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FBI Agents Tracing Linkage Of Envoy To CIA Operative

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By Walter Pincus and Mike Allen
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WASHINGTON, DC -- **FBI** agents investigating the disclosure of a CIA officer's identity have begun by examining events in the month before the leak, when the CIA, the White House and Vice President Cheney's office first were asked about former ambassador Joseph C. Wilson IV's CIA-sponsored trip to Niger, according to sources familiar with the probe.

The name of Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, a clandestine case officer, was revealed in a July 14 column by Robert D. Novak that quoted two unidentified senior administration officials. In their interviews, **FBI** agents are asking questions about events going back to at least early June, the sources said. That indicates investigators are examining not just who passed the information to Novak and other reporters but also how Plame's name may have first become linked with Wilson and his mission, who did it and how the information made its way around the government. Administration sources said they believe the officials who discussed Plame were not trying to expose her, but were using the information as a tool to try to persuade reporters to ignore Wilson. The officials wanted to convince the reporters that he had benefited from nepotism in being chosen for the mission.

What started as political gossip and damage control has become a major criminal investigation that has already harmed the administration and could be a problem for President Bush for months to come. One reason investigators are looking back is that even before Novak's column appeared, government officials had been trying for more than a month to convince journalists that Wilson's mission was not as important as it was being portrayed. Wilson concluded during the 2002 mission that there was no solid evidence for the administration's assertion that Iraq was trying to acquire uranium in Niger to develop nuclear weapons, and he angered the White House when he became an outspoken critic of the war. The **FBI** is trying to determine when White House officials and members of the vice president's staff first focused on Wilson and learned about his wife's employment at the agency.

One group that may have known of the connection before that time is the handful of CIA officers detailed to the White House, where they work primarily on the National Security Council staff. A former NSC staff member said one or more of those officers may have been aware of the Plame-Wilson relationship. White House press secretary Scott McClellan said in response to a query for this article: "I think it would be counterproductive during an ongoing investigation for me to chase rumors and speculation. The president has directed the White House to cooperate fully, and that is exactly what we are doing." Investigators are trying to establish the chain of events leading to the leak because, for a successful prosecution under the law prohibiting unauthorized disclosure of a covert U.S. officer's name, the disclosure must have been intentional, the accused must have known the person was a covert officer and the identity must not have been disclosed earlier.

The first public mention of Wilson's mission to Niger, albeit without identifying him by name, was in the New York Times on May 6, in a column by Nicholas D. Kristof. Kristof had been on a panel with Wilson four days earlier, when the former ambassador said State Department officials should know better than to say the United States had been duped by forged documents that allegedly had proved a deal for the uranium had been in the works between Iraq and Niger. Wilson said he told Kristof about his trip to Niger on the condition that Kristof must keep his name out of the column. When the column appeared, it created little public stir, though it set a number of reporters on the trail of the anonymous former ambassador. Kristof confirmed that account. The column mentioned the alleged role of the vice president's office for the first time.

That was when Cheney aides became aware of Wilson's mission and they began asking questions about

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him within the government, according to an administration official. In the meantime, Wilson was pressing his case. He briefed two congressional committees conducting inquiries into why the president had mentioned the uranium allegation in his Jan. 28 State of the Union address. He also began making frequent television appearances. In early June, Wilson told his story to The Washington Post on the condition that his name be withheld. On June 12, The Post published a more complete account than Kristof's of Wilson's trip. Wilson has now given permission to The Post to identify him as one source for that article. By that time, officials in the White House, Cheney's office, the CIA and the State Department were familiar with Wilson and his mission to Niger.

Starting that week, the officials repeatedly played down the importance of Wilson's trip and its findings, saying it had been authorized within the CIA's nonproliferation section at a low level without requiring the approval of senior agency officials. No one brought up Wilson's wife, and her employment at the agency was not known at the time the article was published. Wilson's oral report to a CIA officer had been turned into a routine one-and-a-half page CIA intelligence memo to the White House and other agencies. By tradition, his identity as the source, even though he went under the auspices of the CIA, was not disclosed. "This gent made a visit to the region and chatted up his friends," a senior intelligence official said last June in describing the agency's view of the mission.

Regarding the allegation about Iraq seeking uranium, the official said: "He relayed back to us that they said it was not true and that he believed them." The Post article generated little public response. But behind the scenes, Bush officials were concerned. "After the June story, a lot of people in government were scurrying around asking who is this envoy and why is he saying these things," a senior administration official said. Wilson said he attempted to increase pressure on the White House the day after the June 12 article was published by calling some present and former senior administration officials who know national security adviser Condoleezza Rice. He wanted them to tell Rice that she was wrong in her comment on NBC's "Meet the Press" on June 8 that there may be some intelligence "in the bowels of the agency," but that no one around her had any doubts about the uranium story.

Wilson said those officials told him Rice was not interested and he should publish his story in his own name if he wanted to attract attention. On July 6, Wilson went public. In an interview published in The Post, Wilson accused the administration of "misrepresenting the facts on an issue that was a fundamental justification for going to war." In an opinion article the same day in the New York Times, he wrote that "some of the intelligence related to Iraq's nuclear weapons program was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat." On "Meet the Press" that day, Wilson said: "Either the administration has some information that it has not shared with the public or, yes, they were using the selective use of facts and intelligence to bolster a decision in the case that had already been made, a decision that had been made to go war." On July 7, the White House admitted it had been a mistake to include the 16 words about uranium in Bush's State of the Union speech.

Four days later, with the controversy dominating the airwaves and drowning out the messages Bush intended to send during his trip in Africa, CIA Director George J. Tenet took public blame for failing to have the sentence removed. That same week, two top White House officials disclosed Plame's identity to at least six Washington journalists, an administration official told The Post for an article published Sept. 28. The source elaborated on the conversations last week, saying that officials brought up Plame as part of their broader case against Wilson. "It was unsolicited," the source said. "They were pushing back. They used everything they had." Novak has said he began interviewing Bush officials about Wilson shortly after July 6, asking why such an outspoken Bush policy critic was picked for the Niger mission.

Novak reported that Wilson's wife worked at the CIA on weapons of mass destruction and that she was the person who suggested Wilson for the job. Officials have said Wilson, a former ambassador to Gabon and National Security Council senior director for African affairs, was not chosen because of his wife. On July 12, two days before Novak's column, a Post reporter was told by an administration official that the White House had not paid attention to the former ambassador's CIA-sponsored trip to

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Niger because it was set up as a boondoggle by his wife, an analyst with the agency working on weapons of mass destruction. Plame's name was never mentioned and the purpose of the disclosure did not appear to be to generate an article, but rather to undermine Wilson's report.

After Novak's column appeared, several high-profile reporters told Wilson that they had received calls from White House officials drawing attention to his wife's role. Andrea Mitchell of NBC News said she received one of those calls. Wilson said another reporter called him on July 21 and said he had just hung up with Bush's senior adviser, Karl Rove. The reporter quoted Rove as describing Wilson's wife "fair game," Wilson said. Newsweek has identified that reporter as MSNBC television host Chris Matthews. Spokespeople said Matthews was unavailable for comment. McClellan, the White House spokesman, has denied that Rove was involved in leaking classified material but has refused to discuss the possibility of a campaign to call attention to the revelations in Novak's column.

On July 17, the Time magazine Web site reported that "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." On July 22, Wilson appeared on NBC's "Today" show and said that disclosing the name of a U.S. intelligence officer would be "a breach of national security," could compromise that officer's entire network of contacts and could be a violation of federal law. Wilson said that brought an immediate halt to the reports he had been getting of anonymous attacks on him by White House officials. An administration source said, "One of the greatest mysteries in all this is what was really the rationale for doing it and doing it this way."

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