

Bush approved security leak to smear Iraq war critic

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The revelation that President Bush personally approved the release of highly classified information to retaliate against a critic of the Iraq war is a major political event. Once again, the modus operandi of this government is revealed: distortion, falsification, manipulation of the media, secretive methods, dirty tricks, all to defend its ongoing criminal enterprise, the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The source of this exposure is a 39-page document filed late Wednesday night by US Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald, the special prosecutor investigating the Bush administration campaign to punish former ambassador Joseph Wilson for publicly challenging the principal pretext for the invasion of Iraq, the claim that Saddam Hussein was on the verge of achieving a nuclear weapons capability that would allow him to slip an atomic bomb to Al Qaeda.

Wilson was sent to Niger in 2002 at the behest of the CIA to investigate claims that Iraq had sought to purchase uranium in the African country to use in a secret nuclear weapons program. He found no evidence to support the allegation, but the charge nonetheless made its appearance in a CIA National Intelligence Estimate released just before the October 2002 congressional vote to authorize war against Iraq, and repeated in Bush's 2003 State of the Union speech. When Wilson went public with his rebuttal, in an op-ed column in a July 6, 2003 *New York Times*, Bush administration officials retaliated by leaking to the media the fact that his wife, Valerie Plame Wilson, was a covert CIA officer involved in counter-proliferation efforts.

Last fall, Fitzgerald obtained a criminal indictment against I. Lewis Libby, Vice President Cheney's chief of staff, for committing perjury and obstruction of justice by lying to the grand jury hearing evidence on the Wilson affair. In particular, Libby was charged with denying that he had revealed to the press that Plame was a covert CIA

operative, when he had actually given this information to several journalists.

The court filing places the exposure of Valerie Plame in the context of a broader campaign by the White House in response to Wilson's criticism of the decision to go to war in Iraq. It cites admissions by Libby that Cheney "advised him that the President had authorized" the release of classified information about the war to journalists who could be trusted to parrot the administration line.

The first such administration stooge was Judith Miller, then a *New York Times* reporter, and notorious as a conduit for Bush administration propaganda about alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Libby arranged a private meeting with Miller at a Washington hotel where he told her of Plame's identity as a CIA agent.

The purpose was twofold: to discredit Wilson by suggesting that his trip—to one of the world's poorest countries—was some sort of junket engineered by his wife; and to punish the couple by putting an end to Plame's career as a covert agent (as well as potentially threatening her safety). In the event, Miller did not write the desired article, but another administration mouthpiece, syndicated columnist Robert Novak, did the job in a column published July 14, 2003. It was this column which triggered the Fitzgerald investigation.

According to the prosecutor, Libby expressed some concerns about the legality of the leaking, but was reassured by Cheney that "the President had specially authorized defendant to disclose certain information." This included excerpts of a highly classified CIA National Intelligence Estimate, delivered to the White House in October 2002, whose purpose was to make the case for war with Iraq by deliberately exaggerating and even falsifying Iraq's alleged WMD capabilities.

It was this NIE that was the basis of Condoleezza Rice's panic-mongering assertion that the United States

faced the danger of “a mushroom cloud” if there was not immediate action to oust Saddam Hussein. It was also cited by numerous Democratic congressmen and senators, including Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, as the justification for their vote to give Bush the authority to go to war.

Lewis Libby resigned his government position immediately after the indictment. In the months since then, his attorneys have faced a difficult struggle to construct a defense, since Libby’s sworn testimony to the grand jury was so obviously a lie. He had told the panel that he had not conveyed classified information about Plame’s CIA role to any journalist, only discussed with several journalists suggestions that were being floated in the press. These denials directly contradicted both the testimony of the journalists and documentary evidence uncovered by Fitzgerald, showing that Libby requested and received classified briefings that included Plame’s identity and job description during the month before his meeting with Miller.

The Fitzgerald document exposes a devastating contradiction in Libby’s defense. His attorneys have been claiming that he misstated and concealed his role in leaking Plame’s name and occupation to the media because he forgot the matter in the rush of far more significant affairs of state. But according to Fitzgerald, Libby told the grand jury that it was highly unusual, even unique, for him to receive an instruction from Bush, relayed by Cheney, to leak classified Iraq intelligence to the *New York Times*. How then was it possible to forget?

The real purpose of Libby’s claim of political amnesia was to justify subpoenaing a huge number of sensitive White House documents—allegedly to “refresh his memory”—which the White House would refuse to release, thus resulting in the case being thrown out on the grounds that Libby was being denied his right to an effective defense. Similar methods were employed during the Iran-Contra investigation, when the Reagan White House conducted an elaborate minuet with attorneys for former top intelligence and national security officials, using this tactic, called “graymail,” to insure their effective immunity from prosecution.

In wake of Fitzgerald’s revelations, the legal position of both Bush and Cheney is in considerable jeopardy. Both Bush and Cheney gave sworn testimony to the grand jury; if they denied their role in instigating the anti-Wilson campaign—as both did in public statements during the two-year investigation—they could face charges of perjury and obstruction of justice, similar to those facing Libby.

Then there is the matter of the leaking itself. The White House claims that Bush has the legal authority as “commander-in-chief” to declassify any material he pleases. That doesn’t constitute leaking, one spokesman said, but rather “sharing with the public.”

Coming from an administration which already claims “commander-in-chief” authority to arrest and jail American citizens indefinitely, kidnap and “render” selected individuals of any nationality to CIA-run torture centers, operate a concentration camp at the Guantánamo Bay naval base, and even commit murder, the unauthorized release of documents might perhaps be considered only a secondary offense.

From a political standpoint, however, the offense is major, and perhaps even fatal. Certainly in any halfway democratic country, the exposure of official misconduct and lying on the scale of the Wilson affair would bring down the government, especially one as unpopular and isolated as the Bush administration, whose approval rating in the latest AP-Ipsos poll fell to a low of 36 percent.

But in the United States of 2006, the administration stands virtually unchallenged, because the ruling elite has essentially abandoned democratic methods of rule and the official bourgeois opposition, the Democratic Party, functions as an opposition only in a purely nominal sense.

Press reports of the Fitzgerald document produced the usual howls of pretended outrage and ritualistic fist-shaking from the Democrats. They criticized Bush for hypocritically denouncing leaks while engaging in the practice himself. But for the most part, their comments were focused on the damage to the morale of the intelligence agencies and the loss of credibility the next time a US administration cries “wolf” over WMD, notably, now in Iran.

In other words, the real content of the Democratic Party critique was an attack on Bush from the right. The Democrats cannot say what so obviously is—that the war in Iraq is the product of a criminal conspiracy to deceive the American people and trample on the rights of the Iraqi people. That is because they have long been the accomplices and junior partners of the Bush administration in perpetrating this crime.



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