

The Libby Cover-up Completed

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President George W. Bush's decision to spare former White House aide I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby from jail marks the final act of a crime and cover-up that began four years ago when Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and other top officials launched a campaign to discredit a critic of the Iraq War.

That campaign started with the leaking of sensitive classified information, the identity of covert CIA officer Valerie Plame, destroying her career and jeopardizing the lives of her agents in other countries. That was followed by White House lies being told to both investigators and the public in order to shield the President from dangerous political fallout.

By commuting Libby's 30-month jail sentence on July 2 – and dangling the possibility of a full pardon later – Bush has moved to ensure that Cheney's former chief of staff keeps his mouth shut and that the full story is never told.

The Plame/Libby cover-up also demonstrates the modern techniques available at least to a Republican president who wants to minimize damage from embarrassing or incriminating information. Bush was able to tap into the ideologically committed right-wing news media to confuse the issue and create political space for his final decision.

Ever since July 2003 – when Plame's husband, former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson, revealed that he had conducted a fact-finding trip for the CIA which helped debunk allegations that Iraq had been seeking uranium from Africa – the right-wing media has kept up a steady assault on Wilson.

Wilson received this treatment because his findings contradicted Bush's claim in his 2003 State of the Union Address that Iraq's supposed search for uranium suggested that Saddam Hussein was trying to build a nuclear bomb, a key argument for invading Iraq.

Wilson's public statements – in a New York Times op-ed and later on TV news shows – represented the first challenge to Bush's case for war from a government insider. At the time, with Bush near the peak of his popularity, Wilson looked like easy prey.

So, instead of showing gratitude to an American citizen who undertook a difficult assignment at no pay, the Bush administration – aided by congressional Republicans, the right-wing media and some pro-war mainstream pundits – sought to tear down Wilson's reputation and mislead the public on the facts of the case.

Talking Points

The original White House talking points – given to about a half dozen journalists – included that Wilson's wife, Plame, worked in the CIA office that sent Wilson to Africa, thus

suggesting that the trip was a case of nepotism.

One White House official later told a Washington Post reporter that the administration had informed at least six reporters about Plame “purely and simply out of revenge” against Wilson.

Libby was one of the leakers, briefing two journalists – Judith Miller of the New York Times and Matthew Cooper of Time – but neither ran with Plame’s identity. Libby also brought White House press secretary Ari Fleischer in on the leak operation.

Two other leakers, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and his friend, White House political adviser Karl Rove, finally managed to get right-wing columnist Robert Novak to run a story about Plame’s identity.

Novak’s column destroyed Plame’s career and put at risk the lives of her overseas contacts who had helped the United States keep an eye on proliferation of dangerous weapons in the Middle East.

But the Plame leak backfired on the White House when the CIA sought a criminal investigation into the illegal disclosure of a covert officer’s identity.

In September and October 2003, the Bush administration’s next line of defense was simply to lie. For his part, Bush pretended that he knew nothing about the anti-Wilson leaks, even though he had authorized release of some intelligence information meant to bolster the White House position on the uranium issue and undercut Wilson.

Bush disingenuously urged his subordinates to say what they knew. “I want to know the truth,” Bush said on Sept. 30, 2003. “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.”

However, since the various conspirators knew that Bush already was in the know, they would have read his comments as a signal to lie, which is what they did. Rove issued a false statement through the White House press office denying any involvement.

That prompted Libby to seek help from Cheney. As Libby’s lawyer Theodore Wells disclosed at his client’s trial, Libby’s complaint was that “they’re trying to set me up; they want me to be the sacrificial lamb.”

In response to Libby’s complaint, Cheney penned a message to the press secretary demanding equal treatment for Libby. “Not going to protect one staffer + sacrifice the guy the Pres that was asked to stick his head in the meat grinder because of incompetence of others,” Cheney wrote to press secretary Scott McClellan.

In the note, Cheney initially ascribed Libby’s sacrifice to Bush but apparently thought better of it, crossing out “the Pres” and putting the clause in a passive tense. Complying with Cheney’s wishes on Oct. 4, 2003, McClellan added Libby to the list of officials who have “assured me that they were not involved in this.”

Twin Conspiracies

So, the evidence is that not only was there a high-level administration conspiracy to leak Plame's identity but there was an equally high-level conspiracy to cover up the truth.

Libby got nailed because he failed to shift away from the cover stories when the investigation grew serious following the appointment of U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald as a special prosecutor in December 2003.

But the cover-up never ended. Republican senators and the Republican National Committee issued harsh attacks on Wilson, making him out to be a liar when the reality was that his fact-finding trip had helped the U.S. intelligence community correctly raise pre-war doubts about Iraq's supposed pursuit of uranium for nuclear weapons.

As Libby faced trial in early 2007, other right-wingers, such as attorney Victoria Toensing, released other red herrings to confuse the public. Toensing, for instance, began insisting that Plame was not a "covert" officer because she was "stationed" at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

Toensing's argument was based on her assertion that a 25-year-old law protecting the identities of U.S. intelligence officers from exposure required that the person "reside" or be "stationed" overseas in the previous five years.

However, Toensing misstated the law, which actually refers to intelligence officers having "served" abroad in the previous five years, which Plame later testified that she had done by traveling on overseas assignments for the CIA.

In other words, the law would protect the identity of a CIA officer based at Langley who went on missions overseas or, say, a special operations officer who was stationed at Ft. Bragg and resided in Fayetteville, N.C., but who still "served" on dangerous missions overseas.

But many in the right-wing news media and even at prestige newspapers like the Washington Post have adopted Toensing's word games as reality. It's now an article of faith in some political circles that Plame was not a "covert" officer and that therefore there was "no underlying crime."

After Libby was found guilty for perjury and obstruction of justice and received a 30-month jail sentence, the cover-up entered a new phase with a new ferocity. His neoconservative allies, the right-wing press and some mainstream pundits joined in a clamor for his pardon.

This phase of the cover-up created political space for Bush to commute Libby's sentence and to hold open the possibility of a full pardon.

So, rather than Libby cooperating with prosecutor Fitzgerald and laying out the full story, Cheney's former chief of staff has a very strong incentive to stay mum. Not only won't he go to jail, but he has reason to hope that Bush will eventually wipe out the felony convictions with a full pardon.

Barring some unforeseen development, the Libby cover-up appears to have succeeded.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at www.secrecyandprivilege.com. *It's also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'*

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