

## **MIA WMD's For Bush, It's a Joke**

By David Corn

Only in Washington.

Last night I was at the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association Dinner. It's a formal-and-fun affair where thousands of media folks assemble at the Hilton for a fancy dinner and fab pre- and post-parties. I'm not going to denigrate such soirees. I enjoy them. While bookers and producers jiggled and jostled on the dance floor and media and political celebs dissected the news du jour (this time it was Richard Clarke's dramatic appearance before the 9/11 commission), I was able to chat with former weapons hunter David Kay and learn about some troubling developments in the intelligence community (more on that down the road). And there was free sushi.

But an awful you're-all-alone moment came during George W. Bush's comments that followed the sit-down dinner. The current president is often the honored guest at this annual affair, and the audience toasts him in what is supposed to be a sign of communal and nonpartisan spirit. And the tradition is that the president has to be funny; he has to provide us with an amusing speech that pokes fun at himself and his political foes. After all, political journalists love to see politicians engage in self-deprecating humor. Bill Clinton was quite good at these performances. Bush seems to enjoy them less. Rather than do straight standup, he sometimes relies on a humorous slide show, and that was how he chose to entertain the media through this time.

It's standard fare humor. Bush says he is preparing for a tough election fight; then on the large video screens a picture flashes showing him wearing a boxing robe while sitting at his desk. Bush notes he spends "a lot of time on the phone listening to our European allies." Then we see a photo of him on the phone with a finger in his ear. There were funny bits about Skull and Bones, his mother, and Dick Cheney. But at one point, Bush showed a photo of himself looking for something out a window in the Oval Office, and he said, "Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be somewhere."

The audience laughed. I grimaced. But that wasn't the end of it. After a few more slides, there was a shot of Bush looking under furniture in the Oval Office. "Nope," he said. "No weapons over there." More laughter. Then another picture of Bush searching in his office: "Maybe under here." Laughter again.

Disapproval must have registered upon my face, for one of my tablemates said, "Come on, David, this is funny." I wanted to reply, Over 500 Americans and literally countless Iraqis are dead because of a war that was supposedly fought to find weapons of mass destruction, and Bush is joking about it. Instead, I took a long drink of the lovely white wine that had come with our dinner. It's not as if I was in the middle of a talk-show debate and had to respond. This was certainly one of those occasions in which you either get it or don't. And I wasn't getting it. Or maybe my neighbor wasn't.

At the end of the slide show, Bush displayed two pictures of himself with troops and noted these were his favorites. The final photograph was a shot of special forces soldiers--with their faces blurred to protect their identities--who were posing in Afghanistan where they had buried a piece of 9/11 debris in a spot that had once been an al Qaeda camp. Bush spoke about the prayer the commander had said during the burial ceremony and noted he had this photograph hanging in his private study.

So what's wrong with this picture? Bush was somber about the sacrifice being made by U.S. troops overseas. But he obviously considered it fine to make fun of the reason he cited for

sending Americans to war and to death. What an act of audacious spin. One poll recently showed that most Americans believe he either lied about Iraq's WMDs or deliberately exaggerated the case to justify the war. And it is undeniable that in seeking public support for the war he made many false assertions that went beyond quoting intelligence that turned out to be wrong. (I've written about this in many other places. If you still don't believe Bush mugged the truth, check out this short guide.) As the crowd was digesting the delicious surf-and-turf meal, Bush was transforming serious scandal into rim-shot comedy.

Few seemed to mind. His WMD gags did not prompt a how-can-you silence from the gathering. At the after-parties, I heard no complaints. Was I being too sensitive? I wondered what the spouse, child or parent of a soldier killed in Iraq would have felt if they had been watching C-SPAN and saw the commander-in-chief mocking the supposed justification for the war that claimed their loved ones. Bush told the nation that lives had to be sacrificed because Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction that could be used (by terrorists) against the United States. That was not true. (And as Kay pointed out, the evidence so far shows these weapons were not there in the first place, not that they were hidden, destroyed or spirited away.) But rather than acknowledge he misinformed the public, Bush jokes about the absence of such weapons.

Even if Bush does not believe he lied to or misled the public, how can he make fun of the rationale for a war that has killed and maimed thousands? Imagine if Lyndon Johnson had joked about the trumped-up Gulf of Tonkin incident that he deceitfully used as a rationale for U.S. military action in Vietnam: "Who knew that fish had torpedoes?" Or if Ronald Reagan appeared at a correspondents event following the truck-bombing at the Marines barracks in Beirut--which killed over 200 American servicemen--and said, "Guess we forgot to put in a stop light." Or if Clinton had come out after the bombing of Serbia--during which U.S. bombs errantly destroyed the Chinese embassy and killed several people there--and said, "The problem is, those embassies--they all look alike."

Yet there was Bush--apparently having a laugh at his own expense, but actually doing so on the graves of thousands. This was a callous and arrogant display. For Bush, the misinformation--or disinformation--he peddled before the war was no more than material for yucks. As the audience laughed along, he smiled. The false statements (or lies) that had launched a war had become merely another punchline in the nation's capital.