

GOVERNMENT EXHIBIT
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Robert D. Novak

Mission To Niger

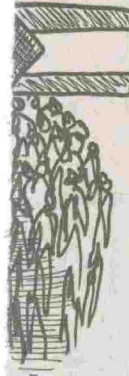
The CIA's decision to send retired diplomat Joseph C. Wilson to Africa in February 2002 to investigate possible Iraqi purchases of uranium was made routinely at a low level without Director George Tenet's knowledge. Remarkably, this produced a political firestorm that has not yet subsided.

Wilson's report that an Iraqi purchase of uranium yellowcake from Niger was highly unlikely was regarded by the CIA as less than definitive, and it is doubtful Tenet ever saw it. Certainly President Bush did not, before his 2003 State of the Union address, when he attributed reports of attempted Iraqi uranium purchases to the British government. That the British relied on forged documents made Wilson's mission, nearly a year earlier, the basis of furious Democratic accusations of burying intelligence, though the report was forgotten by the time the president spoke.

Reluctance at the White House to admit a mistake has led Democrats ever closer to saying the president lied the country into war. Even after a belated admission of error last Monday, finger-pointing between Bush administration agencies continued. Messages between Washington and the presidential entourage traveling in Africa hashed over the mission to Niger.

Wilson's mission was created after an early 2002 report by the Italian intelligence service about attempted uranium purchases from Niger, derived from forged documents prepared by what the CIA calls a "con man." This misinformation, peddled by Italian journalists, spread through the U.S. government. The White House, the State Department and the Pentagon, and not just Vice President Cheney, asked the CIA to look into it.

That's where Joe Wilson came in. His first public notice had come in 1991 after 15 years as a Foreign Service officer when, as U.S. chargé in Baghdad, he risked his life to shelter in the embassy some 800 Americans from Saddam Hussein's wrath. My partner Rowland Evans reported from the Iraqi capital in our column



BY MARGARET SCOTT

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Journalist, is a Robert Wood dation fellow.

ent Charles Taylor apparently has it the country—and good riddance. e is there? And absent any credible what is there to keep the peace once to make it?

ing in the National Guard to quell a town that has no police force wor- me. What do you do when the Guard w do you resist the pressure to keep a place indefinitely?

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we decide what to do about Liberia? iversity of Virginia's Philip Zelikow a checklist for deciding where the s should intervene:

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that Wilson showed "the stuff of heroism." The next year, President George H.W. Bush named him ambassador to Gabon, and President Bill Clinton put him in charge of African affairs at the National Security Council until his retirement in 1998.

Wilson never worked for the CIA, but his wife, Valerie Plame, is an agency operative on weapons of mass destruction. Two senior administration officials told me that Wilson's wife suggested sending him to Niger to investigate the Italian report. The CIA says its counterproliferation officials selected Wilson and asked his wife to contact him. "I will not answer any question about my wife," Wilson told me.

After eight days in Niger's capital of Niamey (where he had once served), Wilson made an oral report in Langley that an Iraqi uranium purchase was "highly unlikely," though he also mentioned in passing that a 1988 Iraqi delegation had tried to establish commercial contacts. CIA officials did not regard Wilson's intelligence as definitive, being based primarily on what the Niger officials told him and probably would have claimed under any circumstances. The CIA report of Wilson's briefing remains classified.

All this was forgotten until reporter Walter Pincus revealed in The Post on June 12 that an unnamed retired diplomat had given the CIA a negative report. Not until Wilson went public on July 6, however, did his finding ignite the firestorm.

During the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, Wilson had taken a measured public position—viewing weapons of mass destruction as a danger but considering military action to be a last resort. He has seemed much more critical of the administration since revealing his role in Niger. In The Post on July 6, he talked about the Bush team "misrepresenting the facts," asking: "What else are they lying about?"

After the White House admitted error, Wilson declined all television and radio interviews. "The story was never me," he told me, "it was always the statement in [Bush's] speech." The story, actually, is whether the administration deliberately ignored Wilson's advice, and that requires scrutinizing the CIA's summary of what its envoy reported. The agency never before has declassified that kind of information, but the White House would like it to do just that now—in its and the public's interest.

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