

MARC AMBINDER'S CAVE

✖ I was going to leave well enough alone—to take Marc Ambinder's limited apology for labeling DFHs who believed the threat level system to be politicized as "gut haters," accept that he is at least thinking about these things, and move on.

But there are a couple of passages from his post that really embody the things that—as I said before—make his take on the threat levels an excellent example of what I think is wrong with Village journalism—and why. Ambinder has been describing his thought process for assessing the threat levels (both then as now) as akin to someone in Plato's cave whose entire reality consists solely of the shadows he sees on the wall of the cave.

For example, take his revised assertion that it was correct to distrust the DFHs belief that the threat levels were politicized.

I still think that some journalists were right to be skeptical of the doubters at the time. I think that some journalists were correct to question how they arrived at the beliefs they arrived at.

I was trying to make this point in my earlier post, but thankfully Ambinder gives me a chance to do it again. Ambinder describes himself as assessing the threat levels by understanding what the different "sides" in the debate were saying, assessing their credibility, and then deciding which was right based (I guess) on each side's credibility. He suggests that he was right to dismiss the DFHs' claims—and **therefore the assertion** that the threat levels were politicized—based on the DFHs themselves. In neither Ambinder's original column nor in his follow-up does Ambinder accept that there was an abundance of evidence that a journalist might use to assess the threat levels himself, to assess the claims the DFHs were making

independently of their credibility or lack thereof. So to use the cave analogy, Ambinder was satisfied that—having identified that the shadow he was seeing on his cave wall came from we DFHs, he had no need to turn around and look at the thing itself, to assess it of his own accord.

Then there's Ambinder actually weighing whether he can, now, conclude that the threat levels were politicized. In his follow-up post he weighs Ridge's statement in the context of his squabbles with Rummy and Ashcroft.

Reading the excerpts from Tom Ridge's book, it is not clear to me that he is actually arguing against interest, or that he is correct. No doubt, Don Rumsfeld and John Ashcroft had very strong views about terrorism, but simply because Ridge — who disagreed with Rumsfeld and Ashcroft about many, many things — had a feeling that Rumsfeld was trying to tinker with an election's outcome does not, by a mile, prove anything.

Which follows up on his assertion that he couldn't assess the terror levels in 2004 because he had no raw intelligence.

And yet — we, too, weren't privy to the intelligence. Information asymmetry is always going to exist, and, living as we do in a Democratic system, most journalists are going to give the government the benefit of some doubt, even having learned lessons about giving the government that benefit.

Now, I actually agree with Ambinder that Ridge's statement is more limited than it has been made out to be. Ridge is talking about a debate that did not end up in an elevated threat level right on the eve of the elections. He's not talking—as I originally assumed—of the elevated threat

level during the DNC, which was one of the most egregious examples for DFHs. And it is true that Fran Townsend and John Ashcroft and Andy Card are pushing back on this.

So I'm not averse to evaluating the pissing match that is about to ensue about this claim—I've already started to do so myself.

But what is interesting about Ambinder's description of his own assessment—then, and now—of the threat levels is that he resorts to "official" sources, raw intelligence and representations from the players after the fact. But he still doesn't engage with the set of data that we DFHs used to correctly interpret the threat assessments as politicized—the sheer number of elevated threat assessments, the timing of them, the absurdity of "threats" that were treated as valid. Or, if raw intelligence is your kind of thing, the process that we now know went into those threat assessments—the torture of Abu Zubaydah that resulted in those absurd threats. Or the torture of Hassan Ghul in August 2004 after he had been in custody since January of that year, just in time to support election eve scare-mongering. All of that is part of the process and evidence of politicization, but Ambinder doesn't touch it.

My point being that Ambinder stubbornly clings to the data he considers valid—"official" sources. He not only appears to accept data solely from those official sources or from a false objective assessment of two sides of a debate, but he takes those official sources at their word. He treats, for example, the One Percent Doctrine on faith, without wondering how a guy really motivated exclusively by a "doctrine" that you have to prevent any possible threat, no matter how small, would turn around and out a CIA counter-proliferation expert because her husband was challenging him politically. Ambinder at least *seems* to interpret any Ridge versus Ashcroft and Rummy disagreements as an equal fight, without also noting the number of times Ashcroft created

press circuses to announce the arrest of yet more "aspirational" terrorists or considering Rummy's fondness both for institutional propaganda like the Rent-A-General program and for making assertions that fly in the face of all reality. Ambinder reifies "official" sources both to the exclusion of a whole bunch of other evidence and in such a way that limits his ability to at least publicly challenge the credibility of those official sources based on their past record. These official sources are filtered—both through the natural egotistical self-promotion and by the conditions (such as torture) that underlie them. That's true of the Bush Administration and the Obama Administration and any other administration. But rather than try to sort through that—or consider other data, such as simple patterns built up over time—Ambinder throws up his hands and says, "information asymmetry," and concedes that professional journalists "give the government the benefit of some doubt" rather than try to fight through it or use alternative sources as well.

What Ambinder is doing—and the reason I think it fair to say his statements represent a lot of what is wrong with Village journalism—is following certain professional habits: the observation of the world through a constant on-the-one-side-on-the-other-side filter and, along with that, through the filter of official sources treated as such. Those professional habits have been incredibly well documented (one book that has influenced me on this is Timothy Cook's *Governing with the News*). And those professional habits serve as a sort of self-imposed cave that permits journalists a view only on the shadows of reality, even after such a time when a more direct view is possible, even to lay observers. (Or perhaps especially to lay observers.)

Now that we're beyond the "gut haters" slur and my own vulgar language, this is ultimately a discussion about two things. First, a tendency among Village journalists to use the on-the-one-

side-on-the-other-side false objectivity as a way to—as Glenn documents—dismiss one perceived side of a debate without ever having to do the work of independently assessing the data they are using. And, more generally, this is another incident in a long series of them in which Village journalistic methods have proven to be catastrophically ineffective at assessing the truth.

The problem is Ambinder and most other Village journalists remain, obstinately, in their cave. On the health care debate, for example, the deathers got a hearing because they were defined as one of the two sides of the debate. Admittedly, they were (after several weeks) dismissed as cranks, but not before they started bringing guns to town halls. But the process of dismissing them as cranks has occupied the Village's time, rather than an exposition of what is really in the existing health care plans. This was exacerbated by the treatment of Sarah Palin and Chuck Grassley as legitimate sources because there are "official" representatives of the Republican Party, when any assessment of what they were saying ought to disqualify them as legitimate voices (though admittedly, Obama bears a ton of responsibility for Grassley's centrality in the debate). So we're getting this entire health care debate filtered through Ambinder's cave, and we may well not get health care as a result, and a lot of people will unnecessarily die or go bankrupt as a consequence.

There's a reason we DFHs got so outraged over this. Not just because we were dismissed as cranks when plenty of evidence showed (and still shows) we were right. But because the refusal of journalists to come out of their caves and report on the reality, rather than the filtered reality their professional habits leads them to favor, has real, awful consequences for our country and its citizens.