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COMMENTARY

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EDITORIAL

President balks when questioned on mistakes

In his first prime time press conference in more than a year, reporters grilled President Bush with questions about the war in Iraq — where 700 American soldiers have died since the beginning of the war, as of this weekend — and whether his administration satisfactorily responded to warnings that foreshadowed the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Laced with what CNN.com somewhat pejoratively dubbed the "usual mix of misspoken words and grammatical conundrums," Bush's less-than-succinct but generally adequate responses tackled reporters' rough questions, often meandering into soliloquies about national security, meeting with fallen soldiers' families and the like, and usually returned full circle.

For example, one reporter asked, "Two and a half years later, do you feel any personal responsibility for Sept. 11?" Several sentences into his reply, Bush discussed the importance of the inter-agency synergy that the Department of Homeland Security enables, saying, "The hearings will show that the PATRIOT Act is an important change in the law that will allow the FBI and the CIA to better share information together."

While providing context is important, discussing the issue of personal responsibility for a great tragedy is a poor moment to advertise an ethically dubious law that restricts civil liberties.

Still, Bush's (rare) prime time appearance brought to the forefront some important points previously buried under a health of conjecture and stock phrases.

At least one remark was particularly disturbing. A reporter asked about the August 6, 2001, presidential daily briefing: "You pointed out that it did not warn of a hijacking of airplanes to crash into buildings, but that it warned of hijacking to obviously take hostages and to secure the release of extremists that are being held by the U.S. Did that trigger some specific actions on your part in the administration, since it dealt with potentially hundreds of lives and a blackmail attempt on the United States government?"

Bush's short answer is no, provisionally: The PDB indicated that "bin Laden might want to hijack an airplane but, as you said, not to fly into a building, but perhaps to release a person in jail," he explained. Bush said that the threat concerned him, but "Frankly, I didn't think there was anything new." By contrast, Bush assured us, "Had I had any inkling whatsoever that the people were going to fly airplanes into buildings, we would have moved heaven and earth to save the country."

But the mention of a threat of hijacking a plane and using hundreds of civilian travelers as blackmail didn't deserve that same attention? Was the specific mention of such a dastardly plan, even if it wasn't specific, worth any less heed because Bush had heard of the threat before?

In any case, at least one question caught the president off-guard: A reporter asked, "In the last campaign, you were asked a question about the biggest mistake you'd made in your life, and you used to like to joke that it was trading Sammy Sosa. You've looked back before 9-11 for what mistakes might have been made. After 9-11, what would your biggest mistake be, would you say, and what lessons have learned from it?"

A surprised Bush admitted, "I wish you'd have given me this written question ahead of time so I could plan for it." Unable to come up with an answer, Bush admitted, "I don't want to sound like I have made no mistakes. I'm confident I have."

But this inability is probably the most dangerous revelation of the conference. If Bush isn't familiar enough with the ramifications of his own policy decisions to identify which were poor ones, how can he learn from those mistakes? Worse, what does that ignorance mean for future decisions?

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"One hundred Chicken McGrills served" just doesn't have the same ring to it as the old hamburger slogan of McDonald's. It's ironic that a company that prides itself on the number of hamburgers served is now trying to add as many non-hamburger options as possible to the menu.

The change has come around for the same reason that most companies alter their strategy: lower profits. With a surge in the health-conscious portion of the population and a scare of mad cow disease, McDonald's has decided to change its ways. There have been various lawsuits brought against "Mc-e-dee's" in which people claim the restaurant is responsible for their obesity. And to top it off, the award-winning film "Super Size Me" was released, documenting the 25-pound weight gain of a man who ate three McDonald's meals a day for a month.

Well, it seems it can't get much worse, and by 'it' I'm referring to the food at McDonald's, not its situation. As I've grown up, I've watched the eatery go downhill, but it may have hit its low point when it announced the introduction of the adult Happy Meal.

I never go to McDonald's for gourmet healthy food. It's cheap, fast and the same low quality at every location. That's the beauty of chain restaurants: You know what you're getting. But the problem is, I don't even recognize the menu at McDonald's today.

As a child I loved to go for the Happy Meal. My parents' attic is still full of my Happy Meal box collection. Today, children have to make do with a paper bag. All those toys I collected, which are also packed away, were discovered to be choking hazards, so the prize isn't even as good as in the old days.

Did you ever like getting those McDonaldland cookies, shaped like Grimace and the Fry Guys? Gone. They've been replaced with desserts like Fruit 'n Yogurt Parfaits and reduced-fat ice cream cones. Not to mention, Hamburglar and company have been replaced with Willie Munchright, a little Claymation boy who gives children healthy eating tips. For some reason, Grimace's purple complexion never scared me, but Willie looks like a human and his purple skin makes me wonder if maybe he doesn't need a little more sugar in his diet.

The merry-go-round, the Grimace you could jump inside and shake about and the Fry Guys you could ride on like rocking horses are all gone. Instead, ball pins and tunnels, all made of plastic, sit out front. You can't help but be glad you were a child back in the days of loose safety standards.

Besides the loss of the iconic characters, the menu has lost some good items and has seen the arrival of some really bad ones. The apple pies are now baked instead of fried. . Then there was the addition of the McSalad Shaker. What a smart idea: Salad in a cup. I once witnessed a rather large construction worker eating one of these. He was trying extremely hard to shake the cup so that the salad dressing spread throughout, just like in the commercial. His violent actions made him look like one of those machines that shakes up paint at the hardware store. Talk about a healthy menu item. It has less fat, and you burn calories just preparing it!

Some people have criticized McDonald's for offering mostly unhealthy food, and contend that the fast food giant has a responsibility for the health of its customers. It doesn't take a lot of common sense to realize eating a Big Mac three times a day is probably not good for your health, but no one ever said people have common sense. Instead the message being sent is, "I am too stupid, too cheap and too lazy to drive anywhere else besides McDonald's, so it needs to change, not me." That's a great manifesto to follow in life. Here's another idea: Take responsibility for your own actions.

We have sold ourselves short in life and now are looking for someone else to blame. McDonald's seems like the perfect scapegoat, and its way to react was to treat adults like children because that is how they are acting. Now it'll be serving adult Happy Meals, complete with a salad, bottle of water, a toy (a pedometer that measures how many steps you walk) and an informational pamphlet promoting exercise. Well, are we all happy now?

Congress recently passed the "Cheeseburger Bill" prohibiting lawsuits against fast-food chains that claim they cause obesity. It is sad when the government has to start making laws because its citizens think they can (and do) sue if something doesn't go their way. The fun of the playground and the Happy Meal toys is gone because of the threat parents will sue the restaurant if their child gets hurt. In reality, the greatest danger posed to a child at McDonald's is probably getting hit by a car in the parking lot. Maybe we should just learn to be responsible for our children and our diet?

McDonald's isn't the same as it used to be. It's unfortunate. In-N-Out Burger has stuck to the basic philosophy of serving hamburgers, fries and shakes. It has had great success, with Diet Coke being the healthiest thing on its menu, but unfortunately, McDonald's went a different route. The last time I was "lovin' it" at McDonald's was when I saw Humongousize Fries on the menu in Texas. Things just aren't how they used to be.

Contact the columnist at marissajones@dailyemerald.com. Her opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.