

White House Iraq ‘Plumbers Unit’ Behind Plame Leak

by Jeffrey Steinberg

On Jan. 22, 2004, just three weeks after his appointment, independent counsel Patrick Fitzgerald issued a wide-ranging subpoena to the Bush White House, demanding telephone records from Air Force One, and all documents pertaining to the July 2003 activities of a little-known but high-powered Administration unit called the White House Iraq Group (WHIG). Fitzgerald was charged with investigating the leak by “two senior Administration officials” of the identity of CIA “non-official cover” officer Valerie Plame, the wife of former Ambassador Joseph Wilson IV. Wilson had been sent by the CIA to Niger in February 2002 on a fact-finding mission, to determine the credibility of reports that Iraq had been seeking large quantities of “yellowcake” uranium from the African state, for the purpose of building a nuclear bomb.

The “Plame Affair” now threatens to bring down the Bush-Cheney Administration, and, while recent media attention has been largely focussed on Deputy White House Chief of Staff Karl Rove, and his role in the “outing” of Valerie Plame to syndicated columnist Robert Novak in July 2003, a far more fruitful line of inquiry actually centers on the WHIG as a whole, of which Rove was a member.

The questions posed by *EIR*’s own recent expanded probe of WHIG are: Did the Bush-Cheney White House create a Nixon-style “plumbers unit” to orchestrate a campaign of disinformation to justify the invasion of Iraq? And did the unit engage in criminal leaks and other illegal and unscrupulous actions to discredit critics of the long-planned Iraq preventive war? Do those crimes reach the threshold of “high crimes and misdemeanors” spelled out in the U.S. Constitution to warrant impeachment of Vice President Dick Cheney, and even President Bush?

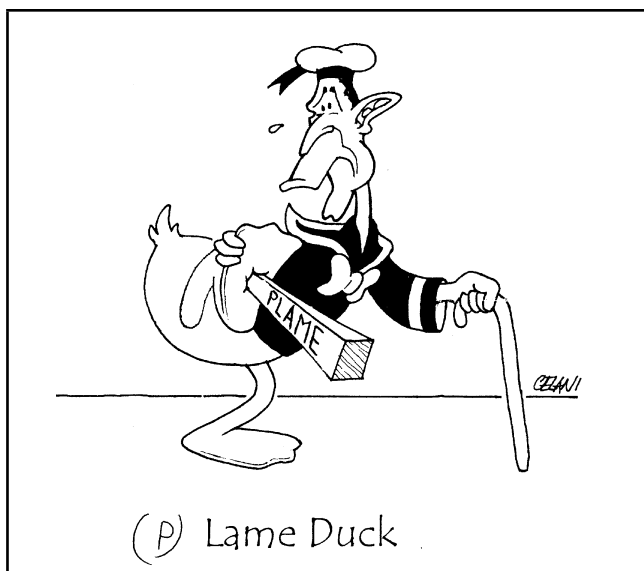
According to the original news account of WHIG, an Aug. 10, 2003 *Washington Post* exposé of faking of intelligence on the purported Iraq nuclear weapons program, the unit was established in August 2002, as a coordinating center for the

Iraq War. As *Washington Post* reporters Barton Gelman and Walter Pincus described it, “Systematic coordination began in August, when Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card, Jr. formed the White House Iraq Group, or WHIG, to set strategy for each stage of the confrontation with Baghdad. 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.’ . . . The group met weekly in the Situation Room. Among the regular participants were Karl Rove, the President’s senior political advisor; communications strategists Karen Hughes, Mary Matalin, and James R. Wilkinson; legislative liaison Nicholas E. Calio; and policy advisors led by [then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza] Rice and her deputy, Stephen J. Hadley, along with I. Lewis Libby, Cheney’s chief of staff.”

According to one Capitol Hill source, WHIG was launched at a moment when the Bush Administration was hit with a series of staggering blows to its Iraq War designs. In early August 2002, Gen. Brent Scowcroft (ret.), former National Security Advisor to President George H.W. Bush, and the head of G.W.’s President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, penned an op-ed, opposing any Iraq invasion, on the grounds that it would detract from the Administration’s post-9/11 priority, the Global War on Terrorism. Scowcroft’s devastating article was followed, in rapid succession, by a similar published warning from former Bush Sr. Secretary of State James Baker III, and statements by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) and former House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.), opposing an Iraq war.

At that point, according to a number of Washington sources familiar with the internal White House deliberations, the decision was made that the focus of attention had to be on making the case that Saddam Hussein was on the verge of obtaining nuclear weapons.

Right on cue, on Sept. 8, 2002, *New York Times* journalists



Judith Miller and Michael Gordon published an exposé of Saddam Hussein's purported quest to obtain aluminum tubes, to be used in a nuclear weapons program. Miller and Gordon wrote, "In the last 14 months, Iraq has sought to buy thousands of specially designed aluminum tubes, which American officials believe were intended as components of centrifuges to enrich uranium. The diameter, thickness, and other technical specifications of the aluminum tubes had persuaded American intelligence experts that they were meant for Iraq's nuclear program."

The Miller-Gordon article failed to take note of the fact that top experts at the Department of Energy had done an exhaustive study of the aluminum tubes the previous year, and had concluded that they were not part of a nuclear weapons program, but were components for missiles.

This was at least the second occasion, in which *Times* reporter Judith Miller had done the Administration's bidding with an "exclusive" news story on Saddam's quest for nuclear bombs. In late December 2001, she published an interview with Iraqi defector Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, who purported to be a civil engineer working on Saddam's nuclear weapons program, at the time he defected in late 2000. He claimed to have been personally involved in constructing secret military sites, where Iraq pursued nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it was learned that none of al-Haideri's claims had a shred of truth.

Al-Haideri was put in contact with Miller in late December 2001 by Ahmed Chalabi, the in-exile head of the Iraqi National Congress. The interview took place in Thailand, and was part of a contractual arrangement between the INC and the Pentagon, that had been established during the early days of the Bush Administration. Under the INC's "Information Collection Program," Iraqi defectors were steered to the Pentagon and to a select group of journalists, like Miller, who were enthusiasts for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

One crucial question yet to be fully corroborated is: Was Miller's interview with al-Haideri part of a contract between the Bush Pentagon and Benador Associates, a New York City public relations firm representing some of the leading neo-conservatives in Washington, and Miller? Several sources have confirmed that Benador did have a contract with the Pentagon, to handle public relations work for Chalabi and the INC. But so far, Pentagon public affairs spokesmen have not confirmed details of the contract, or any information corroborating that Miller's work was part of the arrangement.

If Miller's Sept. 8, 2002 *New York Times* article was part of the Benador "special relationship" to the Bush Administration, then there is more to the story than a mere cozy relationship between high government officials and cooperating reporters. Was Miller's article part of the WHIG propaganda/disinformation offensive to win Congressional backing for the Iraq War? Is Miller's refusal to appear before the Fitzgerald grand jury, even at the cost of several months in jail, related to her role with WHIG?

Wilson Accuses

Media fixation on Karl Rove has blunted another key feature of the "Plame Affair"—the role of Vice President Cheney's chief of staff and chief national security advisor, Lewis Libby—another leading figure in the WHIG. At a press conference on Capitol Hill on July 14, Ambassador Wilson, flanked by Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), reminded reporters that the "Get Joe Wilson and Valerie Plame" campaign was launched in March 2003, at a meeting in the Vice President's Office, attended by Libby and other Cheney staffers. At that meeting, according to Wilson, orders went out to do "a work-up" on Wilson. "A work-up," Wilson explained, "is an intelligence operation to find out everything that you can about Wilson and his family."

Other sources have told *EIR* that Libby was aware of Plame's work at the CIA, because he and the Vice President had already made a series of trips to CIA headquarters, to confront analysts on the issue of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction quest. At the time of Libby's visits to Langley, according to one former intelligence community official, Plame was working for WINPAC, the CIA's weapons of mass destruction intelligence and analysis section, and Libby knew who she was.

Robert Novak freely acknowledged, in his original July 2003 column "outing" Valerie Plame, that he got her name from "two senior Administration officials." Subsequent admissions by Rove's attorney suggest that Rove was the second, corroborating source on Plame, suggesting strongly that the first source was either Libby or another senior figure in Cheney's office. Under any circumstances, the fact that both Rove and Libby were active players in the WHIG task force, clearly defines the larger framework for the Fitzgerald probe, and for other now-pressing investigations into what looks more and more like a "plumbers unit," operating out of the White House Situation Room.