

Political Intelligence (WSJournal)

Editorial

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We've been knocking our heads trying to figure out how a minor and well-known story about an alleged CIA "outing" has suddenly blossomed into a Beltway scandal-ette. The light bulb went off reading Monday's White House press briefing.

Right out of the box, Helen Thomas asked if "the President tried to find out who outed the CIA agent? And has he fired anyone in the White House yet?" OK, the point of this exercise is to get President Bush to fire someone. But whom? That answer became clear when the press corps quickly uttered, and kept uttering for nearly an hour, the name "Karl Rove."

Of course! The reason this is suddenly a story is because Mr. Rove, the President's political strategist and confidant from Texas, has become the main target. Joseph Wilson, the CIA consultant at the center of this mini-tempest, had recently fingered Mr. Rove as the official who leaked to columnist Robert Novak that Mr. Wilson's wife works for the CIA. Mr. Wilson has offered no evidence for this, and he's since retreated to say only that he now believes Mr. Rove had "condoned it." The White House has replied that the charge is "simply not true." But no matter, the scandal game is afoot.

The media, and the Democrats now slip-streaming behind them, understand that the what of this mystery matters much less than the who. It's no accident that Tony Blair's recent and evanescent scandal over WMD evidence concerned his long-time political aide and intimate, Alastair Campbell. We're also old enough to recall what happened to Jimmy Carter's Presidency once his old Georgia friend Bert Lance was run out of town. If they can take down Mr. Rove, the lead planner for Mr. Bush's re-election campaign, they will have knocked the props out of his Presidency.

The political goals must be paramount here because the substance of the story is so flimsy. The law against revealing the names of covert CIA agents was passed in 1982 as a reaction against leaks by Philip Agee and other hard-left types whose goal was to undermine CIA operations around the world. This case is all about a policy dispute over Iraq. The first "outing" here was the one Mr. Wilson did to himself by writing an op-ed in July for the New York Times.

An avowed opponent of war with Iraq, Mr. Wilson was somehow hired as a consultant by the CIA to investigate a claim made by British intelligence about yellowcake uranium sought in Niger by Iraqi agents. Though we assume he signed the routine CIA confidentiality agreement, Mr. Wilson blew his own cover to denounce the war and attack the Bush Administration for lying. Never mind that the British still stand by their intelligence, and that the CIA's own October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, since partly declassified, lent some credence to the evidence.

This is the context in which Mr. Novak was told that Mr. Wilson had been hired at the recommendation of his wife, a CIA employee. This is hardly blowing a state secret but is something the public had a right to know. When an intelligence operative essentially claims that a US President sent American soldiers off to die for a lie, certainly that operative's own motives and history ought to be on the table. In any event, Mrs. Wilson was not an agent in the field but is ensconced at Langley headquarters. It remains far from clear that any law was violated.

The real intelligence scandal is how an open opponent of the US war on terror such as Mr. Wilson was allowed to become one of that policy's investigators. That egregious CIA decision echoes what has obviously been a long-running attempt by anonymous "intelligence sources" quoted in the media to undermine the Bush policy toward Iraq. Mr. Bush's policies of prevention and pursuing state sponsors of terror overturned more than 30 years of CIA anti-terror dogma, and some of the bureaucrats are hoping to defeat him in 2004.

As recently as Monday, the New York Times hung its lead story around a leak that the Pentagon had somehow not got its money's worth from the \$1 million it had spent mining some of Ahmed Chalabi's intelligence tips. We'd love to see a declassified bang-for-the-buck analysis of the tens of millions the CIA has spent paying

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sources who claimed to have Saddam Hussein in their sights. If CIA Director George Tenet can't control his bureaucracy, then President Bush should find a director who can.

Which brings us back to the politics. The Democratic Presidential candidates are naturally all over this pseudo-story, calling for a "special counsel" and Congressional probe. They can suddenly posture as great defenders of the CIA and covert operations, though some of them spent the decades before 9/11 assailing both. And if they can't get Mr. Bush to give up Mr. Rove, perhaps they can keep the story going through next November.

At least we can be thankful that Democrats buried the independent counsel statute during the Clinton years (see related article). "Leak" investigations are notoriously fruitless in any case and typically a waste of Justice Department resources. It's especially amusing to see the media whose lifeblood is leaks feigning outrage. We trust that Mr. Bush and Republicans on Capitol Hill understand that if they throw Mr. Rove over the side, the blood in the water will really be theirs.

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