
On April 19, 2006, on the south lawn outside the Oval Office, President Bush said goodbye to Scott McClellan. For almost three years, the president proclaimed, McClellan had handled the challenging job of White House Press Secretary "with class, integrity." He'd be hard to replace. Some day, Bush concluded, the two of them would sit in rocking chairs in Texas reminiscing about the good old days. "And I can assure you I will feel the same way then that I feel now."

But all was not sweetness and light. Even then. Amidst a general house-cleaning supervised by Josh Bolton, the new White House Chief of Staff, McClellan had, in fact, been forced to resign. Convinced that he had sacrificed his professional credibility during the controversy over who "leaked" the name of CIA officer Valerie Plame (to discredit her husband, Ambassador Joseph Wilson, a critic of the war in Iraq who had refuted President Bush's claim that Saddam Hussein had tried to obtain fissile uranium concentrates from Niger), McClellan had grown disillusioned with "the mentality of political manipulation" in Washington, D. C. He felt betrayed by Karl Rove and Lewis "Scooter" Libby, who had lied to him about their involvement in "Plamegate." Before Bolton showed him the door, McClellan had been preparing to leave.

In *What Happened*, McClellan bites back at the administration that threw him to the wolves. Instead of fumigating the toxic culture of deceit in the federal government, as he had promised to do while running for president in 2000, McClellan charges, George W. Bush decided that "truth was secondary to political victory." He sold the war in Iraq
as a war of necessity when it wasn't. And did a disservice to the American people by choosing to "spin, hide, shade, and exaggerate," attack and counter-attack.

McClellan asserts, more than once, that Bush did not deliberately mislead. His acts of deception were "unintentional or subconscious." And McClellan musters indignation at allegations that the president is "actually stupid." But his narrative undercuts these claims. In 2002, he writes, the Bush White House engaged "in a carefully orchestrated campaign to shape and manipulate" public opinion to gin up support for war with Iraq. Intellectually lazy, the president, when caught in a lie, McClellan implies, is not unlike the little kid with frosting all over his face, who stands nervously, with palms raised up in the air, next to a freshly baked birthday cake with a couple of slices missing, when his mom walks unexpectedly into the kitchen.

On April 6, 2006, on Air Force One in Charlotte, North Carolina, McClellan reveals, he relayed a reporter's question about whether the president had secretly—and hypocritically—leaked part of a National Intelligence Estimate related to Iraq's effort to acquire "yellow cake" in Niger. "Yeah, I did," Bush replied, sheepishly: "the look on his face said he didn't want to discuss the matter any further." The president did not intend to deceive him, McClellan repeats, but "his actions meant that we had been deceived."

Even more damaging, perhaps intentionally so, is McClellan's account of Bush's use of cocaine. In a hotel in the Midwest in 1999, McClellan overheard a conversation between the then governor of Texas (and presidential candidate) and a supporter. "The media won't let go of these ridiculous cocaine rumors," Bush exclaimed. "You know the truth is, I honestly don't remember whether I tried it or not. We had some pretty wild parties back in the day, and I just don't remember." McClellan suggests that Bush was
convincing himself—for his own political convenience and not for the last time—"to believe something that probably was not true and that deep down, he knew was not true." That "falling back on hazy memory" is "not the same as lying in Bush's mind"—or McClellan's—seems to be a distinction without a difference.

*What Happened* doesn't really add all that much to our knowledge of what happened inside the Bush White House before, during, and after the declaration of "mission accomplished" in Iraq. When he took the job as press secretary, McClellan wondered if he would be "privy to the real rationales" behind the president's policies or simply "presented with the final product and told to sell it, willy-nilly." He presents himself as a trusted member of "a select group of insiders" that included Andrew Card, Condoleezza Rice, Karl Rove, and Dan Bartlett. He wasn't. He attended formal meetings—congressional outreach, Cabinet sessions, and world leader visits. But he was excluded from discussions at the National Security Council, the daily "communications" conversations, and the small, informal "strategy" sessions where the real give-and-take occurred. McClellan “knew” what he was told. He was a mouthpiece.

But a very visible one. And so, what's striking about *What Happened* is not what it says, but who said it. A Bushie, and a "Texas loyalist" to boot, Scott McClellan dares to say to anyone who will listen that the emperor and his entourage have no clothes. It's sour grapes, his critics say. He's doing it for the money. He's not the Scott McClellan his colleagues once knew. Maybe so. But if there's mud on the messenger, his message still seems clean, clear, and convincing: Governing in the United States "has become an appendage of politics rather than the other way around"—and the permanent campaign is
based on "the manipulation of shades of truth, partial truths, twisting of the truth, and spin."

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