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[Peggy Drexler](#)

The Truth Will Get You Nowhere

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1994 -- Texas gubernatorial race: George Bush was asked by a debate panelist how he got into the Texas National Guard when there was a waiting list of up to five years. Did the candidate's father, then a congressman, use any influence to have his son jump ahead of one hundred thousand other men his age?

His answer: "Not that I know of. I certainly didn't ask for any. And I'm sure my father didn't either. They just had an opening for a pilot, and I was there at the right time."

2007 -- Presidential news conference. The President Bush was asked his reaction to a Moveon.org ad that made a bad pun--Petraeus-betray us-- in a newspaper that now realizes it gift-wrapped a diversion from the issue at hand. His response: "It's "disgusting," an attack not only on the man, but the military. Never mind that the content of the ad--the fact that the metrics of improvement were subjected to torture every bit as severe as one of Sadaam's prisons and that we are in the middle of an un-winnable religious civil war--were on the mark.

They are book ends for a continuum of dishonesty, incompetence and corruption that is the new and lasting benchmark for leadership failure. They do, however, say something for consistency. Across more than a decade, George W. Bush has stayed true to a philosophy: Deny when you can. Divert when you must. But never tell the truth--especially when it doesn't work in your favor. And, in fact, for the past eight years, it virtually never has.

As a research psychologist, I think the first therapy session for a man who has made delusion and denial a sacrament would be like archeologist Howard Carter's first candle-lit peek into Tutankhamen's tomb. Treasure everywhere.

But a man who prides himself on not reading newspapers, ignoring criticism and who will always "stay the course" and never "cut and run" is likely not a great candidate for self-reflection. He doesn't admit mistakes. He says he can't even remember them.

So we are left to observe from beyond the White House battlements.

What is up with this man? How can he be so consistently bad at so many things--at such a great cost of lives, resources and American reputation--and continue to steer a course to disaster while whistling a tune?

Certainly, there is the arrogance of privilege and the expectations that come from being bailed out of past failures and responsibilities by dad's golfing buddies.

But when you look at the pattern, it's more than that. This is a man who is simply afraid. Afraid of new ideas. Afraid of challenge. Afraid of disagreement. Afraid of science. Afraid of anyone who doesn't act and believe outside the confines of his born-again faith. Afraid of the give and take that bonds partners and resolves conflicts.

The cowardice that has defined so much of his presidency isn't necessarily physical. I really have no problem with the fact that he avoided Vietnam. Had my son been eligible for the draft then, we would have tied him up in the basement before we let him die for Lyndon Johnson's and Richard Nixon's political manhood.

Bush's fears are much more complex than a reluctance to be shot at in defense of a failed geopolitical experiment--even though many brave young men and women are doing exactly that for him.

His fear is the kind that prevents you from telling the truth when the truth is difficult. It prevents you from taking responsibility for your actions when your actions put others at risk. It lets you talk about things like courage and accountability, while never coming to grips with the fact that you fail to exhibit them yourself. It even lets you loose your snarling dogs of misinformation (while you stay behind the fence) on the patriotism and courage of John McCain, John Kerry and Max Cleland--who left two legs and an arm in Vietnam--while never quite answering exactly where you were in those missing Guard years.

His penultimate act of moral cowardice is "The Surge"--one can only wonder how many billable hours went into coming up with that term. You can debate the metrics and parse the definitions of progress, and entirely miss the point--which, in fact, is exactly the point.

The surge is not going scour clean the blood debts of sectarian hatred. It's not going to unite a government that those hatreds have shaped and defined. It's not going to share the oil, treat the sewage or turn on the electricity.

But buy time? Now we're talking. In the calculus of cowardice, you can almost hear the wheels turning. "Just a few more months. Just a few more months. And I can blame this whole thing on somebody else."