

The CIA leak case through the lens of the Wall Street Journal

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3 October 2003

With the Justice Department launching an investigation into the identity of the senior official who leaked the name of a covert CIA agent in a naked act of political reprisal, the *Wall Street Journal* has weighed in with an editorial dismissing the entire affair as a political ruse by the Democratic Party.

The editorial board of the leading US business newspaper is dominated by a group of extreme right-wing zealots who share the closest ideological and political connections with the Bush White House. They faithfully articulate the interests and profoundly antidemocratic views of the layer of reactionaries and criminals within the US business establishment that forms the real political base of the administration.

“Democrats would love to run Karl Rove out of town,” declared the *Journal* editorial’s subhead, referring to Bush’s chief political adviser and handler. It went on to call the controversy a “Beltway scandal-ette” and a “scandal game” in which Rove is unfairly charged, with “no evidence” against him.

In fact, there are very good reasons why Rove is the focus of the developing scandal. Former US ambassador Joseph Wilson, the husband of the named CIA agent and real target of what amounted to a dirty tricks operation, has charged that Rove condoned the leak and advised reporters that publishing the woman’s name was “fair game” after it first appeared in a syndicated column by Robert Novak.

Under reporters’ questioning at a Wednesday afternoon press conference, White House press secretary Scott McClellan did not deny this charge. “Now, we’re getting into issues such as, did anyone talk about what was in the news, what was reported in the paper, things of that nature,” McClellan said.

Legal experts have stated that for an administration official to point to even a published report exposing a CIA agent in a manner that confirmed its accuracy would constitute a violation of the federal law that outlaws such disclosures and provides punishment of up to 10 years in prison.

“The reason this is suddenly a story is because Mr. Rove, the president’s political strategist and confidant from Texas, has become the main target,” the *Journal* states. The editorial continues: “The media and the Democrats now slip-streaming behind them, understand that the *what* of this mystery matters much less than the *who*.... We’re also old enough to recall what happened to Jimmy Carter’s presidency once his old Georgia friend Bert Lance was run out of town. If they can take down Mr. Rove, the lead planner for Mr. Bush’s election campaign, they will

have knocked the props out of his presidency.”

The *Journal* editorial board should not have to plumb its fading memories of Bert Lance. It undoubtedly has far more vivid recollections of a more recent media campaign to “take down” another presidential aide—White House deputy counsel Vincent Foster.

The Foster affair was the most vicious element within a concerted and sustained effort by the *Journal*’s editorial board to undermine and topple an elected president using everything from an insignificant land deal known as Whitewater to the president’s private sex life.

The demonization of Foster had no such substantial basis as suspicion of violating a federal law. Rather it began with the failure of the White House to provide the *Journal* with a photograph of the Clinton White House aide, which promoted an ominous-sounding comment entitled, “Who is Vincent Foster?”

The newspaper continued a non-stop vendetta against Foster, writing editorial after editorial implying sinister and perhaps illegal activities based largely on his having worked as a law partner with Hillary Clinton in Arkansas.

After more than a month of this press campaign, Foster drove to a park in Virginia and shot himself to death. A note found later in his briefcase read: “The WSJ editors lie without consequence ... I was not meant for the job or the spotlight of public life in Washington. Here ruining people is considered sport.”

The ghouls on the *Journal* editorial board then seized upon the suicide to encourage the ultra-rightist fantasy that Foster may have been killed because he “knew too much” about the Clintons’ alleged malfeasance.

But now, the *Journal*’s editors wax indignant about the supposed witch-hunt against Rove, a recognized master in the art of hatchet jobs and smear campaigns.

The editorial dismisses the issues involved in the leak story as “flimsy.” Its reasoning bears consideration. “The law against revealing the names of covert CIA agents was passed in 1982 in reaction against leaks by Philip Agee and other hard-left types whose goal was to undermine CIA operations around the world,” it states. “This case is all about a policy dispute over Iraq.”

In other words, the law is intended only to punish those who oppose the crimes carried out by the US government and its covert intelligence operatives. Breaking the law to promote such crimes—or to punish those who expose them—is itself no crime at all.

This laissez-faire attitude to leaking the identity of a covert CIA agent to the media stands in stark contrast to the attitude taken by the Bush administration and its right-wing supporters toward previous government leaks. The Bush White House has imposed the tightest restriction on the dissemination of classified material in US history. When reports of pre-September 11 National Security Agency cables warning of the impending terrorist attacks were leaked, apparently from members of Congressional intelligence panels, Vice President Richard Cheney ordered a full-scale FBI probe of the Congressional investigators themselves. And Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has threatened Pentagon sources speaking to the media on condition of anonymity with criminal prosecution.

Repeatedly, administration officials have warned that disclosures could expose intelligence “sources and methods” and place lives of agents and their “assets” in danger.

Yet now, the *Journal* insists, the administration officials who revealed the identity of Wilson’s wife—Valerie Plame—as a CIA agent weren’t breaking the law, but performing a public service. “This is hardly a state secret but is something the public had a right to know,” the editorial states. “When an intelligence operative essentially claims that a US president sent American soldiers off to die for a lie, certainly that operative’s own motives and history ought to be on the table.”

Here, lies and confusion intermingle in such a way that all one is left with is the right-wing vituperation for which the *Journal* editorialists are famous. First, Wilson was not an “operative”—his wife was. His career was public knowledge; his spouse’s was a state secret. Second, the former ambassador did not “claim” Bush was sending American soldiers “off to die for a lie,” he proved it.

In his January 28 State of the Union speech, Bush claimed that “the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.” Wilson, a former US diplomat in both Niger and Iraq, had been selected by the CIA to go to Niger and investigate unfounded reports promoted by Cheney of Iraqi attempts to buy uranium. He established to his and the agency’s satisfaction that not only were these reports false, but it would have been impossible for Niger to make such a uranium sale. The White House was informed by the CIA of this fact in March 2002, 10 months before the president’s speech.

In a July 6 opinion piece for the *New York Times*, Wilson wrote: “Based on my experience with the administration in the months leading up to the war, I have little choice but to conclude that some of the intelligence related to Iraq’s nuclear weapons program was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat.” He added that, given the administration’s rejection of his and the CIA’s analysis “because it did not fit certain preconceptions about Iraq, then a legitimate argument can be made that we went to war under false pretenses.”

The White House was forced to admit that the information on Niger was indeed false, while dismissing it as “only 16 words” in the president’s speech. As the fruitless search for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and the recent admissions by the president and his aides that there is no evidence of any link between Iraq and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks make clear, however, the Niger story was just one strand in the web of lies that was used to

promote a criminal war of aggression.

Clearly, the exposure of Plame is not merely a Democratic Party gambit aimed at wresting electoral advantage from Bush. The demand for a criminal investigation came not from Congressional Democrats, but from the CIA itself. The controversy reflects the tensions within the national security establishment that have been heating up since September 11, 2001 and are now boiling over. There is plenty of resentment and demands for retribution to go around.

Within the CIA, there is anger over the attempt by Cheney, Rumsfeld and others to suppress real intelligence that contradicted the White House’s case for war, bypass the agency and manufacture phony evidence of WMD and terrorist ties.

Within the Pentagon, there is a virtual civil war raging between elements of the military command and the group of right-wing ideologues led by Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith in the civilian hierarchy. This has found recent reflection in the statements by retired General Anthony Zinni, the former head of the Central Command in the Middle East, accusing the Rumsfeld group of leading the army into a Vietnam-style quagmire in Iraq and stretching the military to the “breaking point.” Asked in a recent interview on PBS’s “Newshour” whether “heads should roll” at the Pentagon for the failure of postwar strategy, Zinni replied, “absolutely ... somebody should be held responsible.”

Underlying this internecine warfare in Washington there is a growing sense within the ruling elite itself that the path taken by the Bush administration in Iraq is leading to a debacle. Unable to publicly articulate a clear alternative to the administration’s policies, these tensions are being vented through the present scandal.

There is an audible note of panic in the *Journal’s* concern over the fate of Rove. “We trust that Mr. Bush and Republicans on Capitol Hill understand that if they throw Mr. Rove over the side, the blood in the water will really be theirs,” the editorial concludes.

Only last January *Wall Street Journal* contributing editor and former Reagan speech writer Peggy Noonan was publishing a hackneyed paean to Bush on the occasion of his State of the Union address. She wrote of Bush’s “steady hand on the helm in high seas, a knowledge of where we must go and why, a resolve to achieve safe harbor. More and more this presidency is feeling like a gift.”

Now, the threat that the seedy political operative and dirty trickster Rove might be forced from the White House brings absolute despair. Not only is the steady hand off the tiller, but there are visions of the president being devoured in the water. This startling mood swing is symptomatic of a full-blown crisis of class rule opening up in America.



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