Over the past few months, the Democratic presidential candidates have been peddling a story. The story is that the Bush administration is circumventing the competitive bidding process to funnel sweetheart Iraq reconstruction contracts to major campaign contributors, especially Dick Cheney's old firm, Halliburton.

The riff was laid down by Dennis Kucinich, but now all the candidates are playing along. Howard Dean says the Halliburton contracts show that the Bush administration "has sold this country down the river." John Kerry says the administration has broken faith with the American people with its no-bid contracts with Halliburton. In the parade of Democratic bogeymen, the word "Halliburton" elicits almost as many hisses as the chart-topping "Ashcroft."

The problem with the story is that it's almost entirely untrue. As Daniel Drezner recently established in Slate, there is no statistically significant correlation between the companies that made big campaign contributions and the companies that have won reconstruction contracts.

The most persuasive rebuttals have come from people who actually know something about the government procurement process. For example, Steven Kelman was an administrator in the Office of Federal Procurement Policy under Bill Clinton and now is a professor of public management at Harvard.

Last week, Kelman wrote an op-ed article in The Washington Post on the alleged links between contributions and reconstruction contracts. "One would be hard-pressed to discover anyone with a working knowledge of how federal contracts are awarded — whether a career civil servant working on procurement or an independent academic expert — who doesn't regard these allegations as being somewhere between highly improbable and utterly absurd," he observed.

The fact is that unlike the Congressional pork barrel machine, the federal procurement system is a highly structured process, which is largely insulated from crass political pressures. The idea that a Bush political appointee can parachute down and persuade a large group of civil servants to risk their careers by steering business to a big donor is the stuff of fantasy novels, not reality.

The real story is that the Halliburton subsidiary, Kellogg, Brown & Root, won an open competition to provide the service support for overseas troops. This contract is called the Logcap, and is awarded every few years. KBR won the competition in 1992. It lost to DynCorp in 1997, and won it again in 2001.

Under the deal, KBR builds bases, supplies water, operates laundries and performs thousands of other tasks. Though the G.A.O. has found that KBR sometimes overcharges, in general the company has an outstanding reputation among the panoply of auditing agencies that monitor these contracts.

But some circumstances are not covered under Logcap. During the Clinton administration, the Pentagon issued a temporary no-bid contract to KBR to continue its work in the Balkans. In the months leading up to the Iraq war, Defense officials realized they needed plans in case Saddam Hussein once again set his oil wells ablaze. KBR did the study under Logcap. Then in February, with the war looming, Pentagon planners issued an additional bridge contract to KBR to put out any fires that were set. KBR had the experience. Its personnel were in place. It would have been crazy to open up a three-to-five-month bidding process at that time.

There are a number of legitimate questions Democratic candidates could be asking about our procurement system. Are we so overreliant on private contractors that the line between combat personnel and support personnel is getting blurred? Should we beef up the Pentagon procurement staff, to give us the ability to manage...
contracts from a wider cast of companies? What do we do if the private contractors decide to pack up and leave Iraq?

But answering these questions would mean coming up with a positive vision of how to better proceed with our reconstruction efforts. Instead the Democratic presidential candidates are content simply to repeat demagogic and misleading applause lines.

The lesson of this Halliburton business is that some parts of our government really do make their decisions on the merits. And just because a story makes you popular doesn't make it true.