

Vice President's role in outing of CIA agent under examination, sources close to prosecutor say

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Special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald is trying to determine whether Vice President Dick Cheney had a role in the outing of covert CIA operative Valerie Plame-Wilson, individuals close to Fitzgerald say. Plame's husband was a vocal critic of prewar intelligence used by President George W. Bush to build support for the Iraq war.

The investigation into who leaked the officer's name to reporters has now turned toward a little known cabal of administration hawks known as the White House Iraq Group (WHIG), which came together in August 2002 to publicize the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. WHIG was founded by Bush chief of staff Andrew Card and operated out of the Vice President's office.

Fitzgerald's examination centers on a group of players charged with not only selling the war, but according to sources familiar with the case, to discredit anyone who openly "disagreed with the official Iraq war" story.

The group's members included Deputy White House chief of staff Karl Rove, Bush advisor Karen Hughes, Senior Advisor to the Vice President Mary Matalin, Deputy Director of Communications James Wilkinson, Assistant to the President and Legislative Liaison Nicholas Calio, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby – Chief of Staff to the Vice President and co-author of the Administration's pre-emptive strike policy.

Rice was later appointed Secretary of State; her deputy Hadley was made National Security Advisor. Wilkinson departed to become a spokesman for the military's central command, and later for the Republican National Convention. Hughes was recently appointed Undersecretary of State.

Several members of the group have testified before Fitzgerald's grand jury.

Cheney's role under scrutiny

Two officials close to Fitzgerald told RAW STORY they have seen documents obtained from the White House Iraq Group which state that Cheney was present at several of the group's meetings. They say Cheney personally discussed with individuals in attendance at least two interviews in May and June of 2003 Wilson gave to New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof and Washington Post reporter Walter Pincus, in which he claimed the administration "twisted" prewar intelligence and what the response from the administration should be.

Cheney was interviewed by the FBI surrounding the leak in 2004. According to the New York

Times, Cheney was asked whether he knew of any concerted effort by White House aides to name Ms. Wilson.

Sources close to the investigation have also confirmed that special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald is trying to determine Vice President Cheney's role in the outing of Mrs. Wilson, more specifically, if Cheney ordered the leak.

Those close to Fitzgerald say they have yet to uncover any evidence that suggests Cheney ordered the leak or played a role in the outing of Mrs. Wilson. Still, the sources said they are investigating claims that Cheney may have been involved based on his attendance at meetings of the Iraq group. Previous reports indicate Cheney was intimately involved with the framing of the Iraq war.

On Wednesday, The Wall Street Journal confirmed that the Iraq group was under scrutiny.

"Formed in August 2002, the group, which included Messrs. [Karl] Rove and [Lewis] Libby, worked on setting strategy for selling the war in Iraq to the public in the months leading up to the March 2003 invasion," the Journal reported. "The group likely would have played a significant role in responding to [former Ambassador Joseph] Wilson's claims" that the Bush administration twisted intelligence when it said Iraq tried to acquire yellow-cake uranium from Africa.

Rove's "strategic communications" task force operating inside the group was instrumental in writing and coordinating speeches by senior Bush administration officials, highlighting in September 2002 that Iraq was a nuclear threat.

Background

The White House Iraq Group operated virtually unknown until January 2004, when Fitzgerald subpoenaed for notes, email and attendance records. Bush Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card Jr. created the group in August of 2002.

"A senior official who participated in its work called it "an internal working group, like many formed for priority issues, to make sure each part of the White House was fulfilling its responsibilities," according to an Aug. 10, 2003, Washington Post investigative [report](#) on the group's inner workings.

Senior Bush adviser Karl Rove chaired meetings of the group.

The group relied heavily on New York Times reporter Judith Miller, who, after meeting with several of the organization's members in August 2002, wrote an explosive story that many critics of the war believe laid the groundwork for military action against Iraq.

On Sunday, Sept. 8, 2002, Miller wrote a story for the Times quoting anonymous officials who said aluminum tubes found in Iraq were to be used as centrifuges. Her report said the "diameter, thickness and other technical specifications" of the tubes — precisely the grounds for skepticism among nuclear enrichment experts — showed that they were "intended as components of centrifuges."

She closed her piece by quoting then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice who said the United States would not sit by and wait to find a smoking gun to prove its case, possibly

in the form of a “a mushroom cloud.” After Miller’s piece was published, administration officials pursued their case on Sunday talk shows using Miller’s piece as evidence that Iraq was pursuing a nuclear bomb, even though those officials were the ones who supplied Miller with the story and were quoted anonymously.

Rice’s comments on CNN’s “Late Edition” reaffirmed Miller’s story. Rice said that Saddam Hussein was “actively pursuing a nuclear weapon” and that the tubes — described repeatedly in U.S. intelligence reports as “dual-use” items — were “only really suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs.”

Cheney, on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” also mentioned the aluminum tubes story in the Times and said “increasingly, we believe the United States will become the target” of an Iraqi atomic bomb. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, on CBS’s “Face the Nation,” asked viewers to “imagine a September 11th with weapons of mass destruction.”

President Bush reiterated the image of Rice’s mushroom cloud comment in his Oct. 7, 2002 speech.

The International Atomic Energy Agency later revealed that Iraq’s aluminum tubes were never designed to enrich uranium.

In February of 2003, WHIG allegedly scripted the speech Powell made to the United Nations presenting the United States’ case for war.

Powell’s speech to the UN, United Press International reported, “was handled by the White House Iraq Group, which... provided Powell with a script for his speech, using information developed by Feith’s group. Much of it was unsourced material fed to newspapers by the OSP. Realizing this, Powell’s team turned to the now-discredited National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq. But some of Feith’s handiwork ended up in Powell’s mouth anyway.”

Miller appears in jury room again

Miller’s second appearance before the grand jury investigating the CIA leak seems to be tied to her meeting and discussions in June of 2003 with I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Vice President Cheney’s chief of staff, sources close to the investigation said. The meeting came one year before the New York Times printed a lengthy mea culpa discrediting a half-dozen of Miller’s prewar stories on the Iraqi threat.

Fitzgerald’s investigation resulted when allegations surfaced that Bush Administration officials had called reporters to circulate the name of the CIA officer, Valerie Plame-Wilson, in an attempt to discredit her husband, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, a critic of the administration’s Iraq policy.

Wilson went to Niger in 2002 at the request of the CIA to investigate reports that Iraq was trying to buy uranium “yellow cake” to develop nuclear weapons. He found that the reports were not credible.

Until now, Fitzgerald’s two-year investigation has focused on conversations Karl Rove and Lewis “Scooter” Libby have had with individual journalists, including Time magazine reporter Matthew Cooper and New York Times reporter Judith Miller.

That has now changed. Fitzgerald has retraced his steps to an earlier period when he first

began to examine the White House Iraq Group.

During its very first meetings, Card's Iraq group ordered a series of white papers showing Iraq's arms violations. The first paper, "A Grave and Gathering Danger: Saddam Hussein's Quest for Nuclear Weapons," was never published. However, the paper was drafted with the assistance of experts from the National Security Council and Cheney's office.

"In its later stages, the draft white paper coincided with production of a National Intelligence Estimate and its unclassified summary. "But the WHIG, according to three officials who followed the white paper's progress, wanted gripping images and stories not available in the hedged and austere language of intelligence," according to the Post.

Eight months later, Joseph Wilson began to question the veracity of the Bush administration's prewar intelligence in private conversations with reporters. His talk threatened to undercut the administration's successful marketing campaign: that Iraq was an imminent threat to the United States and its neighbors in the Middle East.

Wilson's allegations threatened to chip away at the credibility of individuals such as Cheney, who, in dozens of speeches just a few months prior had said that Iraq was dangerously close to acquiring a nuclear weapon. It also threatened to ruin Miller's credibility. It was then that Administration officials started to discredit Wilson.

Now Fitzgerald is trying to find out whether Cheney was involved.

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