# Will Vice President Cheney be indicted—and will the US media report it?

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A French investigation into $180 million in bribes paid by oil companies to government officials in Nigeria threatens to implicate US Vice President Richard Cheney, according to reports in the French and British press. The conservative French daily newspaper *Le Figaro* wrote last month that “the Paris court contemplates an eventual indictment of the present United States’ vice president, Richard Cheney, in his capacity as former CEO of Halliburton.”

The American media, however, has been all but silent on the subject. The first reference to appear in a major US daily occupied all of nine brief paragraphs in the *Washington Post* January 21. The newspaper buried on page A23 a report that the second highest official in the US government was under investigation for authorizing bribes. The *Post* article made no mention of any possible indictment of Cheney, only noting that the bribes were allegedly paid while he was Halliburton’s chief executive, from 1995 to 2000.

The case arises from the awarding of a multi-billion-dollar contract to build a new natural gas production facility on Bonny Island in the eastern part of the Niger River delta. The contract was won by a four-nation consortium headed by Kellogg, Brown & Root (KBR), Halliburton’s construction arm. Its partners were Technip of France, the Italian firm Snamprogetti, and JGC of Japan.

The four construction firms were to build a huge gas liquefaction factory, one of the largest in the world, and other related facilities, for a consortium of four oil companies: the Nigerian National Oil Company, which owns 49 percent of the venture; Shell, which owns 25.6 percent; Total-Fina-Elf of France; which owns 15 percent; and Agip International of Italy, which owns 10.4 percent. The $6 billion project was run by a joint venture given the title TSKJ, from the initials of the four construction companies.

French authorities began a bribery investigation in October, 2002, probing reports that $180 million (3 percent of the value of the contract) had been paid from TSKJ between 1995 and 2001 to a shell company in the Madeira Islands. This money was then funneled through a series of bank accounts in Gibraltar, Switzerland and Monaco, all controlled by a London lawyer who had performed no work for the project. Enough evidence was developed to warrant assigning the case to a special anti-corruption investigating judge, Renaud Van Ruymbeke, in June 2003. He opened a formal criminal probe in October, 2003.

The circumstances of the payments suggest that they were originally directed to the late Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha, who died suddenly in 1998. (The funds were abruptly shifted from Switzerland to Monaco after a Swiss judicial proceeding began into Abacha’s assets there.) It is not clear who actually controls the funds now. Such payments are illegal under a 1997 convention barring “bribery of foreign public officials in commercial negotiations,” adopted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the 35-nation club of wealthy countries to which the United States belongs.

According to the account in *Le Figaro*, Kellogg, Brown & Root could be charged with paying bribes, but Cheney would not, because the kickbacks may not have been received until after he left Halliburton in 2000. Because the complex web of financial intermediaries was set up beginning in 1995, however, Judge Van Ruymbeke is contemplating bringing charges of misuse of funds, a separate offense under French law.

While the bribery probe is the first of its kind in France under the convention on cross-border corruption, it is the outcome of a lengthy investigation into the French oil giant Elf Aquitaine (now part of Total-Fina-Elf), which has implicated many former executives and high French government officials.

The French investigation into Halliburton, KBR and Cheney sheds further light on the tense relations between the United States and France, which were inflamed by the unilateral US decision to go to war with Iraq, as well as the Bush administration’s exclusion of French firms from bidding for prime contracts for rebuilding the devastated country.

Apparently, KBR conducted itself just as arrogantly in Nigeria as the Bush administration has in Iraq. Technip, the

French junior partner in the construction consortium, objected to the methods used to pay off Nigerian officials, but KBR ignored its complaints, according to press reports.

Both Daniel Burlin, the former Technip finance director, and Jean Desseilligny, the current general manager, have, in statements given to the investigation, placed all responsibility on the American company, which was the lead partner and initiated the payments.

Their account is bolstered by Halliburton's increasingly notorious record as a corporate lawbreaker. Only eight months ago, Halliburton filed documents with federal regulatory agencies in the US revealing that it had paid $2.4 million in bribes to a Nigerian tax official to get favorable treatment. Halliburton fired several lower-level employees and claimed no senior officers were involved.

In Iraq, Halliburton allegedly overcharged the US military $61 million on contracts for delivering fuel. And last week, the company revealed that several of its employees received kickbacks from a Kuwaiti subcontractor to ignore a separate instance of overbilling in a contract for the US Army Corps of Engineers. Halliburton sent a check for $6.3 million to the US Army Materiel Command to refund that overcharge.

According to *Le Figaro*, Dan Etete, former Nigerian oil minister under the Abacha dictatorship, was questioned last month as a state witness and explained that Shell and KBR were the companies in overall control of the project, the first in charge of gas exploitation, the other of industrial development. Etete, who said he "feared for his life," said that Shell and KBR had close and direct relationships with the dictatorship and did not need the complex money-shuffling operation to pay off officials. Press reports on his testimony suggested that some of the money could have been diverted to the Republican Party in the United States.

Meanwhile, Vice President Cheney has emerged from the shadows and begun public appearances in connection with the Bush-Cheney reelection campaign. During the week of January 17-18, he sat for long interviews with the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today* and the *Washington Post*, his first interviews with daily newspapers in more than two years. Neither paper raised the issue of the French court case or possible bribery charges. The *Post* published a long front-page profile of Cheney January 26, noting his sudden increased visibility, and, again, saying nothing of the Nigerian bribery case.

Wire service reports on the investigation into Cheney have been available for weeks from Agence France-Presse and the Associated Press, and excerpts have appeared in such daily newspapers as *Newsday*, the *Dallas Morning News* and even the ultra-right *Washington Times*, controlled by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. But not a word has appeared in the *New York Times*, nor has the subject been addressed in the nightly news broadcasts of the major television networks.

It is worth contrasting their kid-glove treatment of Cheney with the frenzy whipped up, especially by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, over the Whitewater investigation. A 15-year-old real-estate deal, involving $150,000 of undeveloped land in the Ozarks, in which no criminal acts were committed and Bill and Hillary Clinton lost money, nonetheless became a *cause celebre* in the American media. But there is virtually no media interest in the ongoing probe into $180 million in bribes in which the vice president of the United States may be directly implicated.

This is just one example of the systematic political vetting of the "news" by the American mass media. Any development that tends to expose or compound the crisis of the Bush administration, and the political establishment as a whole, is routinely blacked out or relegated to a footnote.

This media blackout, however, is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, as further investigations into bribery in Nigeria unfold. Last Friday, for example, five former Nigerian government officials, three of them former cabinet ministers, appeared in court in Nigeria facing charges of taking more than $1 million in bribes from SAGEMSA, a French electronics company. The five include the labor minister, Husseini Akwanga, who was fired after charges were brought, and former internal affairs ministers Sunday Afolabi and Mahmud Shata.

The case was sparked by an incident last September, when British officials at London's Heathrow airport arrested a Nigerian man, Chris Agidi, carrying a briefcase packed with $200,000 in cash. Agidi, a lower-level civil servant, was apparently a courier taking part of the payoffs overseas to deposit in foreign banks.

The Associated Press reported the Friday court appearance in a dispatch that made reference to the French investigation into Cheney and Halliburton. This was published in the *Baltimore Sun*, that city's major daily newspaper, but there was no coverage in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or any of the television networks.