



## **Breach. Lewis Libby didn't compromise national security, but others did.**

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Lewis Libby's lawyers are quietly filing appeals while President Bush privately ponders arguments for and against a pardon. But now is not the time for this controversy to fade away. Now is the time for it to begin in earnest. The compromise of America's national security should not be swept under a rug.

The good news: There never was a conspiracy on the part of Libby or others in the White House to reveal the identity of a secret agent. Valerie Plame's name was first leaked to columnist Robert Novak by Richard Armitage, a State Department official who was not seeking to harm Plame or her husband, Joseph Wilson. (This is obvious to anyone who knows anything about Armitage; had it been otherwise, special prose-

ctor Patrick Fitzgerald would, without doubt, have brought charges against him.)

The bad news: The CIA actually did send Wilson -- a retired ambassador with no investigative skills and a blatant bias against the Bush administration -- to conduct a highly sensitive investigation.

Key to that decision was Plame's recommendation. Despite Wilson's insistence that his wife played no role, a memo from Plame on behalf of Wilson was sent to the CIA's Directorate of Operations. That memo was retrieved and revealed by Senate investigators.

Among the national security questions this raises: Did CIA officials

have no qualified agents they could assign? Or did they regard the inquiry into whether Saddam Hussein had attempted to purchase uranium in Africa as not worthy of serious attention?

And were they oblivious to the conflict of interest? Since the CIA neglected to require that Wilson keep his C.I.A. mission confidential, they were giving him a credential he could use to sign up lucrative clients. Those clients would see him as an intelligence insider and their fees would enrich the Wilson/Plame household. Does the CIA make it a habit to give its employees such gifts?

We now know also that Wilson 's mission was botched. He returned from Africa certain there had been no attempt by Saddam to acquire uranium. Alarms were not set off for him by the fact that in February 1999, Saddam sent a "trade mission" to Niger, the country from which Iraq had first acquired uranium in 1981 (as confirmed in the Duelfer Report).

Thanks to the reporting of Christopher Hitchens (<http://www.slate.com/id/2139609/>), we know, too, that that this trade mission was led by Wissam al-Zahawie, Saddam's top expert on nuclear matters. Did Wilson fail to uncover that fact? Or did he assume that al-Zahawie went to Niger for the waters?

It is on the basis of the al-Zahawie mission that British intelligence continues to stand behind its conclusion

- validated by two independent commissions - that Saddam did indeed seek uranium in Africa . That is what President Bush asserted in his 2003 State of the Union address. Wilson responded with his *New York Times* op-ed: "What I Didn't Find in Africa," which in turn led Bob Novak and other reporters to try to figure out who Wilson was and why the CIA had chosen him as their man in Niger . Yes, some administration officials attempted to provide truthful answers to the reporters' questions. To see a scandal in that, one has to be a fool or a hyper-partisan. ( Washington lacks for neither.)

The CIA's errors and misjudgments in this and other matters should be investigated by a panel that would propose to the President and the Congressional committees overseeing intelligence ways to fix what is broken.

As for Libby, he did not contribute to the dysfunction at the CIA. If he lied about anything, for any reason, that is wrong. But he has lost his job, his reputation has been soiled, his personal finances and family life devastated. Is that not punishment enough? Is it not time to "move on"?

As a matter of equity, consider that former Clinton National Security Advisor Sandy Berger stole classified documents, stuffed them in his pants and hid them on a construction site. He will serve not a day in prison. President Clinton also lied to a grand jury. He kept his job, did no jail time and has been treated with

respect by his successor in the White House.

Meanwhile, Valerie Plame, who persuaded her superiors to send her husband on a mission for which he was unqualified and from which he

brought back misinformation that he marketed to the public through credulous journalists, is to receive \$2.5 million for her “story.” It will, I’ll wager, be more akin to a fable, omitting all of the pertinent facts noted above.

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