

Hide and Seek with Scooter

As the Plame affair plays out in court, Americans may learn who manipulated pre-war intelligence.

By Justin Raimondo

IN A COURT OF LAW, everyone is entitled to the presumption of innocence, but there was a moment during the trial of I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, the vice president’s former chief of staff, when this axiom was seriously shaken. It came during the cross-examination of Debbie Bonds, one of the FBI agents who had questioned Libby. She admitted, “It took a long time to get him to tell us what his first initial stood for.” Libby’s lawyer tried to make a joke of this—“He still won’t tell me,” Ted Wells quipped—but one has to wonder what the jury made of a suspect who wouldn’t come clean on such a simple matter.

His first name, by the way, is Irving.

As to why he would want to keep this—and so much else—secret is, perhaps, the key to understanding Libby, a man who, despite being one of the most powerful figures in Washington, was unknown to the general public before his indictment. As *Slate* reporter John Dickerson put it, Libby “represents the other side of the Bush administration: the secret undisclosed side. Like the vice president he works for, Libby prefers to work on policy in the shadows and leave the politics to others.” Well, yes, but that depends on what one means by “politics.”

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the president and his team were front and center, serving up the case for war, while Cheney and Libby, in their shadowy kitchen, were cooking the intelligence and beating back the CIA’s efforts to throw out their recipe. An anonymous

Cheney aide told the *Washington Post* during the investigation’s early stages that the vice president’s involvement in the leaking of CIA agent Valerie Plame’s name was “‘implausible’ ... because he rarely if ever involved himself in press strategy.” Libby’s trial has shown this up as pure malarkey.

Working behind the scenes, Cheney and Libby sought to manipulate the media coverage of their war propaganda, with the vice president himself taking an active role—via Scooter—in distributing “talking points” to his underlings. As Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald has invested so much time and effort showing with a parade of witnesses—including Ari Fleischer, former White House press secretary, and Cathie Martin, former communications director for the vice president’s office—one aspect of this, amounting almost to an obsession, was the pushback against former Amb. Joseph Wilson, husband of Valerie Plame. According to the defense team, however, Wilson was just “a sliver,” a minor irritant, and didn’t merit much attention. Yet testimony reveals daily discussions about Wilson and efforts to shape a convincing response—personally directed by the vice president. On one occasion, Cheney dictated a script for Scooter to read to reporters asking about the Wilson matter, and, after doing so, the vice president’s loyal consigliere dutifully spread the news of Plame’s CIA affiliation.

Whether this was a freelancing innovation by Scooter or a deed done at the

direction of the vice president is the question hanging over this trial. And it is likely to come up, at least by implication, in Fitzgerald’s cross-examination of Cheney, if and when that comes to pass.

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius writes that what the Libby trial reveals is “a failed cover up”—but what did Libby and Cheney have to hide? What’s being covered up here—albeit not for long—looks very much like the deliberate falsification of the “intelligence” that sparked the Iraq War. The office of the vice president was the headquarters of this campaign, which led to the outing of a CIA agent. Cheney’s consistent involvement in the day-to-day details of the cover-up is potentially the most explosive issue to come out of Libby’s trial.

It all started in the early months of 2002, when the vice president received uncorroborated reports that the Iraqis were trying to buy uranium from the African nation Niger. Cheney made inquiries to the CIA, and they duly investigated. Langley was skeptical; the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon’s own spook factory, was more enthusiastic about the allegations, and the Niger uranium issue became a major bone of contention between the CIA and the neoconservatives within the administration who were pushing for war. A heated intra-bureaucratic battle ensued, with the CIA debunking the Niger uranium “intelligence” and the vice president’s office energetically defending it. George Tenet, then CIA director, person-

ally intervened to get the “talking points” removed from the president’s public utterances, but the persistent efforts of the War Party paid off: in his 2003 State of the Union address, Bush stated unequivocally that the Iraqis had tried to procure yellowcake uranium from “an African nation,” citing the British as the source.

The real source, however, was a cache of dubious documents that had been obtained from an Italian wheeler-dealer named Rocco Martino, sanitized by SISMI, the Italian intelligence service, and stovepiped to Washington. These documents piqued the vice president’s interest—he was, after all, always on the lookout for fresh evidence of Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction—and so Joe Wilson was sent to Niger, where he found zero evidence that Iraq had obtained yellowcake from this source. When Wilson heard the president utter those infamous “16 words,” he went public with his first-hand knowledge that the Niger uranium charges were bogus.

Also bogus, as it turned out, were the documents that started it all: when the International Atomic Energy Agency obtained the originals, it took only a few hours to determine that they were crude forgeries.

Who was to blame for the “mistake”? All indications point to the office of the vice president. Cheney and Libby claim never to have received Wilson’s report or any indication that the CIA questioned the authenticity of the Niger uranium “intelligence.” But one of the benefits of the Libby trial is that previously classified documents have been dumped into the public domain. Notable among them is a CIA memo dated June 9, 2003, which shows that the Agency published a Senior Power Executive Intelligence Brief on Feb. 14, 2002, casting serious doubt on the alleged Niger-Iraq deal. Cheney certainly saw this brief, yet he

and Scooter continued to push the Niger story.

This is about much more than a cover up—the issue is nothing less than the integrity of the U.S. intelligence-gathering process. Cheney and Scooter reportedly made many trips to Langley, pressuring senior analysts into drawing the “right” conclusions about Iraq’s WMD and especially Saddam’s alleged nuclear program. Yet the Niger uranium affair suggests more than mere meddling. It originated, after all, in forged documents. Someone was trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the Americans. Did that someone include the vice president?

However these fakes crept into the U.S. intelligence stream and ended up being cited by the president, the perpetrators would be sure to go after Wilson,

to discredit the leading critic of this line, Joe Wilson, and 3) Libby lied when he told a grand jury that he had heard of Plame’s CIA connection from journalists. On this last point, seven individuals—a former undersecretary of state, the former No. 3 official at the CIA, Cheney’s former spokeswoman, Libby’s daily CIA briefer, a former White House press secretary, and two prominent journalists—have all testified that Libby told them about Plame’s employment at the CIA before he spoke to Tim Russert, whom he originally claimed was his source. The Libby defense—that he forgot all these conversations and heard about Plame’s job “as if for the first time” from Russert—is absolutely unbelievable. (He later recollected, under FBI questioning, that “he first learned of Plame from the Vice President.”)

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whose *New York Times* op-ed shined the spotlight on a dark corner of the intelligence-gathering process. They would have found it necessary to discredit Wilson and close off any public inquiry into how the Niger allegations were—or were not—verified. Outing Wilson’s wife was part of the game plan: the idea was to not only tar him with nepotism but to intimidate anyone else from coming forward with damning evidence of faked intelligence.

In lifting this rock, Fitzgerald has exposed a nest of normally nocturnal creatures who cannot long survive the light. A parade of prosecution witnesses and declassified documents have proved 1) the administration was warned about tall tales of deals between Iraq and Niger’s closely-monitored uranium consortium, 2) the vice president’s office, with Libby leading the charge, was out

In announcing Libby’s indictment, Fitzgerald said, “If you saw a baseball game and you saw a pitcher wind up and throw a fastball and hit a batter right smack in the head, and it really, really hurt them, you’d want to know why the pitcher did that.” Libby was charged not with outing Plame but with lying to the grand jury because “What we have when someone charges obstruction of justice, the umpire gets sand thrown in his eyes. He’s trying to figure what happened and somebody blocked their view.”

The umpire’s view has been at least partially unblocked by the Libby trial. Whether this new clarity brings more indictments, and a further probe into the Niger uranium fiasco, remains to be seen—but the possibility looms. ■

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Suburban Peaceniks

The antiwar movement is leaving the far Left behind in pursuit of mainstream appeal.

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

ERICA IS NOT PLEASED with this antiwar demonstration. Gesturing to some other activists a few yards away she asks, "Dance for peace? What is that?" Her full cheeks were made for pouting, but she is trying to express something like outrage. A self-described Trotskyite studying at (where else?) City College in New York, Erica can see that her comrades have been pushed aside. I direct her attention to the hammer and sickle hand-painted onto a red flag behind her, and for a few moments we discuss the status of "deformed workers' states" and the theories of Antonio Gramsci. Small talk. But her disappointment is impossible to conceal. She and the other members of the League for the Fourth International are packing up. "I've never seen a demonstration like this," she declaims. She struggles to find the words, "It's so ... so ... middle class."

Early that bright Saturday morning, the "middle class" filled the D.C. commuter trains carrying homemade signs. Accountants and middle managers wearing windbreakers and tennis shoes shared stickers and pins that said "Drop Bush, Not Bombs." When they climbed out of the subway near the Smithsonian, they were greeted by a half dozen young people brandishing black banners with SDS. scrawled in red. The newly re-formed radical student group was preparing for "direct action," but before they could put on their black bandanas and take to the streets, they had to find each other in a swell of suburban Democrats chatting about Jim Webb.

Assembling the diverse coalition for this "peace surge" on the National Mall had its own politics. In the map drawn by the organizing group, United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), religious and faith-based groups were stationed directly to the left of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender anti-warriors. Tolerance in action. When one Baptist minister spoke to the gathering throng, two women wrapped in gay-pride flags and peace symbols giggled and quietly chanted a call "Bigots?" and response "Against War!"

Directly behind both groups was CODEPINK—an organization of feminists who oppose war and patriarchy. Their campaign for the day was cheekily named "Pull Out Now," a slogan emblazoned on pink foam tiaras and later chanted over the loudspeakers much to the delight of the audio crew sent by conservative radio-talker Laura Ingraham, who played it throughout the following week.

But while Ingraham's radio show reveled in sound clips of her producers asking demonstrators where they could join the Communist Party, the speakers on bill were content to serve red-meat rhetoric to a mostly blue crowd. Referring to the Democratic Congress, Susan Schaer of Women's Action for New Directions announced, "They are the deciders, not [Bush]. They are the commanders. Now, it is up to them to make the change. ... We have to be there behind them, every step of the way. Some nonbinding resolution is good, but it's not enough. ... We can do it. We did

it in November, we can do it next year."

Previously, most of the major antiwar demonstrations were co-sponsored with UFPJ by International A.N.S.W.E.R., an outfit formed by Ramsey Clark and captained by the sectarian Left, drawing many of its leaders from the Workers World Party—a radical group distinguished in history by its support for the Soviet invasions in Hungary and Afghanistan. Previous antiwar demonstrations in 2003 and 2005 featured speakers defending the gains of "the revolution" in Cuba, North Korea, and Venezuela. UFPJ severed their relationships with A.N.S.W.E.R. following the September 2005 demonstration in which A.N.S.W.E.R. speakers consistently went over their allotted time while C-SPAN cameras were rolling. A.N.S.W.E.R. "presented a one-sided picture of the antiwar movement to the U.S. public," according to a statement issued by UFPJ in December 2005.

A.N.S.W.E.R. still made an appearance at the rally, holding aloft their signs and trading on their reputation. Unfortunately for them, they stood near the Hip Hop Caucus, a new group that claims to set an agenda for the hip-hop community. Wearing crisp red t-shirts that implored, "Make Hip Hop, Not War" the members enthusiastically spent their time dancing, beat-boxing, and rapping about politics regardless of what was happening on stage. The doctrines of Marxist Leninism just couldn't attract a crowd when compared to the infectious energy of schoolyard rap.

At midday, to the enthusiastic cheers