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LEONARD PITTS JR.: Bush Should Own Up to his mistakes

LEONARD PITTS JR.
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Dear President Bush:

I see where your administration took Newsweek magazine to task last week over a report alleging that U.S. military personnel at Guantanamo Bay defiled the Koran by flushing it down a toilet. Your spokesman declared you outraged. Who can blame you?

The item led to protests across the Middle East and rioting in Afghanistan that reportedly left at least 15 people dead. The Muslim world was infuriated at the supposed mistreatment of the holy book.

Sudden demonstrations

Frankly, the fury mystifies me a bit, given that there have been numerous similar reports over the last two years. The fact that this small item suddenly leads to demonstrations in the streets feels a bit ... orchestrated, if you know what I mean. It leaves me wondering if somebody over there didn't fan this fire specifically to embarrass the American military.

Which is not to take the onus off Newsweek. In retracting the offending item, the magazine said its source could no longer verify the information. That raises questions about the reliability of the magazine's sources and about its policy toward their use.

It is, I can promise you, a painful time at Newsweek. But in the news business, we believe nothing is more important than credibility. You correct mistakes forthrightly and level with readers about how they occurred.

My newsroom calls them "set-recs," short for "setting the record straight." Nothing I've ever written has led to rioting and bloodshed, but I've got a few set-recs on my record. Over the years, I have headquartered an electronics firm on the wrong continent, mislabeled a Bible quote and called a Robert, Richard.

Being open is good

I don't enjoy rereading those columns. But I console myself with the reminder that getting it wrong will occasionally happen so long as news outlets draw their workforce from the ranks of the human race. And also, with the reminder that being open about error is good for us in the long run.

Point being, I'm pleased by your concern for Newsweek's accuracy. And I'm wondering if this means you will soon evince concern for your own.

Because if there is one trait that has characterized your response to the errors that attended our invasion of Iraq, it's a refusal to concede that they happened. Indeed, asked during a news conference last year if you ever admitted mistakes, you got a look on your face like an unprepared fifth-grader called to work out a math problem in front of the class. You hemmed a little, hawed a bit and finally said you couldn't think of any.

Your admirers call that refusal to admit to error evidence of your resolve. But you know, it's a short leap from resolve to stubbornness and an even shorter leap from there to rigidity. So, Mr. President, I've taken the liberty of writing the following set-recs for you. Tell me what you think:

1. "In 2002 and 2003, my administration made the case for invading Iraq by claiming that nation had weapons of mass destruction. It did not. We regret the error." Or:

2. "In 2002 and 2003, my administration encouraged Americans to believe Iraq was involved in the Sept. 11 attacks. It was not. We regret the error." Or:

3. "In 2003, my administration said Iraq's oil wealth was such that the invasion would pay for itself. It has not. We regret that error, too."

See how it works, Mr. President? It's not that bad, once you get the hang of it. OK, granted, it will never be fun. But in my business, we believe owning up to error ultimately makes you better.

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