

Exposure of Rove's lies throws Bush White House into crisis

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The Bush White House has been plunged into political crisis by the confirmation of widespread suspicions that chief Bush political strategist Karl Rove was one of the officials who revealed the identity of CIA operative Valerie Plame. The exposure of Plame was part of a “dirty tricks” campaign to discredit Plame’s husband, Joseph Wilson, a former ambassador who became a prominent critic of US policy in Iraq.

Newsweek magazine provided the most recent and damning evidence of Rove’s role, which had been repeatedly denied by White House spokesmen and by Rove himself over the past two years. On Sunday night, the magazine’s web site carried the text of e-mails written by *Time* magazine reporter Matt Cooper recounting a confidential conversation with Rove in which Rove identified Wilson’s wife, without using her name, as a CIA agent.

The e-mails were among the documents turned over by *Time* magazine last week to the special prosecutor, Patrick Fitzgerald, who is investigating the exposure of Plame. The magazine’s decision to turn over the documents undercut Cooper’s own refusal until then to accede to Fitzgerald’s demand that he reveal the confidential source he used for an article on the Wilson-Plame affair. Cooper ultimately agreed on July 7 to testify, after Rove’s attorney called him and released him from his pledge. A second reporter, Judith Miller of the *New York Times*, stood by her refusal to testify and was sent to jail the same day.

The phone conversation between Cooper and Rove took place on July 11, 2003, three days before the first press report, by columnist Robert Novak, identifying Plame as an undercover CIA operative specializing in weapons of mass destruction. The “spin” which Rove sought to give this revelation to Cooper was identical to that of Novak’s column: that Wilson’s wife had engineered his trip to Niger in 2002, where he investigated claims that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was seeking to acquire large quantities of uranium from the North African country.

The claim of an intensive effort by Iraq to obtain nuclear materials was central to the Bush administration lie that it was invading Iraq to prevent Saddam Hussein from developing a nuclear bomb. Bush cited the “Africa uranium” story in his

2003 State of the Union Address.

Five months later, after the US conquest of Iraq, Wilson wrote an op-ed column in the *New York Times* revealing that he had investigated the uranium claims in 2002 at the request of the CIA and found they were bogus. The White House was compelled to issue a retraction of the Niger story, but within days it began leaking information to the media in an effort to discredit Wilson.

The implication of both Novak’s column and Rove’s comments to Cooper was that Wilson had not gone to Niger on a mission for top CIA officials, but on a quasi-private junket, for which his wife was responsible. There were multiple lies in this account—Valerie Plame was a CIA analyst with no authority to orchestrate such a mission, and an expenses-only visit to Niger, one of the poorest countries in the world, was hardly a perk. Moreover, Wilson’s findings were reported up the chain of command at the CIA to Director George Tenet, ultimately reaching the White House.

The importance of the *Newsweek* report is that it confirms the thuggish and anti-democratic response of the Bush administration to political criticism. Rather than attempting to rebut the criticism by Wilson—a retired State Department official with two decades of experience in the Middle East and Africa—the White House sought to smear him as corrupt, and endanger the livelihood and possibly the physical safety of his wife.

The Rove exposure has further revealed systematic lying by Bush, Rove, White House spokesman Scott McClellan and other White House aides. McClellan was the target of a heated barrage of questions Monday at a press briefing in the White House, where reporter after reporter cited the press spokesman’s own words over the last two years flatly denying that Rove had played any role in exposing Valerie Plame, and reminded the Bush operative of Bush’s pledge to fire any official who had been involved.

McClellan declared that he would take no questions on the Plame case because the leak is the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation by special prosecutor Fitzgerald. He nonetheless received 35 questions on the subject in the course of a 40-minute press conference, and recited his one-sentence “no comment” nearly two dozen times. He was asked, at one

point, whether he had retained his own personal defense counsel in the case.

Rove, Bush, Cheney and other top White House officials have all provided testimony on the leak to the grand jury impaneled by Fitzgerald. Rove and other top administration officials, including Bush, could be open to charges of perjury or obstruction of justice for this testimony.

In that eventuality, the Republican right will no doubt display its unparalleled hypocrisy. They howled for the blood of Bill Clinton when he lied in a deposition about his affair with Monica Lewinsky and then sought to parse words with the grand jury convened by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. Lying and obstruction of justice were the two charges on which the Republican-controlled House of Representatives impeached Clinton. No one should expect the same approach from the Republican Congress to Rove's lying and obstruction of justice, which concerns, not a private sexual matter, but a serious abuse of power—the attempt to smear and intimidate a political critic.

This being said, the role of the Democratic Party in the Plame affair is both cowardly and reactionary. Leading congressional Democrats seized on the *Newsweek* report on Rove to present themselves as defenders of the CIA and national security, while charging that Rove, by revealing the identity of an undercover CIA agent, had undermined the “war on terror.”

Not one leading Democrat pointed out that the exposure of Plame was an effort to suppress opposition to the war in Iraq by intimidating a well-publicized critic with considerable inside knowledge of US-Iraq relations (Wilson was the last US diplomat in Iraq before the 1991 Persian Gulf War).

Senator John Kerry, the defeated Democratic presidential nominee, e-mailed supporters urging them to sign an online petition calling on Bush to fire Rove. Senator Hillary Clinton appeared side-by-side with Kerry at a press conference to endorse this demand.

“The White House promised if anyone was involved in the Valerie Plame affair, they would no longer be in this administration,” said Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid. “I trust they will follow through on this pledge. If these allegations are true, this rises above politics and is about our national security.”

Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey demanded that Bush suspend Rove's security clearance. Referring to a vicious McCarthyite speech Rove delivered recently in New York City, Lautenberg added, “Karl Rove has accused liberals of not understanding the consequences of 9/11, but he's the one who blew the cover of a covert CIA agent.”

Congresswomen Louise Slaughter declared, “There can be no gray area here. Regardless of how he phrased it, regardless of how much detail he provided, he revealed the identity of an undercover CIA agent. What Mr. Rove did is reprehensible. Putting the life of an undercover CIA agent in jeopardy cannot be tolerated. He clearly deserves his pink slip.”

Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean issued a statement declaring: “Rove betrayed the identity of an undercover officer fighting on the front lines in the war on terror.... It is disturbing that this high-ranking Bush advisor is not only still working in the White House, but now has a significant role in setting our national security policy.”

The entire Democratic Party establishment, from Clinton to Dean, has decided to attack Rove and Bush from the right rather than the left—to focus on the alleged damage done to the CIA rather than the effort to suppress criticism of the Iraq war. This dovetails with the political positioning the Democrats are undertaking for the 2006 congressional elections, where they will campaign as advocates of a more vigorous and effective intervention in Iraq rather than calling for troop withdrawal.

Just as significant as this decision to forego any identification with antiwar sentiment is the Democrats' silence on the jailing of Judith Miller, who defied the order by Federal District Judge Thomas Hogan to answer questions from Fitzgerald about the Plame case. Miller is being held in Alexandria, Virginia, at the same facility as accused Al Qaeda terrorist Zaccarias Moussaoui.

The jailing of Miller, notwithstanding her own reactionary role in promoting the Bush administration's lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, is a flagrant attack on freedom of the press. But neither the Democratic Party nor the media itself has sought to make it a major issue.

It is particularly noteworthy that in 40 minutes of questioning of White House spokesman McClellan, not a single one of the journalists took note of the fact that a colleague had just been jailed. No reporter asked McClellan for the White House reaction to Miller's imprisonment.

Similarly, the editorial pages of the major daily newspapers and the commentators on network television have been largely silent. The subject was barely referred to on the Sunday television interview programs, which generally rehash the major events of the week. The *New York Times* itself, while it has backed Miller's stance editorially, made no reference to her imprisonment in its reporting Monday and Tuesday on the Plame case.



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