

Moral Reflections on the White House

Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, Lewis "Scooter" Libby, was indicted today in a federal grand jury investigation into the disclosure of a CIA agency's identity. Cheney's long-time aid submitted his resignation.

President Bush's senior adviser and deputy chief of staff, Karl Rove, remains under investigation, according to news reports.

As the legal and political meaning and consequences of the grand jury's action unfold, a clear moral perspective emerges: the Bush administration has wandered away from its promise to establish an era of moral responsibility through its making the case for war against Iraq and its reaction to a war critic.

The indictment of Libby and investigation of Rove suggest anything but an era of moral responsibility.

Had the White House indeed acted responsibly, it would have taken the prudent course in leading the nation into war.

Instead, the administration chose to cry nuclear wolf and then to smear a critic, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, who questioned the administration's manipulation of intelligence information related to the nuclear threat from Iraq.

When Wilson wrote an opinion editorial ("What I Didn't Find in Africa") in the *New York Times* that appeared on July 6, 2003, more than 200 American soldiers had been killed. This week the death toll from the war surpassed 2,000.

Behind the campaign against Wilson and disclosure of classified information about his wife, an undercover CIA agent, was the administration's use of fear to sell the public on the war against Iraq.

In February 2002, the CIA sent Wilson to Niger to “check out” the story about Iraq seeking to purchase uranium. Upon his return, he briefed the CIA and the State Department African Affairs Bureau.

In March 2002, Cheney said on “Meet the Press” that Hussein was a great danger, “especially if he’s able to acquire nuclear weapons.”

“There’s good reason to believe that he continues to aggressively pursue the development of a nuclear weapon,” said Cheney. “I think it would be a great tragedy if Saddam Hussein were to be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons.”

On the same day, Cheney spoke again of the nuclear threat on “Face the Nation” and CNN’s “Late Edition,” where he said, “This is a man of great evil ... And he is actively pursuing nuclear weapons at this time.”

In September, Bush said in a United Nation’s Security Council speech that Iraq had made “several attempts to buy high-strength aluminum tubes to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons.”

In October, he said, “The evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program.” He referred to Iraq’s attempt to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes and said that Iraq “could have a nuclear weapon in less than a year.”

Bush said, “Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.”

The UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency studied the claim related to the use of aluminum tubes for the enrichment of uranium and concluded that it was wrong.

In his January 2003 State of the Union address, Bush said: “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa. Our intelligence sources tell us that he has attempted to purchase high strength aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear

weapons.”

In early March, the IAEA reported that the documents about the purchase of uranium from Niger were fabricated.

The U.S. invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003.

Unable to find weapons of mass destruction, especially evidence of a nuclear weapons program, the administration’s case for war began to unravel.

Five days after Wilson’s column appeared on July 6, CIA director George Tenet admitted that Bush’s 16 words about African uranium “should never have been included in the text written for the President.”

Three later, Robert Novak, a conservative columnist, tried to discredit Wilson with the assertion that his wife sent him on the trip to Niger and thereby disclosed her identity. Novak said he obtained his information from two senior administration officials.

Before the month ended, a White House deputy national security adviser admitted his failure to keep the Niger claim out of the State of the Union address.

When the Justice Department announced in September that it was investigating the CIA leak, at the request of the CIA, Bush said, “If anybody has got any information inside our administration or outside our administration, it would be helpful if they came forward with the information so we can find out whether or not these allegations are true and get on about the business.”

Asked if he had talked to Rove, Bush said he wanted people “who have got solid evidence” to “come forward and speak out.”

He promised: “We’ll get to the bottom of this and move on. But I want to tell you something—leaks of classified information are a bad thing.”

In June 2004, Bush was asked if he would fire a staff member who leaked the

name of a CIA agent. He answered, "Yes."

On July 13, 2005, with Rove sitting behind him, Bush told reporters, "I will be more than happy to comment on this matter once this investigation is complete."

He said, "I have instructed every member of my staff to fully cooperate in this investigation."

It is now clear that the White House has not acted responsibly whether through staff cooperation with the investigation or through the discerning evaluation of intelligence material.

Had it not cried nuclear wolf, the White House would never have felt the need to smear Wilson. One bad decision led to another and another.

In the most recent episode of NBC's "The West Wing," Toby Ziegler, White House director of communication, admitted that he leaked classified information. President Josiah Bartlet refused to accept his resignation letter in the Oval Office. Instead, Bartlet fired Ziegler. Ziegler was escorted out of White House.

Reality could take a lesson from fiction about conscience and courage.

Conscience, that awareness about the difference between right and wrong, and courage, the strength to do the right thing against the pressure to do otherwise, have been missing in this sad and embarrassing affair.

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