

Leak investigation puts spotlight on Bush war lies

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The document filed last Wednesday by special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald adds to the considerable body of evidence that President Bush and Vice President Cheney systematically lied to the American people before, during and after the US invasion of Iraq in March-April 2003.

The immediate focus of Fitzgerald's investigation is the White House-initiated smear campaign against former ambassador Joseph Wilson, a critic of the Iraq war, which culminated in the public exposure of Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, as a covert CIA agent. The Fitzgerald investigation led to the indictment last fall of Cheney's chief of staff, I. Lewis Libby, on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice. Fitzgerald sought to define the charges very narrowly, limiting them to Libby's lying to the grand jury about when and how he learned that Valerie Plame was a CIA operative, and whether he leaked that information to selected reporters.

The prosecution, Fitzgerald emphasized, did not aim to put on trial either the war itself or the Bush administration's overall conduct in attempting to justify it. Despite this narrow focus, however, and the legalistic language of the document released Wednesday, Fitzgerald's disclosures have intensified the political crisis gripping the Bush administration.

This was evident in the stumbling response of the White House over the past week. Bush's press spokesman, Scott McClellan, was even more incoherent than usual when he faced media questioning April 7 about the central claim in Fitzgerald's document—that Bush personally authorized the leaking of classified documents to rebut Wilson's criticisms.

Wilson had been sent to western Africa by the CIA in 2002 to investigate claims that Iraq was seeking to buy uranium from Niger, a former French colony where a joint Franco-Niger company operates a mine. He found no evidence of such efforts, but his report was ignored by the Bush administration, which continued to raise charges that Saddam Hussein was seeking to buy uranium in Africa, citing documents that had been widely dismissed as crude forgeries.

In July 2003, Wilson published an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* denouncing the Bush administration claims as false, focusing especially on the inclusion of a reference to "uranium in Africa" in Bush's January 2003 State of the Union speech.

At his April 7 session with the White House press corps,

McClellan said, referring to Wilson's criticisms without naming him, "There were irresponsible and unfounded accusations being made against the administration, suggesting that we had manipulated or misused that intelligence" concerning alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. "Because of the public debate that was going on and some of the wild accusations that were flying around...we felt it was very much in the public interest that what information could be declassified, be declassified. And that's exactly what we did."

Actually, the Bush administration's conduct in the Wilson-Plame affair demonstrated that the same methods of fabrication and provocation it had used in the run-up to the war were now being used against the administration's domestic political opponents—even one, like Wilson, with exemplary establishment credentials. (Wilson, a long-serving US diplomat, had received a medal from Bush's father for his conduct in 1990-1991 while running the US mission in Baghdad during the first Persian Gulf war.)

The administration selectively released classified information—much of it concocted and false—to stampede US public opinion behind the war drive. This reached its peak in the notorious appearance by Secretary of State Colin Powell, on February 5, 2003, before the UN Security Council, when he outlined the "evidence" of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, with CIA Director George Tenet seated prominently behind him.

After Wilson began to voice his criticisms to media figures, the White House instinctively reacted with dirty tricks and character assassination. According to Internet journalist Jason Leopold, citing "attorneys and US government officials...close to the [Libby] case," there was a White House meeting to discuss the campaign against Wilson in early June 2003, one month before Wilson's column in the *New York Times*. Among those in attendance were Bush, Cheney, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, Cheney's Chief of Staff Libby, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and her deputy, Stephen Hadley, and top political aide Karl Rove.

Sometime later that month came the meeting between Libby and Cheney in which Cheney passed along a mandate from Bush to use selected portions of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the classified CIA document issued in October

2002 to assist the White House campaign to push a war resolution through the House and Senate. Just as in the original campaign for war, the goal in leaking the classified material was not to provide objective information, but to distort, confuse and mislead.

A careful reading of the 39-page document filed last week by Fitzgerald underscores the crisis wracking the Bush administration. According to this account, as early as June 2003, only three months after launching the war with Iraq, White House aides were deeply divided over how to handle the growing military and political disaster, to the point that senior aides were keeping each other in the dark as they pursued efforts to contain the damage.

Libby, after receiving his instructions from Cheney to leak the NIE material to certain journalists, notably Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* and Judith Miller of the *New York Times*, kept his mandate secret from other top White House officials. He did not inform Rice or Hadley, even when attending meetings in mid-July where Hadley led discussions on the procedure for formally declassifying the executive summary of the NIE and releasing it to the press, which finally took place on July 18, 2003. Libby kept quiet about the fact that he had already made available far more of the document, on the orders of Cheney and Bush.

Significantly, Libby did discuss this response to the Wilson allegations with Karl Rove, the top White House political aide. This underscores the fact that Libby's leaking was a politically motivated hit, in which security information was to be used to serve an immediate political purpose by discrediting an administration critic. It was not, as Bush ludicrously claimed on Monday, an effort to "let the truth be known."

According to one press account, Rove had concluded as early as the summer of 2003 that the exposure of Bush's lies about Iraqi WMD might destroy his reelection chances. He had singled out two issues—the claim of uranium in Africa and the claim that Iraq was buying aluminum tubes for use in centrifuges—as the most vulnerable to refutation.

Libby also concealed his role from McClellan, who was issuing repeated statements in Bush's name that no one wanted to get to the bottom of the unauthorized disclosure of Plame's CIA identity more than the president. Libby actually drafted a statement for McClellan to issue, declaring that "Libby was not the source of the Novak story. And he did not leak classified information."

The conflicts within the White House staff continue in the Libby case, with the former Cheney aide seeking to expand the scope of the exposures beyond the limits set by Fitzgerald by calling many more current and former administration officials as witnesses. Fitzgerald will summon only one White House witness, former press secretary Ari Fleischer, who will reportedly testify that he discussed Plame's CIA employment with Libby before the time that Libby claimed he first learned about it. But Libby's attorneys plan to call Rove, Hadley and

former CIA Director George Tenet as witnesses, as well as former secretary of state Colin Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage.

Perhaps the most politically explosive question is whether Bush, in his June 2004 interview with Patrick Fitzgerald, told the truth to the special prosecutor. Although Bush was not under oath when he spoke with Fitzgerald for 70 minutes at the White House, a false statement would still be grounds for charging the president with obstruction of justice.

Wilson zeroed in on this issue in an appearance Sunday on the ABC News program "This Week," calling for Bush and Cheney to release the transcripts of their testimony "so that we all know precisely what it was that was said to the prosecutor."

The *Los Angeles Times* reported Tuesday, "According to four attorneys who last week read a transcript of President Bush's interview with investigators, Bush did not disclose to the special counsel that he was aware of any campaign to discredit Wilson. Bush also said he did not know who, if anyone, in the White House had retaliated against the former ambassador by leaking his wife's undercover identity to reporters."

Given the fact that Bush, through Cheney, had set this campaign of retaliation in motion, his statements are clearly false. But the *Times* account continues: "Attorneys close to the case said that Fitzgerald does not appear to be overly concerned or interested in any alleged discrepancy in Bush's statements about the leak case to investigators."

At the time that Bush gave his testimony, White House press spokesman McClellan issued a statement declaring, "The leaking of classified information is a very serious matter," adding that Bush was "pleased to do his part" to aid the probe.

"No one wants to get to the bottom of this matter more than the president of the United States," McClellan continued. But now it is clear that at "the bottom of this matter" was Bush himself, as well as Cheney, carrying out actions which fit the constitutional definition of the "high crimes and misdemeanors" that warrant impeachment and removal from office.



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