

Chickens Come Home to Roost on Cheney

Indictments are expected to come down shortly as special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald completes the investigation

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Indictments are expected to come down shortly as special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald completes the investigation originally precipitated by the outing of a C.I.A. officer under deep cover. In 21-plus months of digging and interviewing, Fitzpatrick and his able staff have been able to negotiate the intelligence/policy/politics labyrinth with considerable sophistication. In the process, they seem to have learned considerably more than they had bargained for. The investigation has long since morphed into size “extra-large,” which is the only size commensurate with the wrongdoing uncovered—not least, the fabrication and peddling of intelligence to “justify” a war of aggression.

The coming months are likely to see senior Bush administration officials frog marched out of the White House to be booked, unless the president moves swiftly to fire Fitzgerald—a distinct possibility. With so many forces at play, it is easy to lose perspective and context while plowing through the tons of information on this case. What follows is a retrospective and prospective, laced with some new facts and analysis aimed at helping us to focus on the forest once we have given due attention to the trees.

Background

In late May 2003, the Education for Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC) informed me that a former U.S. ambassador named Joseph Wilson would be sharing keynote duties with me at a large EPIC conference on June 14.

I was delighted—for two reasons. This was a chance to meet the “American hero” (per George H. W. Bush) who faced down Saddam Hussein, freeing hundreds of American and other hostages taken when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. More important, since Wilson had served as an ambassador in Africa, I thought he might be able to throw light on a question bedeviling me since May 6, when New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote an intriguing story about a mission to Niger by “a former U.S. ambassador to Africa.”

There Once Was an Ambassador in Niger...

According to Kristof, that mission was undertaken at the behest of Vice President Dick Cheney’s office to investigate a report that Iraq was seeking uranium from Niger. The report was an entirely convenient “smoking gun.” Since Iraq lacked any nonmilitary use for such uranium, it had to be for a nuclear weapons program, if the report were true. Or so went the argument. The former ambassador sent to Niger had found no basis for the report, pulling the rug out from under the “intelligence” the administration had used during the previous

fall to conjure up the “mushroom cloud” that intimidated Congress into authorizing war.

Kristof’s May 6 column had caused quite a stir in Washington. The only one to have totally missed the story was then-National Security Adviser and now Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (assuming she is to be taken at her word). Rice claimed that the information did not come to her attention until more than a month later. Right. (And the celebrated aluminum tubes were for nuclear enrichment—not artillery. Right.)

This ostensibly nuclear-related “evidence” was no mere sideshow; it went to the very core of the disingenuous justification for war. The Iraq-Niger report itself was particularly suspect. The uranium mined in Niger is very tightly controlled by a French-led international consortium, and the chances of circumventing or defeating the well established safeguards and procedures were seen as virtually nil. On March 7, Mohammed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, announced to the U.N. Security Council that the documents upon which the Iraq-Niger reporting was based were “not authentic.” Colin Powell swallowed hard but took it as well as could be expected under the circumstances. A few days later he conceded the point entirely—with neither apology nor embarrassment, as befits the world’s sole remaining superpower.

The Sixteen Words

Powell had long since decided that the Iraq-Niger report did not pass the smell test. But he was apparently afraid to incur Cheney’s wrath by telling the president. Powell’s own intelligence analysts at the State Department had branded the story “highly dubious,” so he had chosen to drop it from the long litany of spurious charges against Iraq that he recited at the U.N. on February 5, 2003, a performance that Powell now admits constitutes a “blot” on his record. Asked to defend President George W. Bush’s use of the Iraq-Africa story in his state-of-the-union address in January 2003, the best Powell could do was to describe the president’s (in)famous “16 words” as “not totally outrageous,” a comment that did not help all that much.

Those in Congress who felt they had been misled by the story, which the White House PR machine had shaped into a “mushroom cloud,” were in high dugeon. For example, in the days before the attack on Iraq, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) wrote the president to complain that Waxman and his colleagues had been deceived out of their constitutional prerogative to declare or otherwise authorize war. None of this put the brakes on the intrepid Cheney, who three days before the war told NBC’s Tim Russert, “We believe he [Saddam Hussein] has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.”

Cheney, of course, had been assured by the likes of neo-conservative armchair general Kenneth Adelman that the war would be a “cakewalk,” that U.S. forces would be greeted as “liberators,” and that in the glow of major victory, only the worst kind of spoilsport would complain that the “justification” was based largely on a forgery. By May 2003, however, it had become clear that the cakewalk was a pipedream and that no sign of a “reconstituted” nuclear weapons program was likely to be found. In this context, the information in Kristof’s May 6 op-ed was like pouring salt into an open wound.

Do You Know the Ambassador?

When introduced to former ambassador Wilson at the June 14 conference, I wasted no time asking him—rather naively, it turned out—if he knew who the former U.S. ambassador who

went to Niger was. He smiled and said, “You’re looking at him.” I asked when he intended to go public; in a couple of weeks, was the answer.

Wilson then turned dead serious and, with considerable emphasis, told me the White House had already launched a full-court press in an effort to dredge up dirt on him. He added, “When I do speak out, they are going to go after me big time. I don’t know the precise nature the retaliation will take, but I can tell you now it will be swift and vindictive. They cannot afford to have people thinking they can escape unscathed if they spill the beans on the dishonesty undergirding this war.” (Sad to say, the White House approach has worked. There are perhaps a hundred of my former C.I.A. colleagues who know about the lies; none—not one—has been able to summon the courage to go public.)

Wilson’s tone was matter of fact; the nerves were of steel. Hardly surprising, thought I. If you can face down Saddam Hussein, you can surely face down the likes of Dick Cheney. Wilson’s New York Times op-ed of July 6, 2003, “What I Didn’t Find in Africa,” pulled no punches. Worse still from the administration’s point of view, Wilson then dropped the other shoe during an interview with the Washington Post also on July 6.

Consummate diplomats like Wilson typically do not speak of “lies.” So outraged was Wilson, though, that this bogus story had been used to “justify” an unprovoked war, that he made a point to note that the already proven dishonesty begs the question regarding “what else they are lying about.”

It was a double whammy. And, as is now well known, the White House moved swiftly—if clumsily (and apparently illegally)—to retaliate.

It was clear from the start that Vice President Dick Cheney and Kemosabe (Amer. Indian for “Scotter”) Libby, as well as Karl Rove, were taking the lead in this operation to make an object lesson of Wilson and his wife. And it is somewhat reassuring to notice that some newly tenacious mainstream pundits are now waking up to this. Better late than never, I suppose.

Still Good Advice: Fire Cheney

Watching matters unfold at the time, we Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity on July 14, 2003 issued a Memorandum for the President, with chapter and verse on how “your vice president led this campaign of deceit.” We pointed out that this was no case of petty corruption of the kind that forced Vice President Spiro Agnew out by the side door. It was, rather, a matter of war and peace, with thousands already killed and no end in sight. We offered the president the following suggestion:

“Recommendation #1: We recommend that you call an abrupt halt to attempts to prove Vice President Cheney “not guilty.” His role has been so transparent that such attempts will only erode further your own credibility. Equally pernicious, from our perspective, is the likelihood that intelligence analysts will conclude that the way to success is to acquiesce in the cooking of their judgments, since those above them will not be held accountable. We strongly recommend that you ask for Cheney’s immediate resignation.”
<http://www.commondreams.org/views03/0714-01.htm>

President George W. Bush rejected our advice (not for the first time). But now the president

may have to let Cheney go after all. Why? Because special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald is taking his job seriously.

Frog Marching

During a speech in Seattle in August 2003, former ambassador Wilson imagined a scene in which police are frog marching presidential adviser Karl Rove out of the White House. This appeared a bit far-fetched at the time, but not now. Indeed, it seems there will be a need for multiple handcuffs and marshals.

From the beginning of special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald's investigation in January 2004, Wilson expressed confidence that the truth would emerge. And because of Fitzgerald's professionalism and tenacity, we are about to see at least some of the perpetrators of this fraud get their comeuppance. Normally, Schadenfreude is exceedingly hard to resist in such circumstances. But it is harder still to allow oneself any joy at the misfortune of others, when the focus needs to be placed on the huge damage already done to our country, its values, and its reputation.

Fire the Special Prosecutor? Shades of Watergate

When the Watergate scandal reached a similar stage in October 1973, President Richard Nixon, ordered Attorney General Elliot Richardson to fire the intrepid special prosecutor Archibald Cox. Richardson resigned rather than carry out Nixon's order; and so did his deputy William French Smith. So Nixon had to reach farther down into the Justice department where he found Robert F. Bork, who promptly dismissed Cox in the so-called Saturday Night Massacre.

Fitzgerald is at least as vulnerable as Cox was. Indeed, in recent days some of the fourth estate, Richard Cohen in the Washington Post and John Tierney in The New York Times, for example, seem to have accepted assignments to help lay the groundwork for Fitzgerald's dismissal.

Will the White House decide to fire special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, and simply absorb the PR black eye, as Nixon did? There is absolutely nothing to prevent it. Can you imagine Attorney General Alberto Gonzales refusing on principle an order from President Bush?

Could Bush himself be named an un-indicted co-conspirator? If that or something like it happens, we can expect a circling of the wagons and Fitzgerald cashiered.

If the case Fitzgerald has built, however, is not strong enough to implicate Bush personally, it seems likely that the president will acquiesce in wholesale frog marching of others from the White House and then go off for a Thanksgiving vacation in Crawford—oops, more likely, Camp David. For Cindy Sheehan is planning Thanksgiving in Crawford: she still hopes to see the president so that he can explain to her personally what the "noble cause" was for which her son died.

It promises to be an interesting autumn. By all means stay tuned.

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