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EDITORIAL

Bush and 'the memo'

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PRESIDENT BUSH apparently thinks he can dismiss the damning "Downing Street memo" with a few glib words.

If he is right, it is a sad commentary on the state of American democracy and values.

The memo, recounting the details of a July 23, 2002, meeting at British Prime Minister Tony Blair's official residence on 10 Downing St., strongly suggested that the message had been sent across the Atlantic that the Bush White House had made the decision to wage war on Iraq. The minutes of the meeting indicated that Blair and his top-level intelligence and foreign-policy aides were given clear signals that military action was "inevitable."

In the most disturbing passage of the minutes, the head of Britain's MI6 intelligence service, reporting on his recent trip to Washington, told the group that "intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy" of a war to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

Bush was finally asked about the memo directly this week, during a media availability with Blair. Bush tried to discredit the memo because of the timing of its disclosure -- just days before Blair's re-election. But it is

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important to note that no one has challenged the authenticity of the memo nor the accuracy of its account of the meeting.

Bush also scoffed at the suggestion that the decision to go to war had been made by July 2002, nearly a year before U.S. bombs began raining on Baghdad. "There's nothing farther from the truth," Bush told reporters. "My conversation with the prime minister was, how can we do this peacefully?"

Americans deserve to have a more intensive investigation and expansive explanation to the extremely serious allegation that their government "fixed" intelligence to justify a pre-emptive war. The White House wants to dismiss it as "old news" and the Republicans who control both houses of Congress assume they can shrug off the demands of a bloc of Democrats -- led by Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich. -- for hearings on the Downing Street memo.

There should be no statute of limitations -- or shortness of public attention span -- on an issue that cuts to the core of this government's integrity and credibility. Congress must fully investigate the actions in Washington that led the highest officials in Great Britain to be convinced that the Bush administration was hell-bent on war and working to concoct a rationalization for it.

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