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A War on Wilson?

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Has the Bush Administration declared war on a former ambassador who conducted a fact-finding mission to probe possible Iraqi interest in African uranium? Perhaps.

Former Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson raised the Administration's ire with an op-ed piece in The New York Times on July 6 saying that the Administration had "twisted" intelligence to "exaggerate" the Iraqi threat. Since then Administration officials have taken public and private whacks at Wilson, charging that his 2002 report, made at the behest of U.S. intelligence, was faulty and that his mission was a scheme cooked up by mid-level operatives. George Tenet, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, took a shot at Wilson last week as did ex-White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer. Both contended that Wilson's report on an alleged Iraqi effort to purchase uranium from Niger, far from undermining the president's claim in his State of the Union address that Iraq sought uranium in Africa, as Wilson had said, actually strengthened it. And some government officials have noted to TIME in interviews, (as well as to syndicated columnist Robert Novak) that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, is a CIA official who monitors the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. These officials have suggested that she was involved in her husband's being dispatched Niger to investigate reports that Saddam Hussein's government had sought to purchase large quantities of uranium ore, sometimes referred to as yellow cake, which is used to build nuclear devices.

In an interview with TIME, Wilson, who served as an ambassador to Gabon and as a senior American diplomat in Baghdad under the current president's father, angrily said that his wife had nothing to do with his trip to Africa. "That is bulls__t. That is absolutely not the case," Wilson told TIME. "I met with between six and eight analysts and operators from CIA and elsewhere [before the Feb 2002 trip]. None of the people in that meeting did I know, and they took the decision to send me. This is a

smear job."

Government officials are not only privately disputing the genesis of Wilson's trip, but publicly contesting what he found. Last week Bush Administration officials said that Wilson's report reinforced the president's claim that Iraq had sought uranium from Africa. They say that when Wilson returned from Africa in Feb. 2002, he included in his report to the CIA an encounter with a former Nigerien government official who told him that Iraq had approached him in June 1999, expressing interest in expanding commercial relations between Iraq and Niger. The Administration claims Wilson reported that the former Nigerien official interpreted the overture as an attempt to discuss uranium sales.

"This is in Wilson's report back to the CIA," White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer told reporters last week, a few days before he left his post to join the private sector. "Wilson's own report, the very man who was on television saying Niger denies it...reports himself that officials in Niger said that Iraq was seeking to contact officials in Niger about sales."

Wilson tells the story differently and in a crucial respect. He says the official in question was contacted by an Algerian-Nigerien intermediary who inquired if the official would meet with an Iraqi about "commercial" sales — an offer he declined. Wilson dismisses CIA Director George Tenet's suggestion in his own mea culpa last week that the meeting validates the President's State of the Union claim: "That then translates into an Iraqi effort to import a significant quantity of uranium as the president alleged? These guys really need to get serious."

Government officials also chide Wilson for not delving into the details of the now infamous forged papers that pointed to a sale of uranium to Iraq. When Tenet issued his I-take-the-blame statement on the alleged Iraq-Niger uranium connection last week, he took a none-too-subtle jab at Wilson's report. "There was no mention in the report of forged documents — or any suggestion of the existence of documents at all," Tenet wrote. For his part Wilson says he did not deal with the forgeries explicitly in his report because he never saw them. However, Wilson says he refuted the forgeries' central allegation that Niger had been negotiating a sale of uranium to Iraq. Wilson says he explained in the report that several Nigerien government signatures would be required to permit such a sale — signatures that were either absent or clearly botched in the forged documents.

Administration officials also claim that Wilson took at face value the claims of Nigerien officials that

they had not sold uranium ore to Saddam Hussein. (Such sales would have been forbidden under then-existing United Nations sanctions on Iraq.) "He spent eight days in Niger and he concluded that Niger denied the allegation," Fleischer told reporters last week. "Well, typically nations don't admit to going around nuclear nonproliferation,"

For his part, Wilson says that the Administration conflated the prior report of the American ambassador to Niger with his own. Wilson says a report by Barbro Owens-Kirkpatrick, the American ambassador to Niger, addresses the issue of Nigerien government officials disputing the allegation. Wilson says that he never made the naïve argument that if Nigerien officials denied the sales, then their claims must be believed.

A source close to the matter says that Wilson was dispatched to Niger because Vice President Dick Cheney had questions about an intelligence report about Iraq seeking uranium and that he asked that the CIA get back to him with answers. Cheney's staff has adamantly denied and Tenet has reinforced the claim that the Vice President had anything to do with initiating the Wilson mission. They say the Vice President merely asked routine questions at an intelligence briefing and that mid-level CIA officials, on their own, chose to dispatch Wilson.

In an exclusive interview Lewis Libby, the Vice President's Chief of Staff, told TIME: "The Vice President heard about the possibility of Iraq trying to acquire uranium from Niger in February 2002. As part of his regular intelligence briefing, the Vice President asked a question about the implication of the report. During the course of a year, the Vice President asked many such questions and the agency responded within a day or two saying that they had reporting suggesting the possibility of such a transaction. But the agency noted that the reporting lacked detail. The agency pointed out that Iraq already had 500 tons of uranium, portions of which came from Niger, according to the International Atomic Energy Administration (IAEA). The Vice President was unaware of the trip by Ambassador Wilson and didn't know about it until this year when it became public in the last month or so." Other senior Administration officials, including National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, have also claimed that they had not heard of Wilson's report until recently.

After he submitted his report in March 2002, Wilson says, his interest in the topic lay dormant until the State of the Union address in January 2003. In his speech, the President cited a British report claiming that Hussein's government had sought uranium in Africa. Afterward, Wilson says, he called a friend at the Africa bureau of the State Department and asked if the reference had been to Niger. The friend said that he didn't know but, says Wilson, allowed the possibility that Bush was referring

to some other country on the continent. Wilson says he let the matter drop until he saw State Department spokesman Richard Boucher say a few months later that the U.S. had been fooled by bad intelligence. It was then that Wilson says he realized that his report had been overlooked, ignored, or buried. Wilson told TIME that he considers the matter settled now that the White House has admitted the Bush reference to Iraq and African uranium should not have been in the State of the Union address.

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