A government of lies: The political meaning of the Rove affair

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Whenever a major crisis emerges in political life, it is necessary to distinguish between the often peculiar forms in which the crisis makes its initial appearance and the more fundamental underlying issues. So it is with the uproar touched off by the reports that Karl Rove, Bush's top political aide, leaked the identity of a CIA undercover operative to the press, as part of an effort to punish critics of the Iraq war.

The facts of the Rove affair are no longer in question. In July 2003, after former ambassador Joseph Wilson published an op-ed column in the *New York Times* criticizing the administration for making bogus claims that Saddam Hussein had sought to purchase uranium in Africa, the White House moved swiftly to retaliate. Wilson explained in his article his own role in going to Niger at the behest of the CIA to investigate the issue in 2002, and related how he found the charges to be unfounded.

Only a day after the column appeared, top White House aides were reading a secret State Department memorandum on the Wilson trip which included the information—denoted as top secret—that Wilson's wife Valerie was a CIA operative specializing in the field of weapons of mass destruction. Within three days, Rove and other officials were circulating that information to the press, suggesting that Mrs. Wilson had engineered her husband's trip and presenting this as a case of nepotism that cast doubt on Wilson's findings.

A week after Wilson's column appeared, right-wing columnist Robert Novak, a longtime recipient of leaks from Karl Rove, became the first journalist to identify Mrs. Wilson publicly as a CIA agent, under her maiden name, Valerie Plame. This was accompanied by the White House-inspired smear about her alleged role in sending her husband to Niger.

Special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald was appointed by Attorney General John Ashcroft in December 2003 to investigate whether crimes were committed in leaking Plame's name and identity to the media. While Rove's attorney has said that Rove is not a "target" of the investigation—meaning no decision has yet been made on a possible indictment—he admitted that Rove and many other White House aides remain "subjects," i.e., potentially indictable. Fitzgerald must complete his investigation and bring indictments by October, when the term of the grand jury looking into the affair expires.

In a sign of the growing concern that some White House aides will face charges, either for the leak itself or for subsequent lies or obstruction of justice before the grand jury, Bush appeared before the press July 18 and significantly revised his public stance on the case. Where previously he had pledged to fire any staffer found to be involved in leaking the name of the covert CIA officer, he now limited this to a commitment to fire any official who was guilty of a crime. This much more narrow standard would allow Rove, for instance, to keep working at the White House as deputy chief of staff and top political adviser even if he were to be indicted.

The more thoughtful media commentators have begun to acknowledge that the real issue in the Rove affair is not whether Rove, Cheney's chief of staff Lewis Libby, former Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer or some other White House aide leaked Plame's name or lied about it to Fitzgerald's investigators or the grand jury. Such lies are only symptomatic of the much greater lies which constitute the Bush administration's entire case for war in Iraq: claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and Saddam Hussein was an ally of Al Qaeda, and suggestions that the Iraqi president was somehow linked to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

In one perceptive commentary, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich wrote July 17 that the public should not "get hung up" on Rove "or on most of the other supposed leading figures in this scandal thus far." He continued: "Not Matt Cooper or Judy Miller or the Wilsons or the bad guy everyone loves to hate, the former CNN star Robert Novak. This scandal is not about them in the end, any more than Watergate was about Dwight Chapin and Donald Segretti or Woodward and Bernstein. It is about the president of the United States. It is about a plot that was hatched at the top of the administration and in which everyone else, Mr. Rove included, are at most secondary players. That the investigation has dragged on so long anyway is another indication of the expanded reach of the prosecutorial web."

Rich's column was entitled, "Follow the Uranium," and the comparison to Watergate is more than apt, as is his political conclusion: "This case is about Iraq, not Niger. The real victims are the American people, not the Wilsons. The real culprit—the big enchilada, to borrow a 1973 John Ehrlichman phrase from the Nixon tapes—is not Mr. Rove but the gang that sent American sons and daughters to war on trumped-up grounds... this scandal is about the unmasking of an ill-conceived war, not the unmasking of a CIA operative..."

Like Watergate, and unlike the bogus right-wing-inspired investigations into the Clinton White House, the Rove affair is about government policy, in which the actions of the bit players can be traced back directly to the decision-makers at the top: Bush,

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Cheney, Rumsfeld & Co. And like Watergate, the information has begun to surface because of a bitter conflict within the state apparatus, in which murky and even reactionary motives play a role. (Let us not forget the lesson of Watergate's Deep Throat, now revealed as FBI deputy director W. Mark Felt, who leaked critical details of the Nixon White House conspiracy largely out of institutional loyalty to the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover.)

The driving force of the conflict now raging in official Washington is the increasingly evident failure of the Bush administration's military intervention in Iraq. There are bitter recriminations over the consequences of Bush's refusal to heed the cautions from the intelligence agencies and military about the likely outcome of the invasion of Iraq, which has left American imperialism bogged down in an open-ended counter-insurgency campaign.

The dreams of a swift and easy victory giving the US control over the second largest oil exporter, as well as a dominant strategic position in the Middle East, have been shattered. Instead, the plans of the US government and the military for further actions—in Iran or North Korea, for example, and ultimately China—have been significantly undermined, at least in the short term, because nearly all of the deployable forces of the Army and Marine Corps are tied down in Iraq.

No section of the political establishment advocates an American withdrawal, which would constitute a strategic defeat far more costly than Vietnam. But there are intense divisions over policy, with leading sections of the Democratic Party openly advocating the commitment of tens of thousands more troops to ensure military control of Iraq, a course of action that leads inevitably to restoration of the draft.

In the meantime, there is plenty of blame to go around for the current debacle, and a bitter struggle is taking place within the upper echelons of the executive branch, Congress, the judiciary, the two bourgeois political parties, the intelligence agencies, the military brass, and the most powerful corporate lobbyists, influence peddlers and media figures.

All told, this ruling stratum involves mere thousands of people, a layer so narrow that three of the current protagonists, Karl Rove and Joseph and Valerie Wilson, attend the same church in suburban McLean, Virginia. This makes the infighting especially bitter, as demonstrated by Rove's role in "outing" Mrs. Wilson and perhaps endangering her life. In so doing, the Bush White House broke one of the time-honored rules of the Washington Mafia—likewise observed by its underworld counterpart—"Fight if you must, but don't 'hit' the wife."

Frank Rich is correct to trace the Rove affair back to the "big lie" campaign to sell the Iraq war, but he is only half right, or, rather, he stops halfway. The Iraq war was not the beginning of Bush's lies, but the culmination. This is an administration based on lies from its very inception, when it took office through the theft of the 2000 presidential election, hijacked by the Supreme Court intervention to shut down ballot-counting in Florida.

Then came September 11, 2001, an event which has been the subject of the greatest campaign of distortion and cover-up in US history. No serious investigation has been conducted into the US government role in these attacks: from the initial CIA recruitment and training of the founders of Al Qaeda in the 1980s, to the inexplicable ease with which the Islamic fundamentalist terrorists entered the United States and orchestrated multiple hijackings, even though many of them were on government watchlists or actually under surveillance by US intelligence agencies.

The least credible of all accounts of 9/11 is the official story that 19 predominantly Saudi terrorists entered the United States and carried out an intricately organized attack involving multiple hijackings, without any US government agency having the slightest idea what they were doing. This must be set against the enormous political benefits which the Bush administration derived from the 9/11 attacks, which provided the pretext for long-planned invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and for an unprecedented attack on democratic rights at home, and which served as the basic platform for Bush's 2004 reelection campaign.

Tens of millions of Americans recognize today that the Iraq war is based on lies, but they find no political expression for this understanding within the existing two-party system. The whole US political establishment is deeply discredited—the Democratic Party, which voted for the war and continues to support it; the media, which swallowed Bush's lies and regurgitated them uncritically; and the official "labor" movement, a political cipher with no serious influence or support in the working class.

Opposition to the war and support for a US withdrawal from Iraq are widespread, despite the virtually complete ban on such views within the official media and political circles. And there is growing recognition that the "war on terror" is actually a war for oil and world domination.

The conclusion that must be drawn from the complicity of the entire political system in an imperialist war justified by lies is the need to develop a mass independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist program and directed against the financial oligarchy in whose interests this war is being waged, and all of its political representatives.

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