

Bush White House faces criminal investigation over Iraq smear campaign

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1 October 2003

The Bush White House has taken on the aspect of a besieged fortress with the announcement late Monday of a formal FBI investigation into illegal leaks of information by administration officials attempting to intimidate a critic of Bush's Iraq war policy. The full panoply of a Washington scandal is unfolding: charges of conspiracy, criminal referrals, subpoenas, orders to halt the shredding of documents and the deleting of emails, demands for the appointment of a special or independent prosecutor to investigate the charges.

As always in such a political eruption, it is necessary to examine both the specific and peculiar form taken by the "scandal" and the more profound underlying causes. In the current conflict, unlike the countless investigations of the Clinton White House fomented by its extreme-right critics, on trumped-up charges, there is an actual crime, one of considerable political significance.

The *Washington Post* ignited the firestorm with an article posted on its web site on the night of Saturday, September 27, reporting that two Bush administration officials had contacted a half dozen reporters in July, seeking to spread a story to discredit former ambassador Joseph A. Wilson, a prominent critic of Bush's Iraq policy.

Wilson is a retired diplomat who traveled early in 2002 to Niger, in West Africa, on a mission for the CIA to investigate intelligence reports that Iraq was seeking to obtain hundreds of tons of uranium ore from that country for use in a nuclear weapons program. As a former diplomat who had served both in Baghdad and in Niamey, the capital of Niger, Wilson was an obvious choice for the task. He made an eight-day visit and reported that it was impossible for Iraq to get uranium from Niger and that there was no evidence of any attempt.

When President Bush, nearly a year later, included the Africa uranium claim in his State of the Union speech, Wilson protested vocally, first within the Washington national security establishment, then publicly, in an op-ed column July 6 in the *New York Times*. The Bush administration was seriously embarrassed; the White House admitted that the claim had been false; and CIA Director George Tenet issued a public statement taking responsibility for the false information being included in a presidential address.

Within a few days of Wilson's column, Bush administration

officials were leaking to selected reporters the information that his wife, Valerie Plame, was a longtime CIA operative, claiming that she had engineered his selection for the Niger mission and suggesting that this represented some sort of corrupt practice. One of the journalists, longtime right-wing pundit Robert Novak, made Plame's name and occupation public in his syndicated column July 14.

Plame is reportedly a former covert operative now working for the CIA as an analyst in the field of weapons of mass destruction. She has traveled to the Middle East on CIA business while playing the role of an energy industry expert. Friends and colleagues of Plame have told the press that anyone who met with her overseas will now be under suspicion of working for American intelligence, and that many lives could be endangered by her exposure as a CIA agent.

Any US government official who revealed Plame's identity to the press would be guilty of violating the 1982 Intelligence Identities Protection Act, legislation passed under the Reagan administration to put a stop to the exposures made by former agent Philip Agee and other opponents of CIA undercover operations. It is ironic that the first person to be prosecuted under this reactionary law, passed to protect the criminal actions of the American spy agency, could be a high official of the Bush administration.

There are many similarities between the latest Washington scandal and the conflict in Britain triggered by the suicide of David Kelly, the British government scientist who had leaked information to the BBC critical of the Blair government's reckless drive to war in Iraq, and was subsequently hounded to his death. Blair has been forced to authorize a public inquiry, headed by Justice Brian Hutton, in an attempt to control and ultimately suppress the scandal. Despite the best efforts of Blair and Hutton, the inquiry has revealed enormous tensions and divisions within the state machine, and further discredited the Blair government in the eyes of working people.

The conflict in Washington has erupted in the aftermath of the US conquest of Iraq, as it has become clear that the occupation is a military, political and economic debacle for American imperialism. Tensions within the national security apparatus are breaking through to the surface—witness the scathing denunciation of Bush's war policy last month by

retired general Anthony Zinni, the former commander of the US Central Command and once Bush's personal envoy in the Israeli-Palestinian talks.

The warmongering cabal in the Bush White House struck out at Wilson for his exposure of the Africa uranium lie. As Wilson said later, the leak was part of "a deliberate attempt on the part of the White House to intimidate others and make them think twice about coming forward."

John Dean, the former White House counsel in the Nixon administration, commented that the leaking of Mrs. Wilson's name and occupation was worse than any of Nixon's crimes. "If I thought I had seen dirty political tricks as nasty and vile as they could get at the Nixon White House, I was wrong," he wrote last month. "Nixon never set up a hit on one of his enemies' wives."

In retaliation, the "high Bush administration official" who was the source of the *Washington Post* report—widely believed to be CIA Director George Tenet or another top official of that agency—released information that could well trigger a high-level purge within the White House.

According to the *Post* account, the senior official said that the exposure of Wilson's wife "was meant purely and simply for revenge." Such leaks were "wrong and a huge miscalculation, because they were irrelevant and did nothing to diminish Wilson's credibility." The official revealed the leaking, but refused to name either the leakers or the journalists whose collaboration they sought.

The most immediate target of press speculation was Bush's top political adviser and right-wing hatchet man, Karl Rove. Wilson directly attacked the longtime Republican Party operative at a public forum August 21 near Seattle, where he said he was interested "to see whether or not we can get Karl Rove frog-marched out of the White House in handcuffs."

The Bush administration is confronted with a full-blown political crisis that could well produce such a spectacle. Bureaucratic foot-dragging delayed the formal opening of an investigation for months. According to press reports, the CIA approached the Justice Department about an investigation within a week of the publication of Novak's column, and by the end of July had drafted a "crime report," the formal notice that a crime had been committed. But it was not until September 29 that the Justice Department authorized the FBI to begin a criminal investigation.

Then followed a curious sequence of events. The Justice Department officially notified the White House of the upcoming investigation on Monday evening, about 8 p.m. White House counsel Alberto R. Gonzales did not relay the notice to the White House staff until the following morning, in a brief memo instructing them to "preserve all materials that might in any way be related to the department's investigation." The White House made public the text of these instructions in an effort to show that it was cooperating. The media did not make any mention of the timing of these actions: the 12-hour

gap between notification by the Justice Department and Gonzales's memo gave White House aides plenty of time to sanitize their records before FBI agents descended upon them.

White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters, "The president has directed the White House to cooperate fully with this investigation." But he said that no White House aides would be asked directly whether they were the source of the leaks. He denied that Rove was involved, adding, "The president knows he wasn't involved." How Bush could know this, if the policy was not to ask, McClellan did not explain.

The other major actor in the Washington crisis is the media itself. While Novak was the only one of the six journalists contacted by the White House to serve as a conduit for the leak, none of the others—apparently including reporters for NBC, CBS and ABC—made public the fact that the White House was engaged in a smear campaign against its critics. Since the FBI investigation was made public, no journalist has come forward to identify the two high officials who engaged in this criminal action.

Wilson himself said that four reporters working at the three major television networks had told him they received calls as part of the smear, and he identified one of them as Andrea Mitchell of NBC (Mitchell is also the wife of Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan, the head of the US central bank).

In a particularly chilling note, Wilson cited the comment of one reporter "who called me right after he had spoken to Rove and said that Rove had said my wife was fair game." Wilson said that conversation took place July 21, one week after the Novak column appeared.

The revelations so far give a glimpse of the gangster mentality in the White House, but a full exposure would require a wide-ranging public investigation into the entire conduct of the war against Iraq, from its original conception in the minds of Bush administration officials—who began planning it long before the September 11 terrorist attacks supplied them with a pretext.

It goes without saying that no such investigation will be conducted by the FBI and John Ashcroft's Justice Department, or by any other agency of the American state. This includes the Congress, where leading Democrats have already called for hearings and the appointment of a special prosecutor.



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