

The CIA leak inquiry and the politics of criminality

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“I have no idea whether we’ll find out who the leaker is,” President Bush told reporters following a White House cabinet meeting Tuesday. Bush was referring to the senior members of his administration who exposed the identity of a covert CIA agent in an act of naked political retaliation against her husband.

The policies and practices of the Bush administration have increasingly taken on the character of a criminal conspiracy. Its wars of aggression, embrace of assassination as a legitimate tool of statecraft, and systematic and ceaseless lying to the American people on everything from the reasons for the invasion of Iraq to the social impact of its tax policies have made this abundantly clear.

With the developing scandal over the CIA leak, the behavior of the White House has emerged ever more clearly as being on a par with that of an organized crime family.

The origins of the scandal lie within the fabricated intelligence and barefaced lies employed by the administration to promote its war on Iraq. In an attempt to terrorize the American people into accepting an illegal war, the administration sought to portray Iraq as a country on the verge of manufacturing nuclear weapons and placing them in the hands of terrorists.

One of the lies used to substantiate this threat was the claim that British intelligence had uncovered Iraqi attempts to buy large quantities of uranium “yellowcake” from the African state of Niger. The claim was debunked by the United Nations’ own nuclear weapons inspectors, who established that the “evidence” of the Iraqi activity consisted entirely of crudely forged documents.

Under pressure from Vice President Richard Cheney, one of the principal architects of the war, the CIA conducted its own investigation, choosing Joseph Wilson, a former diplomat who had served in both Baghdad and Niger, to go to Africa and make inquiries. Wilson and the CIA both concluded as well that the charges were bogus.

Nonetheless, Bush included the claim in his State of the Union address in January 2003—nearly a year after Wilson’s trip—and administration officials continued to refer to it as proof that Iraq posed a nuclear threat.

In a July 6 column in the *New York Times*, Wilson recounted

the investigation of the Niger claim and accused the administration of “twisting” intelligence to “exaggerate the Iraqi threat” and foster a war that had been planned well in advance. Under conditions in which not a trace had been found of the alleged stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction that were the *casus belli* for invading Iraq, Wilson’s revelations represented another blow to the administration’s credibility.

The response was swift. Within barely one week, right-wing columnist Robert Novak published a column, citing senior administration officials, that revealed that Wilson’s wife, Valerie Plame, was a CIA “operative.”

Plame was known in CIA spy jargon as a “nonofficial cover,” someone working without the benefit of a diplomatic or other official government cover. Posing as an energy consultant, she was assigned to collect intelligence on weapons of mass destruction.

The column served no legitimate journalistic purpose, but rather represented a crude settling of scores. From the standpoint of the US intelligence apparatus, the cost was considerable, involving the exposure not only of a valuable agent, but a front company with which she was associated, as well as “assets,” informants and contacts in a number of countries.

The deliberate exposure of a covert CIA agent is a federal felony under the 1982 Intelligence Identities Protection Act, punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

This is an administration that has killed and maimed tens of thousands of Iraqis and sent some 320 US soldiers to their deaths in the name of curbing the supposed threat from weapons of mass destruction. It is no small irony that, in an effort to achieve political revenge, it casually destroys the career of a covert agent working precisely in this field. It only underscores that there were entirely different motives for the war—the seizure of Iraq’s oil wealth and the consolidation of US hegemony in the Persian Gulf.

John Dean, the Nixon White House lawyer who was jailed briefly on obstruction of justice charges over the Watergate cover-up, described the administration’s tactic in the Plame case as “repulsive,” even worse than those employed during the Watergate period.

“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 in an Aug. 15 column published on the FindLaw web site. “Nixon never set up a hit on one of his enemies’ wives.”

Wilson’s crime was that he talked; he told the American public part of the truth and thereby exposed one of the lies of Bush and his handlers. Like the Mafia, the Bush administration demands observance of *omerta*, the vow of silence.

It is counting on that same principle—and the spinelessness of the Democrats in Congress—to squelch any genuine investigation into who was responsible for the leak.

“I don’t know if we’re going to find out the senior administration official,” the president said Tuesday. “Now, this is a large administration, and there’s a lot of senior officials. I don’t have any idea.”

In reality, the identity of the White House official who called Novak and other reporters to expose Plame is known by many in Washington, and almost certainly by all of the most influential figures in the administration itself. This does not necessarily include Bush, whose involvement in affairs of state is limited by his manifest lack of intelligence.

It is evident, in any case, that the so-called “leaker” did not act alone, but as part of a deliberate policy worked out within the highest levels of the administration. According to an article appearing in the Oct. 13 issue of *Newsweek*, Karl Rove, Bush’s senior political adviser, was touting Novak’s story as soon as it appeared in print, confirming its veracity and urging other reporters to pursue Plame, referring to the exposed CIA agent as “fair game.” Other reports have implicated I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Cheney’s chief of staff, and National Security Council official Elliot Abrams.

Every step has been taken to assure that the secret remains within the inner circle. Calls for the appointment of a special prosecutor have been quashed, with the investigation left in the hands of US attorney general John Ashcroft. The integrity of such a probe would be unlikely to surpass that of one conducted by his predecessor John Mitchell’s into Watergate.

While the White House staff has been ordered to turn over records, documents and logs, all of this material is being reviewed and vetted by the same White House lawyers whose job it is to protect the president.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan claimed that the documents would be culled of any material that these lawyers deem not to be “responsive or relevant.” McClellan refused to say whether the White House would invoke executive privilege to deny requested documents, declaring, “It’s premature to even speculate about such matters.”

So Bush has some basis to be confident when he states that those responsible for the leak may never be identified. It is just one more unsolved crime, with the evidence concealed by the administration itself.

Just as the public may never know who leaked the name of the CIA agent, it has yet to learn what advance knowledge the administration had about the conspiracy leading up to the

September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The White House has repeatedly stonewalled congressional investigators and the independent panel named by Bush himself, denying them relevant documents and testimony on the grounds of “national security” and executive privilege.

It may never learn the identity of the person responsible for the anthrax letter attacks that claimed the lives of US Postal Service workers and others in the fall of 2001. There exists substantial evidence that these terrorist actions could only have been carried out by individuals with access to US biological warfare labs and were motivated by right-wing political views. Yet, no one from this rather narrow field of suspects has ever been charged.

The identity of those who met with Vice President Cheney, the former CEO of Halliburton, as part of his “energy task force” and what they talked about will—if the administration prevails—also never be learned. The administration has steadfastly resisted demands for records of these closed-door meetings. It is known that these sessions—held in early 2001—consisted largely of energy industry executives and lobbyists, and that among the topics under discussion was the potential for exploiting Iraq’s oil reserves.

Thus, the present controversy over the CIA leak is only part of a broader pattern of criminality and cover-up that has been the modus operandi of the present administration ever since it was installed through the theft of an election nearly three years ago.

This is a government of gangsters. It defends the interests of a criminal social elite that has vastly enriched itself at the expense of the masses of working people in the US through methods that amount to financial fraud and theft. On the international arena, it recognizes only the law of the jungle, arrogating to itself the right to attack and occupy any country for the purposes of outright plunder. At home, it proceeds with unconcealed contempt for democratic rights, not to mention the social interests of the vast majority of the American people.

The Plame-Wilson affair is a manifestation of growing concerns within the state apparatus itself that these methods are leading to a catastrophe. Yet, the Democratic Party, having itself backed the war in Iraq and acted as an accomplice in its reactionary social policy, is unable to mount any serious challenge to Bush over the considerably lesser crime of exposing a CIA agent.



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