

The political implications of the Libby indictment

Barry Grey
31 October 2005

Friday's indictment of I. Lewis Libby for perjury and obstruction of justice in the Justice Department probe of the outing of a CIA agent has shaken not only the White House, but the entire political establishment in the US.

Libby was one of the chief architects of the invasion of Iraq. His indictment for lying about an administration "dirty tricks" operation against a critic of the war implicates both the vice president and Bush himself.

As the *New York Times* wrote on October 29, Libby "had the exalted position of being a full member of President Bush's inner circle ... holding three pivotal jobs at once: assistant to the president, chief of staff to the vice president and Mr. Cheney's national security adviser."

Underlying Libby's indictment is a deep crisis of American foreign policy—first and foremost the disastrous results of the US invasion of Iraq—which has come together with growing internal opposition to both the war and the worsening economic situation confronting broad masses of working people.

This crisis is more than the end result of the personal limitations of Bush and the subjective predilections of Cheney, Rumsfeld and their fellow conspirators. It is rooted in an objective crisis of historical proportions: American imperialism has arrived at a blind alley, for which it has no way out other than war and reaction.

That is fundamentally what imparts to the US government its criminal character, and dictates that the more it becomes caught up in its own contradictions, the more dangerous and violent it becomes. It would be the most serious mistake to believe that the response of the Bush administration to the indictment of Libby will be to compromise and retreat from its policies of militarism and social reaction. Its instinctive response will be to adopt even more extreme measures.

This can already be seen in the Bush administration's signals to the Christian right, following the collapse of the Harriet Miers nomination for the Supreme Court, that the president's next choice will meet the specifications of the administration's neo-fascist "base."

Despite the crisis and disarray of his administration, Bush has one great advantage: his nominal opposition, the Democratic Party, has no interest in seeing his government collapse. The Democrats' combination of cowardice and complicity in the war ensure that Bush will be given time to work out his plans for a counteroffensive.

Libby's indictment arose out of the attempt by the White House

to discredit former diplomat Joseph Wilson. In July of 2003, after US occupation forces had failed to turn up any evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and the anti-US insurgency had begun to grow, Wilson published a column in the *New York Times* exposing as a lie one of the main pieces of "evidence" cited by Bush and other top administration officials to back up their tales of a nuclear-armed terror regime in Baghdad. This was the claim that Saddam Hussein had sought to purchase uranium from the African country of Niger.

Wilson revealed that he had been sent by the CIA the previous year to Niger to investigate the uranium claim, and had found it to be false. He accused the Bush administration of "twisting" intelligence to drag the American people into war.

The administration responded by feeding to the press the fact that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame Wilson, was a CIA operative, and suggesting that she had played a role in assigning Wilson to check out the African uranium story. The aim was to smear Wilson and dissuade any other would-be whistle blowers from exposing the government's lies.

This plot to silence a critic of the war was only a small part of an immense web of criminality and lies. It flowed from the central crime: the unprovoked invasion of Iraq, justified through the systematic and deliberate deception of the American people. If the principles laid down by the Nuremberg trials were enforced, this conspiracy to wage aggressive war would itself result in Bush, Cheney, Libby and others suffering the maximum penalty.

The Bush administration elevated the illegal premises underlying the Iraq war to the foundation of its foreign policy, in its doctrine of "preventive war," which is a direct repudiation of international law. The pursuit of this policy has entailed the widespread use of torture, the practice of "disappearing" alleged terrorists and the establishment of American-run gulags in various parts of the world.

Given the enormity of these crimes, and the scale of the lying used to justify or conceal them, what is remarkable is not that one small aspect of the conspiracy has unraveled, and one of the culprits has been indicted, but that it has taken years for the administration to suffer any serious consequences.

This is a government that has carried out one cover-up after another: of its role in the so-called "intelligence failure" that enabled a band of Islamic terrorists to blow up the World Trade Center and bomb the Pentagon; of its policy of torturing detainees in the so-called "war on terror;" of its conspiracy to drag the

country into an illegal war that has already cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and more than 2,000 American soldiers.

It is a government, moreover, that came to power on the basis of fraud and the suppression of votes.

Yet it has been given a free pass by the Democratic Party, Congress, the courts and the media. The CIA leak investigation that has resulted in Libby's indictment did not come about as a result of demands from the Democratic Party, Congressional probes, or investigations by the establishment press.

Rather, it was the result of mounting tensions and jurisdictional disputes between the CIA and the State Department on the one side and the White House, Cheney and the Pentagon on the other. Within the CIA, bitterness and anger grew over the open contempt with which Cheney and Rumsfeld treated the agency and its staff. Dissatisfied with the reports coming from the CIA on Iraqi WMD, Cheney tried to bully CIA analysts into producing intelligence that could justify an invasion, and simultaneously set up his own intelligence unit to bypass the normal channels and churn out the most dire reports.

When the administration outed Valerie Plame Wilson, a covert operative, the CIA bureaucracy was shocked that the government would violate so basic a principle of the spy apparatus for political ends. It decided to retaliate. It was, in fact, an official request from the CIA for an investigation of Wilson's exposure that forced then-attorney general John Ashcroft to appoint a special counsel to conduct a probe.

That the administration's claims of Iraqi WMD were either gross exaggerations or outright lies was known throughout the political and media establishment. Even the United Nations weapons inspectors and the International Atomic Energy Agency had rebutted Washington's assertions. And it was well known that the Bush administration was dominated by neo-conservatives who had been agitating ever since the first Gulf War of 1991 for a new war to topple Saddam Hussein and turn Iraq—with its vast oil resources—into an American protectorate.

Defenders of the war and the Bush administration repeatedly point to the fact, as supposed proof that the White House did not deliberately lie, that the preceding Democratic administration of Bill Clinton had insisted that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction. Clinton used this claim to justify relentless American pressure on the Baathist regime, including the launching of air wars and the maintenance of sanctions that destroyed the country's infrastructure and led to the death of hundreds of thousands of its citizens.

The argument that both parties promoted the myth of Iraqi WMD is, of course, true. What it demonstrates, however, is not the innocence of Bush, but rather the degree to which the Iraqi WMD canard had for a decade served as an essential premise of US imperialist foreign policy. This lie had become so pivotal that it took on a life of its own and could not be challenged.

The bipartisan consensus surrounding this lie, and its inevitable and bloody consequences, were spelled out during the 2004 election campaign by James Rubin, a top Clinton-era State Department official and adviser to Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. Rubin declared that had Democrat Al Gore

won the 2000 election, the US would have invaded Iraq anyway.

These political facts show that every institution of American capitalism is implicated in the crime of aggressive war, and the conspiracy against the democratic rights of the American people of which it is a part. However, no matter how complicit and prostrate the Democratic Party and the media, taking the country into war on the basis of lies is an enormously reckless enterprise, fraught with consequences unforeseen by those who conspired to carry it out.

In the end, what has produced the Libby indictment and the broader crisis of the US political system is the failure of the American military to suppress the Iraqi resistance and the mounting opposition of the American people to the war. The growth of popular opposition has been compounded by the disastrous response of the government to Hurricane Katrina and the escalating assault of big business against the jobs and living standards of the working class.

Every one of those who conspired to invade and occupy Iraq richly deserves whatever legal punishment may be eventually meted out. But militarism, war, the assault on democratic rights and living standards will not be halted by the institutions of the very system that is responsible for these crimes.

On the contrary, the American people face the danger that the ruling elite, in response to its mounting and intractable problems, will strike out both abroad and at home. No matter how extended and bogged down the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan, the impulse will be to widen the war in the Middle East.

The editorial page of the October 29 *New York Times* is instructive. One day after Libby's indictment, the *Times*, which played a key role in promoting the administration's lies and its drive for war against Iraq, published an editorial on Iran that stated—as a matter of fact—"the trouble is that Iran has a nuclear weapons program..."

This claim, which has been rejected by the International Atomic Energy Agency and for which not a shred of evidence has been produced, serves the same function in preparing for military action against Iran as the WMD fabrications about Iraq.

The only basis for ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and preventing future and even more bloody catastrophes is the independent political mobilization of the working class in opposition to the two-party system and the financial aristocracy whose interests it serves.



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