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Rove-Plame Scandal Leading to Deeper White House Horrors?

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At long last, Plamegate -- the scandal surrounding the outing of covert CIA operative Valerie Plame Wilson by two "senior administration officials" -- has exploded out of the D.C. beltway to become a major national news story.

It would appear that this scandal goes way beyond Karl Rove and who said what to whom when about Ms. Plame. It certainly is true, though, that turning over that slimy Rove-Plame rock was the way into the larger issues upon which Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald and his grand jury apparently are focusing.

(Ain't it almost always so in Washington? The cover-up is always a greater problem for the perpetrators than the original crime, for inevitably even seamier scandals are unearthed one by one; see the Pentagon Papers, Watergate, Iran-Contra, et al. The moral lesson -- admit your mistake early, bear the immediate hit, and move on unencumbered -- rarely seems to "take" among politicians, of whatever party.)

What's being covered up in the Plame/Rove case seems to revolve around the Bush Administration's orchestrated, and perhaps illegal, propaganda campaign to justify its invasion of Iraq. Valerie Plame and her husband Ambassador Joseph Wilson -- who wrote the op-ed in the New York Times that got this whole thing going -- are just the tips of very large icebergs, and one of those icebergs has a name: the White House Iraq Group (WHIG), which we'll examine below.

THE EIGHT BLACKED-OUT PAGES

One of the ruling judges on the case of the two reporters who refused to divulge their Plame-outing source was about to go easy on them when he read Fitzgerald's new information -- eight pages of which were redacted from the public -- and said that the [national-security seriousness of what he read](#) changed his mind. The court then ordered Time's Matthew Cooper and the New York Times' Judith Miller to testify or else; Cooper finally did, and Miller is in jail for contempt of court.

We don't know what is in those eight blacked-out pages -- and, if they really do involve national-security matters, we may never be permitted to know precisely. But apparently they provide the locus around which Fitzgerald is building a case that could result in perjury indictments, at the least, for a number of Administration officials and perhaps journalists as well.

(Another judge said that the prosecutor's classified filing -- those missing eight pages -- "decides the case." In other words, to quote Lawrence O'Donnell: "All the judges who have seen the prosecutors secret evidence firmly believe he is pursuing a very serious crime, and they have done everything they can to help him get an indictment.")

Further, depending on what Bush and Cheney knew and when they knew it -- and what they did or covered-up in the possible light of such knowledge -- there may be plenty of ammunition for likely impeachment hearings. (Note: Bush hired a private attorney last summer for this CIA-leak case.)

And the two journalists in question, Cooper and Miller, have their own attorneys. It's defense-attorney heaven in the nation's capital these days.

PERSONAL REASONS MILLER NOT TESTIFYING?

Why Judith Miller is not testifying apparently goes to the heart of Fitzgerald's case. There are reasonable grounds for wondering whether Miller might have been aiding, inadvertently or consciously, Rove and the rest of the WHIG to help move the country toward war with Iraq. For example, she may have been told by Administration officials about Plame and her CIA job, and helped spread that word to other journalists, who then contacted Rove and I. Lewis Libby, Cheney's chief of staff. Cooper over the weekend revealed that it was Libby who was the second of the "two senior administration officials" who leaked Plame's identity.

The New York Times already has apologized for running several of Miller's pre-Iraq War stories that were based on faulty weapons-of-mass-destruction intelligence; much of that concocted intel was provided by Ahmed Chalabi, the sleazy Iraqi exile leader who hitched his wagon to the Pentagon neo-cons to get his forces back into Iraq in the wake of a U.S. invasion. Those Miller stories helped provide the imprimatur of New York Times prestige that other media outlets then picked up on, helping create a nationwide zeitgeist of imminent threat from Iraq.

Indeed, Dick Cheney squared the circle by using Miller's stories as "evidence" that even the hallowed New York Times had determined that Iraq had, or soon would have, nuclear weapons of mass destruction.

"The day The Times story ran," wrote Amy and David Goodman in their invaluable book ["The Exception to the Rulers..."](#) Cheney "made the rounds on the Sunday talk shows to advance the administration's bogus claims. On NBC's Meet the Press, Cheney declared that Iraq had purchased aluminum tubes to make enriched uranium. It

didn't matter that the IAEA refuted the charge both before and after it was made. But Cheney didn't want viewers just to take his word for it. 'There's a story in The New York Times this morning,' he said smugly. 'And I want to attribute The Times.' This was the classic disinformation two-step: the White House leaks a lie to The Times, the newspaper publishes it as a startling expose, and then the White House conveniently masquerades behind the credibility of The Times."

WHO GETS THE HOT POT?

What we are witnessing right now is a grand-scale game of political/legal "hot potato." Nobody wants to be holding the various hot pots around the Plame case when the grand jury finally settles on its various indictments, which could come in the next several months.

Rove these days, through an anonymous source (probably his attorney), is trying to deflect blame and attention to others, especially journalists, by throwing out one bizarre scenario after another to escape legal culpability. (Not surprisingly, even though Bush and Press Secretary Scott McClellan say the Administration will refuse to comment because there's an "official investigation" going on, Rove, through his surrogate, feels free to continue his attempts to comment on and shape the case.)

But, from what Fitzgerald has suggested, he and the grand jury long ago determined who the leakers were. That's not what is at issue now. The investigation is all tied in with the national-security matters talked about on those blacked-out eight pages.

And, a reasonable guess is that those pages deal in some fashion with the actions -- legal or illegal, overt or covert, actual or covered-up -- of the members of an inner council of Administration heavies called the White House Iraq Group.

Just one example of the WHIG's function and influence: "The escalation of nuclear rhetoric a year ago [in 2002], including the introduction of the term 'mushroom cloud'

into the debate, coincided with the formation of ... WHIG, a task force assigned to 'educate the public' about the threat from Hussein, as a participant put it." (This quote comes from a [groundbreaking 2003 article](#) by investigative reporters Barton Gelman and Walter Pincus of the Washington Post.)

EENY MEENIE HUNT FOR WAR JUSTIFICATION

How did we get to Cheney and Rice scaring the population with talk of "mushroom clouds" and wild tales of Iraqi WMD that might be made available to al-Qaida terrorists?

Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. It was 2002. The Administration already had decided to bomb and invade Iraq, but was having trouble figuring out how to manipulate the propaganda so as to fool Congress, the American people, and the international community into giving them permission to do so.

It was not smooth sailing. Not only were the Democrats and leakers within the CIA beating up on Bush's plans for war, but prestigious conservative Republican leaders, such as Gen. Brent Scowcroft, James Baker III, Dick Cheney, and Trent Lott also were warning against an invasion of Iraq. Something had to be done.

The disinformation campaign was launched by the WHIG and others inside and outside the White House. (We ordinary citizens learned about Bush's pre-9/11 obsession about attacking Iraq both from memoirs by former Cabinet members, such as Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and National Security Council official Richard Clarke, and most recently verified by the Downing Street Memos leaked from inside the Blair Cabinet.)

REASONS BEHIND THE INVASION

Bush&Co. realized they couldn't come right out and tell everyone what their true motives were -- to depose the Saddam Hussein regime in order to control the world's second largest oil reserve, to set up permanent military

bases there, and to use the presence of those bases and the "shock&awe" example of overthrowing a dictator as a warning to other autocratic regimes in the Greater Middle East to bow to U.S. wishes. Those wishes involved oil, Israel, nuclear reactors, terrorism, and the like. So, a convenient reason -- one simple enough for the masses to comprehend -- had to be found that would justify war.

As the Downing Street Memos and other internal British and U.S. documents make clear, it was well-known that Iraq by the mid-1990s was a paper tiger: Its economy, as a result of the embargo, was in tatters; Saddam had control only of the central part of the country (Britain and the U.S. controlled the skies over the so-called "no-fly" zones in the South and the North); its standing army was easily defeatable; and, most important, its major weapons systems and research facilities had been effectively destroyed during the first Gulf War or in the years immediately after. In short, there were no WMD worth mentioning, even though the lying, exaggerating Iraqi exiles kept insisting that the U.S. military would find huge stockpiles of such when they got to Iraq.

But, as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz later said, the Administration settled on WMD ("for bureaucratic reasons"), apparently realizing that it would be the most effective, frightening, and thus acceptable justification. And so the WMD scare campaign began, with nightmarish tales of biological and chemical agents (which senators were told could be delivered by a drone Iraqi air force over East Coast cities), huge missile armadas, and, most tellingly, nuclear weapons. Of course, none of this was true.

Cheney and Rice and Bush and Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, the whole lot, spent months peddling their scare stories to the public and to members of Congress, and even sent poor Secretary of State Colin Powell to the United Nations Security Council with a sorry, embarrassing hodge-podge of non-existent "evidence" -- and, damn, it worked.

Thanks to those lies and the stenography of the mainstream media when it came to the Administration's peddling of them, both the Congress and the public bought

into Bushthink with regard to the war. That was especially so when the campaign added the laughable suggestion that somehow Saddam Hussein was tied to the 9/11 terror attacks on the U.S. (yet another example of the Big Lie Technique used by Rove and his forces). The war was on.

THE WHITE HOUSE IRAQ GROUP

But someone, or some entity, within the Administration had to coordinate these concerted propaganda campaigns. That was the bailiwick and job-assignment of the WHIG, chaired by Bush's Chief of Staff Andrew Card, the regular members of which were Karl Rove, the president's senior political adviser; communications strategists Karen Hughes, Mary Matalin and James R. Wilkinson; legislative liaison Nicholas E. Calio; and policy advisers led by Rice and her deputy, Stephen J. Hadley, along with "Scooter" Libby, Cheney's Chief of Staff. In other words, WHIG included the key decision makers (Rove, Rice, Card, Cheney-via Libby), and the key propaganda specialists (Hughes, Matalin, et al.).

They waited a month to launch their first public-relations bombardment. Why September? Andy Card let slip the reason in an interview with the New York Times: "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August," he said.

They soon determined that the public was most frightened of a possible nuclear attack by al-Qaida, and so, the day after publication of Card's marketing quote, the Bush Administration heavies began dropping their Iraq-as-nuclear-menace grenades into the public airwaves. They attempted to back up their claims by quoting from reports by international nuclear energy agencies supposedly saying that Iraq was about to become a nuclear power -- but no such reports existed.

But the lack of believable evidence about WMD didn't stop them, and the fright campaign continued. Some of that history may well have been in Fitzgerald's classified showing before the court.

FITZGERALD MIGHT HAVE TO WATCH OUT

In sum, the White House Iraq Group was tasked to come up with propaganda campaigns that would work on the Congress and American people -- no matter how great the fib; indeed, the bigger the lie, the easier it seemed to be to sell it. And their mission included coordinating those campaigns through the various stages, and denouncing and destroying the reputations of those who dared to confront their lies and deceptions.

The WHIG played the public like masters, thanks in no doubt to their stooges and ideological supporters in the mainstream media, who joined in the fool-the-public campaign in major, influential ways. Those who chose not to play the deception game, such as Ambassador Wilson, they decided, would be made to pay the price for their perfidy -- and would serve as a warning to any others inside the Administration who might want to blow some truth-whistles. Interestingly, the trash-Joe-Wilson campaign continues until this day.

To their chagrin, Wilson appears to be a man of great character and courage, and refuses to back down. And why should he? He's been speaking the truth about the Bush Administration's lack of evidence of Iraqi WMD for more than two years, while the Administration's lies have been exposed time and time again on the ground in Iraq and by official agencies and reports.

Again, it's not totally clear how far Special Counsel/U.S Attorney Fitzgerald is willing to go to clear out this nest of Administration vipers. He could choose to stick close to the Valerie Plame/Joe Wilson case itself, or he could keep heading in the direction of indicting a good many Administration officials -- perhaps with Bush and Cheney as unindicted co-conspirators -- for their part in lying about classified national-security matters to the Congress and American people. A wild card: If Judith Miller were to trade immunity for prosecution and decide to testify about Rove/Libby/Cheney, anything could happen.

WOUNDED, CORNERED ANIMALS ARE DANGEROUS

If and when the above scenarios start to unfold, it's not outside the realm of possibility that Rove would get desperate enough to try to question the motives and character of the Special Counsel himself, as BuzzFlash puts it, "to try to sink the investigation through an *ad hominem* attack. This is Rove's pathological gutter tactic. He doesn't know how NOT to use it when backed into a corner." Or Rove/Bush conceivably could do a Nixon and order Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to fire Fitzgerald.

Anything is possible as the Bush Administration paints itself further into the scandal corner, and, desperate to avoid criminal proceedings and/or impeachment, lashes out at its perceived enemies.

Stay tuned. The fun is just beginning.

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