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The Last Throes of Truth in Iraq

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THE WHITE HOUSE is searching for weapons of mass deletion.

On CNN's "Larry King Live" on Monday, Vice President Dick Cheney said of the violence in Iraq, "I think they're in the last throes, if you will, of the insurgency."

This is after May became the deadliest month for US forces since the January elections, with 76 US military casualties.

At a press conference on Tuesday, President Bush was asked about the US casualties and the deaths of 760 Iraqis since the new Iraqi government was named April 28. A reporter asked Bush, "Do you think that the insurgency is gaining strength and becoming more lethal?"

Bush responded, "I think the Iraqi people dealt the insurgents a serious blow when they, when we had the elections."

Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Myers was asked on ABC's "Good Morning America" about the deaths. "Myers said, 'Well, first of all, the number of incidents is actually down 25 percent since the highs of last November, during the election period. So, overall, numbers of incidents are down. Lethality, as you mentioned, is up. . . . I think what's causing it is a realization that Iraq is marching inevitably toward democracy.'"

Do not even think of bringing up Amnesty International. The human rights group published its annual report last week, a report in which the organization's secretary general, Irene Khan, said, "The detention facility at Guantanamo Bay has become the gulag of our times, entrenching the practice of arbitrary and indefinite detention in violation of international law."

To that, Bush cried, "Absurd." Cheney said, "I was offended." Myers said, "absolutely irresponsible."

All that is missing is a banner behind them saying, "Misinformation Accomplished."

Bush, Cheney, and Myers are saying all these things as their invasion of Iraq is closing in on a dubious milestone. The number of soldiers who died in the invasion and occupation, 858, is about to be passed by the number killed after the United States handed over sovereignty to hand-picked Iraqi leaders. The latter number just crossed the 800 mark.

Soon, the number of US soldiers who have died in the "free" Iraq will surpass the number who died dismantling the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. The two-deaths-a-day average suffered by the US-led forces is the same as during the period from when Bush stood under the banner "Mission Accomplished" until the handover. The number of Iraqi police and guardsmen who have been killed is 880 this year alone, according to the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count. At the current pace, this year's deaths will easily outstrip the prior 1,300.

Yet Bush says, "I'm pleased with the progress." If the Iraqi people have already dealt the insurgency a serious blow, as Bush claims, or if it is in the final throes, as Cheney claims, one shudders to consider what Iraq will look like if they are wrong.

On the Amnesty International flap, conservative commentators and The Washington Post editorial page have slammed Amnesty's rhetoric as way over the top, saying it is a cheap shot to compare US prisons in Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and in other parts of Iraq and Afghanistan to the horrors of Stalin. Amnesty definitely overdid it on the surface, but there was one thing the Bush administration of course did not mention in its rush to trample Amnesty's name.

When our State Department released in March its own massive annual report of human rights abuses around the world, it was quick to criticize other nations for human rights abuses. The State Department often quotes Amnesty International on other nations' abuses. But there was no self-criticism of our prisoner treatment in the so-called war on terror.

The reason is quite ironic. A year ago, Assistant Secretary of State Michael Kozak said, "The reason we don't do a report on ourselves is the same reason you wouldn't write investigative reports about your own finances or something; it wouldn't have any credibility. Somebody else needs to do that. It's not that we're against being scrutinized, and indeed we are scrutinized by many other organizations: Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International."

With new allegations of Guantanamo prisoner treatment by the Associated Press, the questions continue about American moral authority. If the chaos continues, what could the Bush administration possibly say next?