say that the President is not telling the truth. It would be a real service to the country and the world if the Post's editorial page were to be similarly ballsy about the President's statements on, say, Iraq. But even if it did, what I find particularly dispiriting about the professional standards of contemporary MSM journalism is that the news pages are proudly bereft of such truth-squadding.

Faced with a presidential lie, the best a reporter can do is find someone else to say it's not true, and juxtapose that quote with the original quote; the reader is left to connect the dots. Often, because of time pressure or laziness, the opposing quote comes from someone whose view can be discounted by a reader (or by the President's supporters) because of motivations; he or she is an "opponent" of the President — a Democrat, or someone who once worked for a Democrat, or someone at a "liberal think tank." To do more than paste a truth-claim next to a counter-truth-claim is, says the reporting handbook, to slide down the slippery slope to "analysis" and "interpretation."

While this juxtaposition of competing voices may be motivated by the goals of "fairness" or "balance" or "objectivity," the actual result is epistemological anarchy. It's the postmodern version of do your own thing: make your own truth. And it plays right into the hands of faux-news operations, like Fox and the Washington Times, whose "journalists" have no hesitation about declaring winners and losers in the battle for belief.

Sure, it's "accurate" to quote the President, and it's "fair" to "balance" a statement about Iraq from Democrat John Murtha with one from "Independent Democrat" Joe Lieberman. But it's also nuts. Either tax cuts increase the deficit, or they don't. "Victory" in Iraq is either a realistic goal, or it's just a batshit insane slogan. It shouldn't just be the job of editorial page writers and loudmouths to help Americans decide when their leaders are lying. Reporters and editors have skin in this game, too.

Come to think of it, it might even make economic sense for the industry. Maybe readers and audiences would be more prone to pay attention to news that avowedly manifests the courage of its professionals' convictions, than to "content" whose providers believe that stenography is the highest virtue.

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