

The Secret Downing Street Memo and the Politics of Truth: A Performance Text

Norman K. Denzin, Ph.D.*

Abstract

Reading forward from the recently released secret Downing Street Memos, to the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, in this performance text I critique the Bush Administration and its reliance on science, or evidence-based models of inquiry (SBR). SBR raises issues concerning the politics of truth and evidence. These issues intersect with the ways in which a given political regime fixes facts to fit ideology. Three versions of SBR are discussed, as is a model of science as disruptive cultural practice. I conclude by calling for a merger of critical pedagogy with a prophetic, feminist post-pragmatism.

* Norman K. Denzin is a Distinguished Professor of Communications, Professor of Cinema Studies Professor of Criticism and Interpretive Theory, Professor of Sociology at University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. Denzin's research covers the entire span from theory to institutional practice. In 1997 he was awarded the George Herbert Award from the Study of Symbolic Interaction. He is the past editor of *The Sociological Quarterly*, co-editor of *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2/e, co-editor of *Qualitative Inquiry*, editor of *Cultural Studies--Critical Methodologies*, and series editor of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*.

The Secret Downing Street Memo and the Politics of Truth: A Performance Text

With C. Wright Mills (1959) I believe scholars have an obligation to write their way into their historical moments. The failure to do so, makes us complicit with the histories that too often go on behind our backs.

Published in the *Sunday London Times*, on 1 May 2005, the Downing Street Memo set off a firestorm of controversy. The memo demonstrated that the American and British public had been misled about the reasons for and the timing of the decision to go to war with Iraq. The secret document indicated that the Bush administration had committed itself to war with Iraq, at least a full eight months before the official start of the war which was 19 March, 2003. I want to interrogate this history, a history which involves the politics and pragmatics of truth, the manipulation of evidence and facts about the world by governmental officials.

In this interrogation, which is a performance text^[1], I move back and forth between local knowledge and global contexts. We are living in dangerous times, year three of the Iraqi War, what Joan Didion and George Orwell call the "New Normal."

Speaker Ones and Two: George Orwell and Joan Didion (Orwell, 1984

[1949, pp. 33-45] quoted in Didion, 2004, p. 71):

Under the new normal many of us discovered ... [that] our memories were not satisfactorily under control. We possessed 'pieces of furtive knowledge' that were hard to reconcile with what we heard and read in the news. We saved entire newspapers, hoping that further study might yield their logic, but none emerged (Didion, 2004, p. 71).

Today in post 9-11 America with illegal wiretaps, and a President who performs scripts of fear denouncing evil terrorists we are struggling:

Speaker One: William Kittridge:

to revise our dominant mythology ...to find a new story to inhabit, to find new laws to control our lives, laws designed to preserve a model of a free democratic society based on values learned from a shared mythology.

The ground upon which we stand has dramatically shifted. We are asked to accept a new set of myths and laws which threaten to destroy what we mean by freedom and democracy. The complex political spaces of the new normal are profoundly shaping the multiple terrains of qualitative inquiry in the 21st Century, including what we mean by words like science, evidence and truth.

Now the secret memo.

Speaker Two: David Manning:

The Secret Downing Street Memo (with some paraphrasing):^[2]

This is Secret and Strictly Personal--UK Eyes Only.

IRAQ: PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING, 23 JULY

This record is extremely sensitive. No further copies should be made. It should be shown only to those with a genuine need to know its contents.

Speaker One: John Scarlett

Military action is now seen as inevitable. Bush wants to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD.

Speaker Two: C:

The intelligence and facts are being fixed around the policy ... Bush has made up his mind to take military action ... The Attorney-General said that the desire for regime change was not a legal case for military action ... The case (for war) was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbors, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran.

Speakers One and Two: Tony Blair and George W. Bush:

We stand together on these issues, It is impossible to distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam (Alterman and Green, 2004, p. 252)

The memo is chilling. It clearly states that facts and intelligence were being fixed and fitted to conform to a predetermined agenda. Through a series of carefully choreographed presentations involving aerial and ground photographs, statistics, excerpts from secret intelligence memos, Bush and his staff

based the case for war on the threats of Saddam's WMD's to the world order (Hersh, 2005, p. 235). They were hesitant, however, to sell the argument for war against Saddam Hussein in August of 2002.

Speaker One: Andrew Card:

From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August" Rich, 2005c, p. 12).

Speaker Two: Bob Woodward:

Bush initiated plans for the war on November 21, 2001 (Woodward, 2004, p. 1).

But today we know there were no WMD's.^[3] There were no links between 9/11 and Saddam. Cheering crowds did not greet American soldiers when they marched into Baghdad.^[4]

Speaker One: Frank Rich:

Democracy "was hijacked on the way to war" (Rich, 2005c, p. 12).

Speaker Two: President Bush (Press Conference, 4 October 2005):

And we've got to win in Iraq. We will win in Iraq.

Iraq's a part of a global war on terror. We're

not leaving Iraq.

Meanwhile, the administration takes to a new level the meaning of the staged news event, borrowing its techniques of news management from Jon Stewart, host of the "Daily Show." Fake newsmen, looking like real newsmen, use the practices of real news programs to deliver fake news in prime time (Rich, 2005a, p. 20).

Speaker One: Frank Rich:

The use of fake reporters--six and counting-- producing fake news stories has been exposed. The administration paid \$240,000 to Armstrong Williams for delivering faux-journalistic analyses of the No Child Left Behind Act (Rich, 2005b).

Bush's handlers script "town hall" meetings. Under Bush a lie is true if it has the appearance of truth. Manipulating the logic of the lie that looks like the truth, insures that Bush's assertions about the real have the appearance of being truthful.

Truth and Evidence

In times such as this the politics of truth take on increased importance. Many questions are raised. What is truth? What is evidence? What counts as evidence? How is evidence evaluated? How can evidence, or facts be "fixed" to fit policy? What kind of evidence-based research should inform this process? How is evidence to be represented? How is evidence to be discounted, or judged to be unreliable or incorrect? What is a fact? What is intelligence? What are the different discourses--law, medicine, history, cultural, or performance studies-- that define evidence and truth? (Pring, 2004, p. 203).

Speaker Two: Esther Kaplan and Union for Concerned

Scientists (quoted on Kaplan, 2005, p. 128):

There is significant evidence that the scope and scale of the manipulation, suppression, and misrepresentation of science [and evidence] by the Bush administration is unprecedented ... In the name of pseudo, fake, or junk science, it manufactures evidence to support its positions ... Indeed, the Bush Administration has taken the concept of evidence to a new level with the endorsement of what is called scientifically based educational research (SBR).

Under the auspices of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, the Bush Administration has stated that traditional scientific methods are inadequate for purposes of educational reform. It has endorsed evidence-based models of inquiry, which many regard as inappropriate to human subject research, and nearly impossible to implement in concrete research settings (Ryan and Hood, 2004).

Under the guise of endorsing Intelligent Design the Administration has launched a full-scale attack on the logic and methods of modern science. Thus, while they have raised the bar concerning the standards for conducting and evaluating educational research, they have similarly moved to debunk these same standards in other areas. This allows them to have it both ways. Modern science cannot get us to where we want to be in our schools, and we will use the methods of science to prove the case!

Drawing from the bio-medical field, SBR emphasizes research practices that produce so-called objective, generalizable evidence ((Ryan and Hood, 2004). Such data, gathered from randomized and non-randomized experimental trials, and quantifiable measurement procedures are used to test causal hypotheses derived from scientific theory. When possible, data are fitted to complex causal models. Evidence based on these assumptions is presumed to be of maximal value for policy makers, practitioners and the public (Pring, 2004; National Research Council, 2002, p. 47). Evidence that does not conform to these principles is of less value and is not to be encouraged or funded.

There is a great deal at stake in these arguments. As St. Pierre (2004, p. 132) observes, the SBR criteria marginalize many forms of qualitative inquiry, including critical race, queer, postcolonial, feminist, indigenous, and decolonizing theories. The SBR model raises questions that require serious public discussion. The model endorses a narrow view of science and evidence. It celebrates a historical moment when the methods of positivistic science were not being challenged. In valorizing the

experimental paradigm, it ignores the many criticisms of experimentalism developed by Donald Campbell over four decades ago, including the inability to adequately treat rival causal factors associated with internal and external validity.

Speaker One: Donald Campbell (paraphrase):

The critics of SBR rightfully raise other issues with the paradigm, including its reliance on a naive realism, and its failure to take up the value-fact-theory distinction. The paradigm still acts as if a disinterested observer has a God's eye view of objective reality. It relies on an ethics of deception. It does not address the contexts of knowledge production, nor is it sensitive to the nuances of the researcher-subject relationship (Howe, 2004; Campbell and Stanley, 1963; Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

These limitations of the SBR model involve the politics of truth. They intersect with the ways in which a given political regime fixes facts and intelligence to fit ideology. What is true, or false is determined, in part, by the criteria that are used to judge good and bad evidence.

SBR AND THE WAR ON TRUTH

There are at least three versions of SBR. SBR One is the model outlined by the National Research Council (2002). SBR Two is a simulacra of SBR One. It was the model used by the Bush administration when it sold the Iraqi war to the world. This models produces simulacra of the truth. SBR Three (below) rejects SBR One and Two, and articulates a politics and methodology of truth based on a decolonizing critical pedagogy, and a feminist, prophetic ethical pragmatism (Siegfried, 1996; West, 1989, 1991; Denzin, 1996, 2003, 2005).

SBR One, with its focus on objectively verifiable evidence, was not in play when the Bush administration decided to go to war. Instead, they used SBR Two, which allowed them to act as if they were gathering objective, reliable, generalizable, evidence. But they were not doing this. The intent, instead, was to gather evidence that appeared to have these characteristics. Under the Bush regime, a fact or piece of evidence is true if it meets three criteria: (a) it has the appearance of being factual; (b) it is patriotic; and (c) it supports a political action that advances the White House's agenda.

Evidence that contradicts that agenda is flawed, and biased. The Bush administration wanted to assert its will in the Middle East. It fabricated a set of facts, using their version of SBR One-- SBR Two-- to justify that activity. Challenges to the war were unpatriotic, and discredited because they undercut the Administration's desire to protect Americans from violent terrorists who oppose our political system.

The ways in which the world is not a stage are not easy to specify. The dramaturgical politics of the Bush administration is one reason why this is so. Indeed, if, as they demonstrate, everything is

already performative, staged, commodified and dramaturgical, then the dividing line between performer and actor, stage and setting, script and text, performance and reality disappear. As this disappearance occurs, illusion and make-believe prevail. Truthful facts are casualties under such regimes. Misrepresentations are passed off as the truth. When this happens, the right people are not held accountable for the consequences of their actions. The consequences of misrepresentation can be devastating. The likelihood of future catastrophes is increased, and, as in the case of Iraq, people die needlessly (Solomon, 2005, p. B-3).

In this space, where the hyperreal appears more real than the real, pragmatists and cultural critics require apparatuses of resistance and critique, methodologies and pedagogies of truth, ways of making real realities that envision and enact pedagogies of hope. Such pedagogies offer ways of holding fraudulent political regimes accountable for their actions.

A senior advisor to President Bush (Suskind, 2004, p. 51), described this troubling relationship between performance and reality. He contrasted the so-called "reality-based community" --people who believe that solutions emerge from ... judicious study of discernible reality" (p. 51), with his own world view.

Speaker One: Bush aide:

"That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you are studying that reality we'll act again creating other new realities, which you can study too ... We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do" (Suskind, 2004, p. 51).

How do you respond to a statement such as this? Whose history are they creating? And for what ends? Who gave them this power? Who is holding them responsible for the consequences of their historical actions? If they do not like the effects of one reality, they create a new one, to which we must respond, living out the consequences of their experiments in reality construction.

Speaker Two: George Bush:

I am praying for strength to do the Lord's will ... I'm surely not going to justify the war based upon God ... Nevertheless, in my case, I pray to be as good a messenger of his will as possible (Suskind, 2005, p. 51).

SBR THREE: CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, ETHICS AND PROPHETIC PRAGMATISM

Under such circumstances what does it mean to assert that journalists and social scientists can only write about the realities created by history's actors? What does it mean to state that journalists write the first drafts of history? Whose history, whose reality and what does reality any longer mean?

When the divisions disappear between reality and its appearances, critical inquiry necessarily becomes disruptive, explicitly pedagogical and radically democratic. Its topics: fascism, the violent

politics of global capitalist culture, the loss of freedom in daily life. We need a new politics of truth. We must embrace the justice of our rage:

Speakers One and Two: June Jordan and Patricia Hill Collins (paraphrase):

We must reclaim the neglected legacy of the
Sixties, an unabashed moral certainty, an incredible
outgoing energy of righteous rage. We cannot restore and
expand the forms of justice that our lives require until and unless
we change the language of current political and methodological
discourse. If we do not reintroduce our concepts of Right and
Wrong, of Truth and Evidence, then how shall we finally argue
for our cause (Collins, 1998, p. 250; Jordan, 1992, p. 178).

I answer the call of Jordan and Collins by turning to the post-pragmatists (see Denzin, 1996 for a review; also Siegfried, 1996). For the post-pragmatist feminist there is no neutral standpoint, no objective God's eye view of the world. The meaning of a concept, or line of action or a representation lies in the practical, political, moral, and social consequences it produces for an actor or collectivity. The meanings of these consequences are not objectively given. They are established through social interaction and the politics of representation. All representations are historically situated, shaped by the intersecting contingencies of power, gender, race and class (Siegfried, 1996, p. 269; Collins, 2000).

An Afro-Centric, feminist ethical framework (Collins, 2000; 1998) mediates the pragmatic theory of meaning. Collins (2000) offers four criteria --primacy of lived experience, dialogue, an ethics of care, an ethics of responsibility--for interpreting truth and knowledge claims. This framework privileges lived experience, emotion, empathy, and values rooted in personal expressiveness (Collins, 2000, pp. 265-269; Edwards and Mauthner, 2002, p. 25).

The moral inquirer, whether a politician or a social scientist, builds a collaborative, reciprocal, trusting, mutually accountable relationship with those studied. This feminist ethical framework is care and justice-based. It seeks to contextualize shared values and norms. It privileges the sacredness of life, human dignity, nonviolence, care, solidarity, love, community, empowerment, civic transformation. It demands of any action that it positively contribute to a politics of resistance, hope and freedom (Denzin, 2003, p. 258).

For the prophetic post-pragmatists there are no absolute truths, no absolute principles, no faith-based beliefs in what is true or false. Following Collins (2000), Pelias (2004, p. 163), and Freire (1999), the moral inquirer enacts a politics of love and care, an ethic of hope and forgiveness.

Speaker One: Ron Pelias (paraphrase):

The heart learns that stories are truths that won't keep still. The heart learns that facts are the possibilities we pretend we trust. The heart's method of pumping, loving and forgiving encourages us to proceed with our hearts first. What matters most is that we learn how to use our rage in positive ways, to love, to struggle to forgive. We have little other choice (Pelias, 2004, pp. 162-163, 171).

In a methodology of the heart, actions are judged in terms of moral consequences and the meanings people bring to them. Consequences are not self-evident. They are socially constructed. The concept of truth is thus replaced with a consequential theory of meaning. Experience, folded through what Stuart Hall (1996, p. 473) calls the politics of representation, becomes the site of meaning and truth. Facts about the world are treated as facticities, as lived experiences. The pragmatist examines the effects, or consequences of any line of action on existing structures of domination. The pragmatist asks, that is, what are the moral and ethical consequences of these effects for lived human experience. If people are being oppressed, denied freedom, or dying because of these effects, then the action, of course, is morally indefensible.

Speaker Two: Cornel West (1991, p. 36; 1989, p. 234; paraphrased):

At the level of politics and ideology, the post-pragmatist acts as a critical moral agent, one whose political goal is the creation of greater individual freedom in the broader social order. Prophetic pragmatists as moral agents understand that the consequences of their interventions into the world are exclusively political, judged always in terms their contributions to a politics of liberation, love, caring and freedom.

The processes that shape national security decision-making in a democracy should be transparent and open. They should not be based, as were the Bush Administration's decisions to go to war, on cherry-picked intelligence, disinformation, secrecy, secret information, secrets that are not secrets, leaked, declassified and reclassified documents, coded phrases, misrepresentations, distortions, and lies (Sanger, 2005, pp. 1, 5). Evidence should not be doctored (Rich, 2005d, p. 13). Contradictory evidence should be openly discussed, its implications for policy debated. Decisions "should be subjected to a robust process of checks and balance" (Herbert, 2005. p. A23).

Leading scientists, including more than 60 Nobel Prize winners have all spoken out against these abuses of science under the Bush regime (Kaplan, 2005, pp. 95, 104, 113). The hallmark of a free society is its unfettered support of research and inquiry on ethically and politically sensitive, controversial issues. Such research yields trustworthy findings that many, including those in political

power, may find objectionable. But a society's respect for critical interpretive inquiry is "based on the common understanding that serious health, economic and social consequences are at stake" (Hillman, 2003).

Safe guards protecting scientists and the scientific community from censorship, misrepresentation, repression and politicization must be commonplace. The values of progressive democracy must be forefront when scientific advice is used for policymaking decisions. The pragmatic consequences for a radical democracy must be taken into account when scientific recommendations for social action are implemented. It is time for all concerned scholars and citizens to rally against the misuses of science, information and evidence by the Bush administration (Mooney, 2005, p. 255).

BACK TO DOWNING STREET AND HISTORY'S ACTORS

The morally unethical actions of Bush and his administration are exposed in the Downing Street memo. Like the high level leaks that unmasked whistle-blower Joseph Wilson's wife Valerie as a covert C. I. A. agent, the memo shows that Bush's History's Actors, or the White House Iraq Group (WHIG) as they called themselves, were willing to go to any length to justify the war in Iraq. They took the concept of truth as a social construction to a logical but ethically indefensible conclusion. In so doing they exposed the vulnerability of an epistemology and methodology that relies upon manipulations of the world to produce findings that conform to one's beliefs about reality. Thus did WHIG discredit SBR One, showing that it has no full-proof mechanism for producing objective truth.

As long as reality can be socially constructed, fraudulent versions of SBR One, what I have called SBR Two will be created. In that space history's actors must be held accountable to a higher moral truth. A methodology of the heart, a prophetic, feminist post-pragmatism embraces an ethics of truth grounded in love, care, hope and forgiveness.

Speaker One: Patricia Hill Collins (2000, p. 251, paraphrase):

This methodology relies on a righteous rage to spur us on, to keep us headed in the right direction, to point the way, to move people toward justice. If it does this then it has made a very important difference in the lives of people.

We demand that history's actors use models of evidence that answer to these moral truths.

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Notes

^[1] The text is to be performed on a stage with three speakers: a narrator at a podium and speakers A and B seated behind a table. Speakers A and B assume the voices of a variety of persons, including Joan Didion, President Bush, Tony Blair and George Orwell. A spot light moves to each speaker when it is his or her turn to speak. When speaking the speaker first announces the name of the person being spoken for.

^[2] The text reads:

This is Secret and Strictly Personal--UK Eyes Only

David Manning

FR: Matthew Rycroft

Date: 23 July 2002

cc: Defence Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Attorney-General, Sir Richard Wilson, John Scarlett, Francis Richards, CDS, C. Jonathan Powell, Sally Morgan, Alastair Campbell

IRAQ: PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING, 23 JULY

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John Scarlett summarised the intelligence and latest JIC assessment ... C reported on his recent talks in Washington ... Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy ... It seemed clear that Bush had made

up his mind to take military action ... The Attorney-General said that the desire for regime change was not a legal case for military action ... But the case (for war) was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbors, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran.

[3] Since no WMD were found, the reasons for the war had to be changed. They now include bringing American-style democracy to Iraq and the Middle East; fighting terrorists in Iraq before they strike America; and honoring the dead who have been killed in the war.

[4] Saddam did not represent a threat to America, nor to the world. There were no secret purchases of uranium oxide from the African nation of Niger (Alterman and Green, 2004, p. 265). No one will take responsibility for, nor be accountable for the mass destruction, the murders and the violence that have occurred since the beginning of the war. Facts: over 2000 dead American soldiers; more than 30,000 dead Iraqi; disgrace and degradation in Abu Ghraib.