A couple of weeks ago, the Republican presidential hopeful Jeb Bush was asked in an interview with Fox News whether, knowing what he knows now, he would have invaded Iraq.

It's the kind of predictable question for which most people assumed he would have a coherent answer. They were wrong. Jeb blew it. "I would have [authorised the invasion]," he said. "And so would have Hillary Clinton, just to remind everybody. And so would almost everybody that was confronted with the intelligence they got."

For the next few days, as he was hammered from left and right, he flailed around like a four-star general in search of a plausible exit strategy. In a number of do-overs, he answered the same question with "I don't know", "I didn't understand the question", and "no" before finally falling back on the perennial Republican default of blaming everything on Barack Obama.

"You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever," writes Tim O'Brien in his novel about Vietnam, The Things They Carried. "In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unravelling the deeper meaning."

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