

**THE BLOG**

# Russert Watch - Downward Doggie-Style

---

By Marty Kaplan

11/13/2005 01:45 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Since Arianna's sun-saluting *sans* satellite tv aboard the ms Oosterdam's *Nation* seminar cruise, I'm rolling out the yoga mat and doing downward-dog duty on the Russert Watch this Sunday morning.

The warm-up act was Tim's NBC EXCLUSIVE interview with Jordan's King Abdullah, which confused me, because I'd seen Brent Sadler's CNN EXCLUSIVE interview with King Abdullah on Saturday. I guess what made the Meet the Press interview EXCLUSIVE was that Brent Sadler wasn't actually in the studio with Tim at the same time; it certainly couldn't've been the content of the interview, which broke no new ground.

The main event was Tim's interviews with the two party chairmen. On Saturday night, Drudge was EXCLUSIVE and DEVELOPING with word — probably IM'd to him by Ken Mehlman — that Russert would interview the chairs separately rather than jointly. Mehlman must have figured his best shot was to use the "debate debate" ploy to make process the headline, instead of, say, Bush-is-a-liar. I don't think it's going to work, kids. Drudge may scream "Chicken Little!", but that ain't no blue dress. No semen, no spin.

Ken Mehlman was his usual scary talking-points-bot self. His message was the same as the push-back that Bush offered in his Besmirch Veterans Day speech: "the Democrats had access to the same intelligence." Russert was ready for this. He quoted from the Milbank/Pincus takedown of this argument in the Washington Post. He cited Mohamed ElBaradei's real-time demolition of the White House's imminent-mushroom-cloud case. When Mehlman said the Robb-Silverman commission absolved Bush of pre-war manipulation, Russert pointed out that the commission didn't look at the use of intelligence. When Mehlman said that the lesson of 9/11 was "we can't wait," Russert said that there was no link between 9/11 and Iraq. When Mehlman said that the Senate Intelligence Committee "unanimously found that there was no intent to mislead anyone," I wish Russert had pointed out that it had done no such thing — examining the use of intelligence is the unbegun job of Phase II of that committee's work, which is why Pat Roberts has spent years trying to prevent that investigation — but even so, Mehlman was bleeding pretty badly.

My favorite Mehlman moment came when Russert cited a poll showing that Republican support was tanking. Mehlman's answer: "Usually, when I get a poll like that, I fire the pollster." Mehlman paused a half-second, as if for a rim shot, and then went on to say, "But seriously..." The lame joke reveals how the BushCo mind works. When Joe Wilson tells you Iraq isn't buying yellowcake from Niger, what do you do? Send a firing squad after Wilson. When they tell you that Curveball's a liar, Chalabi's a liar, al-Libi's a liar, do you reassess your intelligence in light of those warnings? No,

you put your thumbs in your ears and sing nyah-nyah-nyah-I-can't-hear-you. But seriously... More than two thousand American dead in Iraq, and they're feeding us Borscht Belt shtick?

Then it was Howard Dean's turn. He wore an American flag lapel pin, which I liked; capture-the-flag is a game we can play, too. Dean had one point to make, and he made it over and over: The President isn't telling the truth. To back it up, Dean used the same evidence that Russert used against Mehlman: cherrypicked intelligence, no evidence of a nuclear program, no 9/11 connection to Saddam, etc.

But then Tim went all weird. In effect, he became Mehlman. When Dean said the President lied about 9/11 being connected with Iraq, Russert — instead of doing what he did in the Mehlman interview, which was to dispute that connection — told Dean that Bush never made the 9/11-Saddam connection. When Dean said Bush didn't tell Congress about the misgivings the intelligence community had about the case for war, Russert was stricken with amnesia: "What did he withhold?" he asked Dean. This time it was Russert's turn to mischaracterize the evidence. Just as Mehlman purveyed a phony, exculpatory version of the Robb-Silverman report, Russert inaccurately claimed that the National Intelligence Estimate that Bush used to sell the war to Congress contained adequate warnings about the unreliability of the intelligence.

Which Russert is real: the one who demolished Mehlman, or the one who parroted Mehlman to try to demolish Dean? Don't tell me he was just doing a journalist's job; that's the pernicious postmodern version of journalism, in which there's no such thing as truth. Yes, there's another side to every argument. But that doesn't mean that both sides to an argument are equally right, or equally wrong. Even Chris Matthews has finally figured out that the Republicans lied about prewar intelligence; what's stopping Russert from renouncing the he-said/she-said pathology that makes mainstream media so toxic for democracy?

The rest of the Dean interview played out the familiar Democrats-don't-have-an-agenda meme. Russert cited poll numbers saying that's what Americans believe (without mentioning that media repeating that point is likely a big contributor to that view). Dean's first answer was pretty good: We're going to tell the truth — to our people, to our armed forces, to our allies. We're going to fight for jobs at home, especially through an energy plan that depends on renewable sources. We're going to improve education...

Russert was ready for this: Those are just words, he said. What's behind them? What's the plan on Iraq? You've got no plan on Social Security. You've got no plan on the deficit. You've got no plan on health care.

I wish Dean had hit that one out of the park. He could have cited John Edwards' plan for Iraq, in this morning's Washington Post, which he begins by saying, "I was wrong." He could have said that our plan for Social Security is to maintain its solvency and stop Republicans from repealing it. He could have said that our plan on the deficit is to repeal tax cuts to the rich, stop the pork, and stop making students, seniors and working families pay the price of the tax cuts. And so on.

Instead, Dean said that it's not our job to have a plan, that there's time to come up with a plan, that "together, America can do better." You could tell how hamstrung he was. He clearly believes that he can't really say anything until Reid and Pelosi agree on an agenda (and if that pap about "we can do better" is a sign of what's to come, please pass the strychnine). He can't be the old Howard Dean on Iraq, as long as Hillary calculates that she's more vulnerable on strength issues than Republicans are on trust issues. He can't call for national health insurance unless the leadership decides that the "How are you going to pay for it?" follow-up is trumped by the moral argument about a decent society.

I guess being DNC chair is a little like being moderator of Meet the Press. In politics, as in Mainstream Media Theater, sometimes the straitjacket of the role puts truth-telling at odds with performance. No wonder they call it kabuki.

UPDATE: Josh Marshall does some good truth-squadding on Mehlman's mendacity.

And Kevin Drum is working up a useful catalogue of instances where the Administration suppressed intelligence that undermined its case. No, Ken, we didn't all work from the same information.

**Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/martykaplan](http://www.twitter.com/martykaplan)**



**Marty Kaplan** 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director