

## Telling It Right

By Paul Krugman

“This is a very, very important part of history, and we’ve got to tell it right.” So says Thomas Kean, chairman of the independent commission investigating the 9/11 attacks. Mr. Kean promises major revelations in testimony next month: “This was not something that had to happen.” We’ll see: maybe those of us who expected the 9/11 commission to produce yet another whitewash were wrong. Meanwhile, one can only echo his sentiment: it’s important to tell our history right, not just about the events that led up to 9/11, but about the events that followed.

The capture of Saddam Hussein has produced a great outpouring of relief among both Iraqis and Americans. He’s no longer taunting us from hiding; he was a monster and deserves whatever fate awaits him. But we shouldn’t let war supporters use the occasion of Saddam’s capture to rewrite the recent history of U.S. foreign policy, to draw a veil over the way the nation was misled into war.

Even the Iraq war’s critics usually focus on the practical failures of the Bush administration’s policy, rather than its morality. After all, the war came at a heavy cost, even before the fighting began: to prepare for the Iraq campaign, the administration diverted resources away from Afghanistan before the job was done, giving Al Qaeda a chance to get away and the Taliban a chance to regroup.

And while the initial invasion went smoothly, since then almost everything in Iraq has gone badly. (Saddam’s capture would have been a smaller story if it had happened in the first flush of victory; instead, it was the first real piece of good news from Iraq in months.) The security situation remains terrible; the economy remains moribund; gasoline shortages and power outages continue.

To top it all off, the ongoing disorder in Iraq is a clear and present danger to our own national security. A large part of the U.S. military’s combat strength is tied down in occupation duties, leaving us ill prepared for crises elsewhere. Meanwhile, overstretch is undermining the readiness of the military as a whole.

Now maybe, just maybe, Saddam’s capture will start a virtuous circle in Iraq. Maybe the insurgency will evaporate; maybe the cost to America, in blood, dollars and national security, will start to decline.

But even if all that happens, we should be deeply disturbed by the history of this war. For its message seems to be that as long as you wave the flag convincingly enough, it doesn’t matter whether you tell the truth.

By now, we’ve become accustomed to the fact that the absence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction—the principal public rationale for the war—hasn’t become a big political liability for the administration. That’s bad enough. Even more startling is the news from one of this week’s polls: despite the complete absence of evidence, 53 percent of Americans believe that Saddam had something to do with 9/11, up from 43 percent before his capture. The administration’s long campaign of guilt by innuendo, it seems, is still working.

The war’s more idealistic supporters do, I think, feel queasy about all this. That’s why they lay so much stress on their hopes for democracy in Iraq. They’re not just looking for a happy ending; they’re looking for moral redemption for a war fought on false pretenses.

As a practical matter, I suspect that they’ll be disappointed: the only leaders in Iraq with genuine popular followings seem to be Shiite clerics. I also wonder how much real commitment to democracy lies behind the administration’s stirring rhetoric. Does anyone remember that Dick Cheney voted against a resolution calling for Nelson Mandela’s

release from prison? As recently as 2000 he defended that vote, saying that the African National Congress “was then perceived as a terrorist organization.”

Which brings me to this week’s other famous prisoner. While the world celebrated the capture of Saddam, a federal appeals court ruled that Jose Padilla must be released from military custody. Mr. Padilla is a U.S. citizen, arrested on American soil, who has been held for 18 months without charges as an “enemy combatant.” The ruling was a stark reminder that the Bush administration, which talks so much about promoting democracy abroad, doesn’t seem very concerned about following democratic rules at home.