

September 6, 2002

## The Bully's Pulpit

By PAUL KRUGMAN

**W**ar is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength. Colin Powell and Dick Cheney are in perfect agreement. And the Bush administration won't privatize Social Security.

Ari Fleischer's insistence that Mr. Powell and Mr. Cheney have no differences over Iraq seems to have pushed some journalists into facing up, at least briefly, to the obvious. ABC's weblog The Note described it as a "chocolate-is-vanilla" claim, admitting that "The Bush team has always had a credibility problem with some reporters because of their insistence on saying 'up is down' and 'black is white.' "

But the administration needn't worry; if history is any guide, many reporters will soon return to their usual cringe. The next time the administration insists that chocolate is vanilla, much of the media — fearing accusations of liberal bias, trying to create the appearance of "balance" — won't report that the stuff is actually brown; at best they'll report that some Democrats claim that it's brown.

The Bush team's Orwellian propensities have long been apparent to anyone following its pronouncements on economics. Even during campaign 2000 these pronouncements relied on doublethink, the ability to believe two contradictory things at the same time. For example, George W. Bush's plan to partially privatize Social Security always depended on the assertion that 2-1=4 — that we can divert payroll taxes into high-yielding personal accounts, yet still use the same money to pay benefits to retirees.

The Orwellian tactics don't stop with doublethink; they also include newspeak, the redefinition of words to rule out disloyal thoughts. Again, Social Security is a perfect example. Republican political consultants have found that in an era of plunging stocks and corporate scandal the word "privatization" has taken on negative connotations. The answer? Deny that personal accounts constitute privatization, and bully the press into going along. A Republican National Campaign Committee memo lays out the new strategy: "It is very important that we not allow reporters to shill for Democrat demagoguery by inaccurately characterizing 'personal accounts' and 'privatization' as one and the same."

Is it inaccurate to say that personal accounts equal privatization? We could argue on the merits. Under the Bush plan, a worker's personal account reflects any gains or losses on the stocks it represents. When risks and rewards accrue entirely to the individual, isn't that privatization?

But wait, we can do better. The push to convert Social Security into a system of personal accounts has been led by the Cato Institute. The Bush plan emerged directly from Cato's project on the subject, several members of Mr. Bush's commission on Social Security reform had close Cato ties, and much of the commission's staff came straight from Cato. You can read all about Cato's role on the special Web site the institute set up, [socialsecurity.org](http://socialsecurity.org).

And what's the name of the Cato project to promote personal accounts? Why, the Project on Social Security Privatization, of course.

Which brings us back to the issue of intimidation. The R.N.C.C. doesn't really think it can convince people that privatization isn't privatization. But that's not the goal. The memo doesn't talk about how to communicate with the public; it's a list of demands to place on journalists. As Joshua Marshall put it at [talkingpointsmemo.com](http://talkingpointsmemo.com), the goal is to "mau-mau reporters out of using the word 'privatization' in this context."

And the intimidation will probably succeed. Indeed, it's already working. As Mr. Marshall notes, in a recent interview of the House minority leader, Richard Gephardt, Judy Woodruff of CNN duly echoed the R.N.C.C.'s memo.

Unfortunately, this isn't just a question of Social Security policy. Once an administration believes that it can get away with insisting that black is white and up is down — and everything in this administration's history suggests that it believes just that — it's hard to see where the process stops. A habit of ignoring inconvenient reality, and presuming that the docile media will go along, soon infects all aspects of policy. And yes, that includes matters of war and peace.

The trouble is that eventually reality has a way of asserting itself. And in case you are wondering, ignorance isn't strength.

[Copyright 2002 The New York Times Company](http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/06/opinion/06KRUG.html) | [Permissions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)