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The Plame Affair: Rove and Cheney Are Guilty As Charged

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Within the next days or weeks, it is anticipated that Independent Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald will ask a Federal grand jury to hand down indictments against one or more senior White House officials, for obstruction of justice, perjury, and, perhaps, violation of national security laws banning the public disclosure of the identities of American undercover agents. The two names that have surfaced most prominently in the two-year old probe are White House Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove and Vice Presidential Chief of Staff I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby. The scandal unavoidably tars Vice President Dick Cheney and President George W. Bush.

While White House spin-meisters have attempted, for two years, to create a fog of confusion and disinformation about the exposure of the wife of former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson, Valerie Plame, as a CIA officer, in a syndicated column by Robert Novak, the essential facts of the case are straightforward and undisputed.

1. In February 2002, former Ambassador Wilson was dispatched to Niger by the CIA, to assess raw intelligence reports, received by the Bush Administration from Italian government sources, that in the 1990s, Saddam Hussein had attempted to purchase large quantities of "yellowcake" uranium compound, for the purpose of building nuclear bombs. The Wilson mission was provoked by a request from Vice President Cheney, who was keen to have the information corroborated, as it would bolster the case for war on Iraq. Cheney directed his CIA briefer to seek confirmation of the information, and the CIA then decided to send someone to Niger to pursue the

story.

Wilson had served as a diplomat in Niger, and later as the head of African Affairs at the National Security Council; and was the last American chargé d'affaires in Baghdad, just prior to Operation Desert Storm in 1991.

At the conclusion of his eight-day fact-finding mission, Wilson reported back to both the State Department and the CIA that, based on a dozen interviews with current and former Niger government officials and businessmen involved in the country's tightly regulated uranium industry, he concluded that the story was false.

2. Despite his findings—which were buttressed by similar reports from the U.S. Ambassador in Niger and from a Marine general who had been dispatched on a parallel mission by the Pentagon—in September 2002, the Bush Administration and the British government of Tony Blair claimed publicly that Saddam had attempted to purchase large quantities of uranium from Africa.

On Dec. 19, 2002, in response to Iraqi government written disclosures about their weapons programs, the U.S. State Department issued a fact sheet, asserting that Saddam had covered up efforts to obtain 500 tons of yellowcake from Niger, in his UN disclosures.

In his January 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush, citing British intelligence reports, claimed that Iraq had attempted to obtain uranium from Africa.

3. On the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, on March 7, 2003, Dr. Mohammed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), testified before the United Nations Security Council. Dr. ElBaradei not only reported that his inspectors in Iraq had found no evidence of any illegal nuclear weapons program; his staff had also determined that the alleged Niger government "yellowcake" documents were shoddy forgeries.

4. The next day, March 8, 2003, Joseph Wilson appeared on CNN, and stated, "I think it's safe to

say that the U.S. government should have or did know that this report was a fake before Dr. ElBaradei mentioned it in his report at the UN yesterday." Wilson made no mention of his Niger fact-finding mission.

5. According to well-placed U.S. government sources, within days of Wilson's appearance on CNN, a meeting took place in the Office of Dick Cheney, to review the Wilson statements, and work up a dossier on the former Ambassador.

6. On May 6, 2003, Nicholas Kristof wrote a *New York Times* column, "Missing In Action: Truth," which revealed the existence of the CIA fact-finding mission to Niger in February 2002, without mentioning Wilson's name.

7. On July 6, 2003, Wilson wrote an op-ed, "What I Didn't Find in Africa," which was published in the *New York Times*, detailing his mission to Niger, and identifying Cheney as the source of the query to the CIA that led to his mission. Wilson asked: "Did the Bush Administration manipulate intelligence about Saddam Hussein's weapons program to justify an invasion of Iraq?"

8. On July 14, 2003, *Chicago Sun-Times* syndicated columnist Robert Novak wrote a widely published article, exposing Ambassador Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, as a CIA officer, involved in tracking weapons of mass destruction. The Novak column aimed to discredit Wilson, by charging that he was sent to Niger only because his wife recommended him for the assignment. Novak quoted several "senior Administration officials" as his sources.

According to a report in the *Washington Post* on Sept. 28, 2003, when Novak called a CIA official, to alert him in advance that he planned to "out" Valerie Plame as a CIA officer, the official urged him not to print it "for security reasons." In the *Post* article, Novak acknowledged that the CIA had specifically asked him not to name her. "They said it's doubtful she'll ever again have a foreign assignment," he admitted.

Under the Intelligence Identity Protection Act of 1982, it is a Federal crime, punishable by a fine and up to ten years in prison, to knowingly

disclose the identity of a U.S. undercover operative. Under other far broader Federal statutes, it is a crime to disclose classified information, damaging to the national security.

9. Presidential Advisor Karl Rove was deeply implicated from the outset. While there is no public evidence to date that Rove personally contacted Novak to specifically reveal Plame's identity, several journalists have reported that they were contacted by Rove, soon after the publication of the Novak leak, and were told that "Joe Wilson's wife is fair game." At least six journalists, including Novak, were contacted by Rove and encouraged to target Wilson and Plame.

10. Independent Counsel Fitzgerald has also identified "Scooter" Libby as another "senior Administration official" who contacted journalists and discussed the Wilson/Plame issue, both before and after the appearance of the Novak column.

Worse Than Watergate

John Dean, Richard Nixon's White House General Counsel, has denounced the Wilson-Plame affair as "worse than Watergate." He is right. Not only did the Novak column, orchestrated from the White House, end Valerie Plame's 20-year career as a CIA "non-official cover" officer. The leak also exposed a longstanding CIA proprietary company, Brewster Jennings & Associates, where Plame worked. The Boston- and Washington-based front company had, since 1994, been tracking weapons of mass destruction, through a network of agents and correspondents in a such dangerous places as Iran, North Korea, Belarus, Israel, Pakistan, Libya, Serbia and Taiwan.

It is not known whether the CIA or one of the Congressional intelligence oversight panels has done a full damage assessment of the consequences of the Plame leak. But they are no doubt extensive. It is one thing for a spy, like Aldrich Ames, Robert Hanssen, or Jonathan Jay Pollard, to steal secrets jeopardizing the national security of the United States on behalf of a

foreign power. It is another thing altogether, for top officials of the White House to willfully leak the identity of an undercover CIA officer, as an act of revenge or damage control, against a U.S. official who came forward to reveal government chicanery in a matter as serious as the Iraq War.

The Chickens Are Coming Home to Roost

The pivotal role of Lewis Libby sets the stage for the impeachment or forced resignation of the Vice President. This, Lyndon LaRouche has emphasized, is a precondition for any effective U.S. government response to the onrushing global financial meltdown. The reason to force Cheney's resignation is not just the Plame leak, which emanated from his office; however, the involvement of Libby, along with other Cheney staffers, including John Hannah, in the orchestrated destruction of Wilson, Plame, and the Brewster Jennings proprietary, affords a sufficient cause for Cheney's impeachment.

Cheney's departure, and replacement by a qualified, experienced figure, such as several leading Republican Senators, would create the safe conditions for the removal of President George W. Bush, for the good of the nation.

Procedures for the removal of Bush from office are contained in the 25th Amendment to the Constitution, which spells out the procedures for the removal of the President from office if he is determined to be "unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office." The Constitution itself demands that the President meet the standard of competence. And that is where Bush fails, miserably.

Bush has demonstrated, with increasing frequency in recent weeks, that he is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office. LaRouche has pointed to the President's oft-repeated declarations that the U.S. Treasury bonds on deposit in the Social Security Trust Fund are "useless IOUs," as evidence that he is no longer qualified to discharge his duties as President. Such cavalier declarations of a sovereign default on the full faith and credit of the

U.S. government, alone, constitute an act of political insanity and incompetence, that prove his incompetence to serve. As the United States and the world move into the most deadly systemic financial and economic crisis in modern times—as early as this Summer—the question must be asked: Can the nation survive a continuation of the Bush-Cheney Presidency?