

Details Emerge in Latest Round of Plame Emails 'Found' by the White House

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The White House confirmed Tuesday that it recently turned over to Special Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald 250 pages of emails from the Office of Vice President Dick Cheney related to covert CIA operative Valerie Plame Wilson and her husband, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, a vocal critic of the Bush administration's pre-war Iraq intelligence. The emails were not submitted three years ago when then-White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales ordered White House staffers to turn over all documents that contained any reference to Valerie and Joseph Wilson.

Gonzales's directive in October 2003 came 12 hours after he was told by the Justice Department that it was launching an investigation to find out who leaked Plame Wilson's undercover CIA status to reporters in what appeared to be an attempt to discredit and silence her husband from speaking out against the administration's rationale for war. Gonzales spent two weeks with other White House attorneys screening emails and other documents his office received before turning them over to Justice Department investigators.

News of the 250 pages of emails was revealed to Libby's attorneys during a court hearing Friday.

In addition to witness testimony, investigators working with Fitzgerald are said to have discovered the existence of the emails from computers that investigators had confiscated from the Office of the Vice President, people familiar with developments in the investigation said.

Attorneys for Libby and the US District Court reporter in the Libby case, William McAllister, reading from Friday's transcript of the hearing, confirmed that Libby's defense attorneys were told during Friday's hearing that the emails were recently turned over by the White House to Fitzgerald.

According to a copy of the transcript from Friday's hearing, Libby's attorney, Ted Wells, said he was "told that there are an additional approximately 250 pages of documents that are emails from the office of the vice president," the transcript states.

Your Honor, may recall that in earlier filings it was represented or alluded to that certain e-mails had not been preserved in the White House. That turns out not to be true. There were some e-mails that weren't archived in the normal process but the office of the vice president or the office of administration I guess it is has been able to recover those e-mails. Gave those to special counsel I think only on February 6 and those again are going to be produced to us. We don't know what's in there. We've been led to believe it's probably not anything startling in those e-mails.

A spokesman for Cheney would only confirm the accuracy of what was said in court: that the White House recently turned over the emails. The spokesman would not comment further.

Remarkably, other than a brief citation buried inside an Associated Press story, Friday's development about the White House's "discovery" of the 250 pages of emails was not covered by any major news media.

But that particular bit of courtroom dialogue between Libby's attorneys and Specials Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald was an explosive development in the three year-old criminal probe.

For one thing, it raises numerous questions: why weren't the emails located in late 2003, when Gonzales enjoined roughly 2,000 White House staffers to turn over any communication about Plame Wilson and her husband, as so ordered by a Justice Department subpoena? Do the emails provide greater insight into the campaign to discredit Wilson and identify the officials who unmasked his wife's undercover CIA status to reporters?

A spokesperson for Gonzales did not return numerous calls for comment. But sources close to the investigation said that unnamed senior officials in Cheney's office had deleted some of the emails before Fitzgerald learned of their existence earlier this year, and others never turned them over to Gonzales as requested. Separately, according to people close to Fitzgerald's probe, there are some emails that Gonzales has refused to turn over to Fitzgerald, citing "executive privilege" and "national security."

It's unclear whether a formal subpoena was issued to the White House for the emails or whether the request came in the form of a letter from Fitzgerald. Sources said the White House did not voluntarily turn them over to Fitzgerald's staff.

The emails from Cheney's office that were turned over to Fitzgerald earlier this month were written by senior aides and sent to various officials at the State Department, the National Security Council, and the Office of the President. The emails were written as early as March 2003 – four months before Plame Wilson's cover was blown in a report written by conservative columnist Robert Novak. The contents of the emails are said to be damning, according to sources close to the investigation who are familiar with their substance. The emails are said to implicate Cheney in a months-long effort to discredit Wilson – a fact that Cheney did not disclose when he was interviewed by federal investigators in early 2004, these sources said.

The emails also show I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Cheney's former chief of staff who was indicted in October on five counts of perjury, obstruction of justice, and lying to investigators related to his role in the leak, Deputy White House Chief of Staff Karl Rove, and then-Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, as well as former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton and other top officials in the vice president's office also took part in discussions about ways in which the administration could respond to Wilson's public criticism about the Bush administration's use of intelligence that claimed Iraq tried to purchase uranium from Niger.

Wilson had traveled to Niger in February 2002 on behalf of the CIA to investigate those claims and reported back that there was no substance to the allegations. But the Niger uranium claims made it into President Bush's January 2003 State of the Union address and

Wilson had accused the administration of “twisting” intelligence on the Iraqi threat to win public support for the war.

Cheney and his senior aides did not disclose to federal investigators the fact that they either received or sent emails about either Joseph Wilson or Valerie Plame Wilson when they were first questioned about their knowledge and/or role in the leak in early 2004, people close to the investigation said.

Witnesses who work or worked at the CIA, the National Security Council, and the State Department who have been interviewed in the case, and some of who are cooperating with the probe, said they told Fitzgerald that they had received or sent emails to senior aides in Vice President Cheney’s office, the State Department and the National Security Council as early as March 2003 about Joseph Wilson.

Other emails show that in mid-June 2003 these officials had sent emails that mentioned “Valerie Wilson” – not Valerie Plame – and her employment with the CIA, sources close to the leak investigation said.

One email about Wilson and his wife is said to have been sent by Libby to an unknown senior individual at the National Security Council in early June 2003, after Libby was told by Marc Grossman, then Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, that Wilson’s wife worked for the CIA and that Grossman’s colleagues told him that Plame Wilson was involved in organizing Wilson’s trip to Niger in February 2002 to investigate whether Iraq had tried to purchase uranium from the African country.

However, copies of the emails were never found in the more than 10,000 documents that Fitzgerald’s staff has collected during the course of their investigation, the sources said.

Rove and Libby both testified that they learned about Plame Wilson from reporters – a fact disputed by the emails and witness testimony – and that they were not involved in a campaign to discredit Wilson. Rove remains under scrutiny. Rove’s attorney, Robert Luskin, did not return calls for comment.

Hadley’s role in the leak is also being closely looked at by Fitzgerald and his staff, sources said, adding that new evidence has surfaced showing that the National Security Adviser played an intimate role in the effort to discredit Wilson and that he may be one of the still unnamed administration officials who spoke to reporters about Plame Wilson’s work for the CIA.

Jason Leopold is the author of the forthcoming book NEWS JUNKIE, to be published in April. Visit www.newsjunkiebook.com for a preview.

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