

The Franklin /AIPAC Case: Cheneygate Revisited

by Jeffrey Steinberg

On May 24, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Martinsburg, West Virginia, announced a new criminal complaint against Larry Franklin, charging the Pentagon analyst with illegal possession of classified U.S. government documents. The indictment stemmed from a June 30, 2004 raid on Franklin's West Virginia home, during which 83 classified documents were seized. At the beginning of May, Franklin was arrested on a similar criminal complaint issued by the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia. Each complaint carried a potential ten-year jail sentence.

The Franklin case is but the tip of an iceberg that extends from the Washington, D.C. headquarters of the semi-official Israeli lobby in America, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), to the headquarters of Israel's intelligence services, to the Office of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Ultimately, the Franklin case promises to reopen the combination of scandals collectively known as "Cheneygate."

It was an open secret, the week of May 23, that several Democratic U.S. Senators were prepared to publicly call for the impeachment of Vice President Dick Cheney, if he had triggered the so-called "nuclear option" barring Senate filibusters of nominations of Federal Circuit and Supreme Court Justices. Although that moment of crisis passed, the specter of Dick Cheney orchestrating what Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) branded a "cold coup" against the Constitutional role of the U.S. Senate has raised the stakes in several ongoing criminal probes, that all lead to Cheney's office. These include: the Valerie Plame leak; the Niger yellowcake document forgeries; the Halliburton contract scandals; and the Franklin case.

According to news accounts that accompanied the May 24 criminal complaint against Franklin, investigations into

the Air Force reservist, turned Pentagon Iran desk officer, dated back to 1997, when Defense Intelligence Agency officials were alerted to unauthorized contacts by Franklin with Israeli military and intelligence officials. Franklin had served two reserve tours at the U.S. Embassy in Israel. The second tour, according to Pentagon sources familiar with the case, was cut short because of the unauthorized and unreported meetings.

A Neo-Con Patsy?

Franklin apparently came to the attention of Paul Wolfowitz (later Deputy Defense Secretary) when Franklin took courses at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced and International Studies, where Wolfowitz was Dean. Franklin was hired as a civilian analyst, to be the Iran desk officer at the Near East South Asia (NESA) policy office, headed by William Luti, early in the Bush 43 Administration. Luti, a retired Navy captain, was initially an aide to Vice President Cheney at the outset of the Bush Administration. But by the Summer of 2001, he was sent to the Pentagon to take over NESA. According to eyewitness accounts provided by Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski (USAF-ret.), who worked for Luti from 2002-03, Luti's ties to the Vice President remained strong. Luti boasted at staff meetings that he was working for "Scooter," a reference to I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, the Vice President's chief of staff and chief national security advisor.

Libby had his own curious links to Israeli intelligence. For over a decade, as a Washington "power alley" lawyer, his main client was fugitive swindler and Mossad piggybank, Marc Rich. Libby, too, was a protégé of Paul Wolfowitz, who left the Pentagon recently to take over as president of the World Bank.

When the Franklin case first grabbed headlines in August 2004, Douglas Feith, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy, who is another leading Pentagon neo-con, denied any involvement with Franklin, dismissing him as “six levels below me” in the Pentagon chain of command.

In fact, sources report that Franklin was a frequent participant in exclusive brown-bag lunch sessions in Feith’s private office. The closed-door sessions reportedly included a neo-con-only crew: Feith; Harold Rhode, another Wolfowitz ally and protégé of British Intelligence Arab Bureau “scholar” Dr. Bernard Lewis; Abraham Shulsky, the head of the NESAs Iraq war planning hub, the Office of Special Plans; Luti; and former Defense Policy Board head Richard Perle. Michael Pillsbury, a member of the “Blue Team” of Sinophobes in the Pentagon and CIA, who was a top consultant to Feith, also attended some of the private soireés, according to one source.

Assistant Secretary of Defense Feith resigned his post suddenly and without explanation several months ago, effective July 2005. Federal law enforcement sources suggest that Feith’s resignation may be linked to the Franklin probe. He was reportedly interviewed four times by FBI and other counterintelligence investigators.

Former colleagues of Franklin have described him as a “nice guy” who “went native” during his reserve tours in Israel. They paint a picture of someone who the leading Pentagon neo-cons may have cultivated and played as their “patsy.” It was apparently Franklin’s sharing of classified Pentagon and CIA intelligence with two AIPAC officials that is at the heart of the current grand jury probe—although the FBI investigation of AIPAC officially reportedly predated the 9/11 attacks.

Two former AIPAC officials, Steven Rosen and Keith Weissman, have told the press that they expect to be indicted in June, on charges stemming from their relationship with Franklin.

The Show Must Go On

Rosen and Weissman were fired by AIPAC on the eve of the organization’s annual policy conference in Washington, which took place May 22-24. Rosen, who was the director of research for AIPAC for 27 years, knows more about the group’s inner workings and ties to both U.S. and Israeli intelligence and government officials than anyone else. Although he and Weissman, the organization’s Iran expert, were fired, their legal bills, which reportedly already total more than \$1 million, are being paid by AIPAC. The departure-with-legal-fees was arranged, according to sources, by Washington lawyer Nathan Lewin. More than 25 years ago, Lewin was instrumental, according to author Mike Sabba, in shutting down a similar Department of Justice probe into the passing of classified documents to Israeli officials by then-Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer Dr. Stephen Bryen.

The Israeli intelligence officer suspected of being Bryen’s

late 1970s case officer, Zwi Rafiah, surfaced in 1999, in league with “Scooter” Libby and the Anti-Defamation League’s Abe Foxman, in orchestrating the Marc Rich pardon by then-President Bill Clinton (Clinton later acknowledged that, if he had known that Rich’s lawyer would later be Chief of Staff to Vice President Cheney, he would have never signed the pardon).

In a further twist on the Franklin/AIPAC case, government sources have reported that at least four journalists have been asked to voluntarily appear before the Alexandria, Va. grand jury, to discuss briefing calls they had received from AIPAC’s Rosen.

In another recent development pointing to the ties of Cheney’s office to the Franklin case, on the same day that the first arrest warrant was issued for Franklin, the White House announced that Luti was leaving the Pentagon to take up a post as Special Assistant to the President for military strategy.

Luti’s Office of Special Plans (formerly the Iraq desk at NESAs) has been widely identified as a key part of the pre-Iraq-War propaganda “stove pipe” that ran between the Iraqi National Congress, the Pentagon, and the Office of the Vice President—bypassing all traditional intelligence checks and balances, and chains of command. It was this circuit that produced some of the most fantasy-riddled material on Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction, and ties to Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda perpetrators of the 9/11 attack.

Analysts in Washington are asking whether Luti’s return to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is aimed at securing his silence, as the heat rises from the Franklin/AIPAC grand juries.

Already, back in September 2003, another leading Pentagon neo-con, propagandist David Wurmser, had been brought onto Cheney’s staff. Wurmser had headed a small team in Feith’s office, assigned to cherry-pick the CIA, NSA, DIA, and other intelligence agency work product to create a connecto-case that Saddam was behind 9/11. Wurmser subsequently went to the State Department, where he was special assistant to arms control chief John Bolton. From March 2003 until his appointment as Middle East policy aide to Dick Cheney, Wurmser was “on loan” from Bolton to the Vice President’s staff.

Senate delays John Bolton confirmation vote: On May 26, the vote on the Bush Administration’s nominee to become UN Ambassador did not take place as the White House had hoped, because the Republican leadership in the Senate was unable to muster the 60 votes necessary to cut off debate on the nomination. Senate Minority leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said that the failure to vote on Bolton “is not the fault of the Democrats. . . . We’re here to get information,” referring to documents about Bolton’s snooping on other U.S. officials which the Administration has refused to provide.