

## Ex-Cheney Aide Shares Media Manipulation

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By MICHAEL J. SNIFFEN

WASHINGTON (AP) - A smorgasbord of Washington insider details has emerged during the perjury trial of the vice president's former chief of staff.

For example, when Dick Cheney really needed friends in the news media, his staff was short of phone numbers.

No one served up spicier morsels than Cheney's former top press assistant. Cathie Martin described the craft of media manipulation - under oath and in blunter terms than politicians like to hear in public.

The uses of leaks and exclusives. When to let one's name be used and when to hide in anonymity. Which news medium was seen as more susceptible to control and what timing was most propitious. All candidly described. Even the rating of certain journalists as friends to favor and critics to shun - a faint echo of the enemies list drawn up in Richard Nixon's White House more than 30 years ago.

(AP) In this courtroom artist rendering, Vice President Dick Cheney's spokeswoman, Cathie Martin, left,... Full Image

The trial of I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby owes its very existence to a news leak, the public disclosure four summers ago of CIA officer Valerie Plame's identity.

A private brainstorm of Plame's in 2002 brought a rain of public attacks on Cheney the following year. Cheney was accused of suppressing intelligence and allowing President Bush to present false information about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Plame's husband, ex-ambassador Joseph Wilson, started the attack. Her unit at the CIA had sent him to Niger in 2002 to check a report Iraq was buying uranium for nuclear weapons. Cheney and the departments of State and Defense wanted to verify that.

Wilson thought he had debunked the report, but Bush mentioned it anyway in his State of the Union address in 2003. The story helped justify war with Iraq.

Wilson claimed Cheney's questions prompted his trip and Cheney should have received his report long before Bush spoke.

Wilson's charges first surfaced, attributed to an unnamed ex-ambassador, in Nicholas

Kristof's New York Times column. But Martin testified she felt no urgency to set him straight because Kristof "attacked us, our administration fairly regularly."

But by July 6, 2003, Wilson wrote his own account in the Times and appeared on "Meet the Press" on NBC.

After that much exposure, Cheney, Libby and Martin spent the next week trying get out word that Cheney did not know Wilson, did not ask for the mission to Niger, never got Wilson's report and only learned about the trip from news stories in 2003.

Cheney personally dictated these points to Martin. She e-mailed them to the White House press secretary for relay to reporters.

When the story did not die, Martin found herself in a bind because Cheney's office was known for disclosing so little.

"Often the press stopped calling our office," Martin testified. "At this point, they weren't calling me asking me for comment."

So she had to call National Security Council and CIA press officers to learn which reporters were still working on stories.

Once Martin got names, Cheney ordered his right-hand man, Libby, rather than lowly press officers, to call - a signal of the topic's importance.

Top levels of the Bush administration decided that CIA Director George Tenet would issue a statement taking the blame for allowing Bush to mention the Niger story. Cheney and Libby worried Tenet would not go far enough to distance the vice president from the affair.

Libby asked Martin to map a media strategy in case Tenet fell short.

A Harvard law school graduate, Martin had succeeded legendary Republican operative Mary Matalin as Cheney's political and public affairs assistant. Matalin had brought Martin to Cheney's office as her deputy and trained her.

Martin offered these options in order:

\_ Put Cheney on "Meet the Press."

\_ Leak an exclusive version to a selected reporter or the weekly news magazines.

\_ Have national security adviser Condoleezza Rice or Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld hold a news conference.

\_ Persuade a third party or columnist to write an opinion piece that would appear in newspapers on the page opposite the editorials.

Not only did Tenet leave unanswered questions about Cheney, his remarks came out late on a Friday, the government's favorite moment to deliver bad news.

Why?

“Fewer people pay attention to it later on Friday,” Martin testified. “And in our view, fewer people are paying attention on Saturday, when it’s reported.”

As Martin rated their options, putting Cheney on “Meet the Press,” NBC’s Sunday morning talk show, “is our best format.” Cheney was their best person for the show and “we control the message a little bit more,” according to Martin.

The downside was that Cheney could “get pulled into the weeds and specifics. We like to keep him at a pretty high level,” she said. Also, it “looks defensive to rush him out on ‘Meet the Press.’”

Next they could give an exclusive or leak to one reporter and she considered David Sanger of The New York Times, Walter Pincus of The Washington Post, or Time or Newsweek.

Because reporters are competitive, “if you give it to one reporter, they’re more likely to write the story,” Martin testified.

Plus an official can demand anonymity in return for the favor. “You can give it to them as a senior administration official,” she said. “You don’t have to say this is coming directly from the White House.”

The news weeklies offered a focus on the big picture and opinion-editorial writers and columnists could voice opinions.

Ultimately, Cheney crafted an on-the-record statement to be attributed to Libby by name along with some anonymous background information. Libby personally called Matt Cooper of Time, who had e-mailed questions to Martin earlier.

But when Libby suggested calling Newsweek in fairness, Cheney’s aides were at a loss.

“We were scrambling for a number for a reporter that we know there named Evan Thomas,” Martin testified. “We were looking around for a number. I didn’t have it with me.” Eventually, they found a number and left a message.

But Cooper did not use the full quote and Martin called to complain. “I put Scooter on the phone with him, which we didn’t do very often on the record with a quote,” she testified, “and he took just a piece of it.” The result “wasn’t helpful” and the story did not fade away.

So the following week, two senior Bush aides – communications director Dan Bartlett and Rice’s deputy, Steve Hadley – briefed White House reporters. Cheney invited a group of conservative columnists to lunch at his residence.

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