

“A true American hero”

Joseph Wilson stood up to Saddam—then to the Bush administration. The man who exposed the president’s bogus uranium claim talks about why he spoke out and the White House’s ugly “revenge” against him and his wife.

By David Talbot

In 1991, President George Bush introduced Joseph Wilson to his war Cabinet, calling the veteran diplomat “a true American hero.” By any standard, Wilson deserved such praise. As the senior U.S. diplomat in Iraq during Operation Desert Shield, the massive U.S. military buildup in Saudi Arabia after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Wilson was responsible for freeing 150 American hostages seized by the Iraqi dictator. Indeed, he was the last U.S. diplomat to meet with Saddam Hussein, in August 1990, following Saddam’s notorious July 25 meeting with U.S. ambassador April Glaspie, who failed to warn Saddam not to invade Kuwait. Wilson advocated a muscular response to Saddam’s aggression, and though he sought a diplomatic solution, supported Operation Desert Storm. During his highly decorated 23-year career, Wilson also held the position of political advisor to the commander in chief of the U.S. Armed Forces in Europe and was ambassador to Gabon.

In July this year, Wilson staked out another claim to heroism when he revealed in a New York Times piece that Bush administration claims that Saddam was seeking to acquire uranium from the African nation of Niger were known by the Bush administration to be false. In February 2002 Wilson himself had been assigned by the CIA—acting, ironically, at the request of Vice President Dick Cheney—to investigate the uranium allegations in an attempt to strengthen the administration’s arguments for war. He reported back to his superiors that there was no basis for the claims. But in January 2003, to Wilson’s amazement, President Bush made the same discredited claim in hyping the terrifying nuclear threat posed by Saddam. In the New York Times article, Wilson wrote that that “I have little choice but to conclude that some of the intelligence related to Iraq’s nuclear weapons program was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat.”

Along with a host of other revelations about cherry-picked intelligence, bogus claims about Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction and arm-twisting from administration officials to find usable evidence, Wilson’s bombshell made it clear that the Bush administration had decided to go to war first and come up with the justification for it second. As 9/11 hysteria faded, WMD failed to turn up and the invasion’s aftermath turned brutally ugly, the fact that false evidence was used to sell the war became a major political problem for Bush. Questions about his leadership of the “war on terror”—the heart of his appeal—became louder. The GOP had to stop the bleeding. A decision was reached that the best way to do that was to take Wilson down.

On July 14, two senior administration officials told syndicated columnist Robert Novak, a reliably pro-GOP journalist, that Wilson’s wife, Valerie Plame, was a CIA operative and had been responsible for sending him to Niger. The message sent by the administration leakers was about as subtle as a Tony Soprano neck massage: Mess with us and we’ll destroy you—or your wife’s career.

The political firestorm that erupted exposed a moral tawdriness in the White House and the national GOP that not even the president’s most ardent supporters could deny. Revealing the name of a CIA agent is an extremely grave offense, and the leak undeniably came from the White House. Yet rather than expressing moral outrage and demanding the head of the guilty party or parties, the head of the Republican National Committee, Ed Gillespie, actually went on a smear campaign against Wilson, telling talk shows that he was a Democrat with a partisan agenda who had given money to Al Gore’s presidential campaign. (Gillespie failed to say that Wilson had also given money to

George W. Bush's campaign, which Wilson supported for a time.) It was a shocking example of arrogance and moral myopia: Had the head of the Democratic Party during the Clinton years sunk to this level, it's almost impossible to even imagine the outraged reaction.

As for President Bush, after a few pro-forma statements that his administration would pursue an investigation ("spearheaded" by Attorney General John Ashcroft, who paid Karl Rove, Bush's political guru, \$746,000 for direct-mail services in three political campaigns) he said on Tuesday, "I don't know if we're going to find out the senior administration official. I don't have any idea." In the extremely close, leak-averse, hierarchical, on-message Bush White House, this bore a distinct resemblance, in terms of believability, to O.J. Simpson's claim that he was looking for Nicole's murderer.

Joseph Wilson spoke to Salon by phone from his office in Washington.

Q: What was your first reaction when you read Robert Novak's column?

I'm not sure it's printable. Novak had called me about my wife for the confirmation that he needed—and I of course didn't give it to him. So I was surprised when it came out. When I read the article, I guess my initial reaction was, What the hell does my wife's identity add to the story? And at the time I was not aware that the leaking of her name was a violation of a specific federal statute.

Q: Was your wife put at immediate risk?

Well, our thinking on this was always how does this affect the national security. It wasn't until people started speaking out and saying maybe she's been put at risk by this—after it blossomed into a big media story—it wasn't until then that we started worrying about the crazies who might do something—you know, the people who think the CIA has implanted transistors in their brains. That's when we started worrying a bit.

Q: Have you taken any security steps to protect your wife?

We don't discuss any security measures that we might have taken.

Q: When the president said earlier this week that we might never know who's responsible for the leak, what did that suggest to you?

Well, the thing that is important to understand in all of this is that it's not a crime that was committed against my wife or me—it was a crime against the country. And I think the president and all of us need to think of it in those terms. But obviously to those in the CIA community who believe that there's been a breach of trust, I don't think the president's words will be reassuring.

Whether or not it's finally determined to be a criminal act, it's clear that there was a fair amount of administration pushing on this, pushing the story out to the press—and for an administration that came to office promising to restore the honor and dignity of the White House and to change the tone, I think it's unprecedented to drag somebody's family members into a dispute just because you don't like what the husband has been saying.

Q: Do you think the White House is serious about finding the culprit?

I don't know. I would hope so.

Q: Do you have any doubts about Attorney General Ashcroft's impartiality as he directs the investigation?

It seems to me that the White House would want to make sure that any inquiry does not have even the perception of a potential conflict of interest. And so I think it's important that the administration seriously ask itself that question, given the privileged relations between members of the White House staff and the Justice Dept—particularly between Attorney General Ashcroft and Mr. Rove.

Q: Do you think there needs to be a special prosecutor to make sure the investigation is impartial?

I don't know—I saw one poll that said the public wanted a special counsel by something like 70 percent. But I don't know. I think the White House has to answer that question to its own satisfaction, and ultimately to that of the American people.

Q: Do you think Karl Rove knows who the culprit is, as you suggested earlier?

I never suggested that—what I did suggest was that I intend to cooperate with any investigation that goes forward because I would like to see the culprit brought to justice, whether that culprit is Karl Rove who is frog-marched out of the White House in handcuffs or somebody else. At the time that I made that statement (about Karl Rove), it was before the leak in the Washington Post that said there had been two officials who called six journalists about my wife. And my statement about Rove was predicated on the following: The act of leaking my wife's name to the press was a political act. The White House has a political office; the head of that political office is Mr. Rove. Now I can't tell you for certain that he would leak the identity of my wife to the press or even authorize the leak. But what I can tell you is that in the week after the Novak column appeared, I heard from several reporters that the White House was essentially pushing the story, that the White House was calling up the press and saying the real story here is Wilson and his wife, not the president's 16 infamous words [in his January State of the Union speech, alleging Saddam had tried to buy yellowcake uranium from Niger]. And then finally I heard from another reporter who said he had just gotten off the phone with Karl Rove, who said to him, "Wilson's wife is fair game."

Q: Do you believe Karl Rove's and [Cheney chief of staff] Scooter Libby's denials that they were behind the leaks?

I don't know what to believe.

Q: Are you considering filing a civil suit against the administration?

We have an attorney who is looking at that, but we haven't had a chance to sit down and discuss it yet.

Q: You've suggested there's been an attempt by the administration and the Republican Party to smear you—to paint you as a hardcore partisan out to undermine the administration. Is that an accurate characterization?

At first I thought what they did to me and my wife was clearly a signal to discourage others from coming forward—if you come forward like Wilson has, this is what we'll do to you. Since then, there have been a number of press reports to suggest this was pure revenge on the part of the White House—which is not what one hopes that the public officials who are supposed to be stewards of the nation's security would be engaging in.

Now with respect to [Republican National Committee chairman Ed] Gillespie, I only met him once, when he came off a TV set after saying I was a Gore campaign contributor. And I asked him if he knew that I had also contributed to the Bush-Cheney campaign. And he acknowledged that yes, he did know, because of course it's public information. So I find his selective use of the facts to be disingenuous at best.

I am not a rabid partisan. I'm proud of the service to my country. I pledged 27 years ago when I first went overseas to defend the Constitution of the United States. I've done so throughout my career. I found these charges to be without foundation—and frankly selectively pointing out that I've contributed to the Gore campaign without mentioning my Bush contribution to be duplicitous.

Q: Why did you contribute to both campaigns?

Well, I take great pride in being an American, and I don't believe either party has a monopoly on wisdom. It did seem to me that when Mr. Bush was running as a

compassionate conservative, he was going to be the better of the two candidates. I thought it was important that we have the two best candidates. I contributed to the Bush campaign before they went to South Carolina and engaged in their smear tactics against Mr. McCain and his wife and children. And ultimately, as I look back on [my Bush contribution], I made a mistake.

Q: You had a lot of respect for the first President Bush, and he reportedly thought well of you. Have you heard from anyone in his administration about the exposure of your wife and the attacks on you? After all, the first President Bush declared it was treasonous to reveal the identity of an undercover agent.

I cherish my time as the first President Bush's charge' [d'affaires] in Baghdad as well as his ambassador to Gabon. They are highlights of my professional career. I have tremendous admiration for the team that put together the Desert Storm operation and I was proud to be in charge of the embassy in Baghdad and to contribute to that effort. Now in this current imbroglio, I have heard from people across the country and from across the political divide. I've heard from many Republicans, including deeply conservative ones, and their outrage and indignation over what's been done to my family has been heartfelt. What Mr. Gillespie did to me is not reflected in what I've heard from other Republicans. Any conversations I've had with senior members of either party, those are private and will remain private.

Q: Are you concerned about any further reprisals? This is a pretty vindictive administration.

(Laughs) I don't know how to answer that. I think the administration would be well advised to deal with the issues on the table. The uncontested facts are that the 16 words in the president's State of the Union speech should never have been in his address. So the administration would be well advised to quit throwing dust in people's eyes and trying to make this a Wilson-Bush shootout or a Wilson-Cheney shootout. This is a problem between the president and his advisors, with respect to those 16 words in the State of the Union address. And it's a problem between the leaker of my wife's identity and the Department of Justice.

Q: Do you think one of the key subtexts in your story is the growing friction between the CIA and the White House over the politicization of intelligence?

I don't think that's a subtext, it's more of a consequence. I think what has happened as a consequence of what was done to my wife is that people in the CIA have felt there's been breach of trust. The agency's case officers feel that way—and without your case officers, you're nothing. So there is a legitimate concern that the feelings of the CIA troops be considered in all of this.

Q: Do you approve of the way George Tenet has handled your wife's case?

It's not up to me to approve—what I can tell you is that my wife is a star at what she does and that her community has embraced her, and that's all to the good.

Q: Was Tenet pretty much compelled by his rank and file to take the steps he did and refer the leak case to the Justice Department?

No, not at all. George Tenet is very highly regarded by his troops. That is undeniable. No one questions how good he is at defending his troops and looking after the morale of the agency.

Q: You have an establishment résumé, you've served several administrations—and now this administration is trying to paint you as a wild-eyed partisan and damage your reputation. Have you become disillusioned with Washington service?

No, I think the support across the political divide has been extraordinary. So far from being disillusioned, my faith in my country has been enhanced by this. Everybody

understands that when you do something like this, your credibility has to be tested. And when you look at the past few weeks, you have to say that the press and everyone else has been very fair to us, with the exception of a few who are defending positions that are simply untenable. The White House strategy is clear and it's simply not fooling anybody.

Q: The other way your Republican critics have tried to discredit you is by pointing out that you're a supporter of John Kerry. Do you still support his campaign?

Oh, absolutely. But let me say to that, I don't think for a minute that the two leakers would have outed a national security asset simply because I support a particular political campaign. So they can say that Joe Wilson supports the Kerry campaign, and that's true. But that's not the point—it's who leaked Wilson's wife and why.

Q: Well, their allegation of course is that when you went to Niger on your fact-finding mission, you did not have an open mind, that you went as a partisan.

Well, first of all, any contributions I made to the Kerry campaign were not made until 2003—my mission to Niger was in February 2002. And if you take a look at my writings in the run-up to the war, I always said that disarmament of Saddam was a legitimate national security objective, and that in order to disarm him we would have to deal from a position of strength, and that required the credible threat of force. So there's nothing in any of that that is anti-Bush.

Q: But by the time Bush was preparing for invasion, you had decided the war was not advisable, there was no imminent threat from his WMD.

What I had decided was that the invasion-conquest-occupation scenario—and this is a year after my trip to Niger, mind you—was the highest risk-lowest reward of all the options that we had.

Q: Do you think the U.S. is less safe now, post-invasion?

Yes, absolutely. For three reasons. One is that we have 133,000 more potential targets out there, a lot closer to where harm can happen, that we've created another front for terrorism that we're now in the midst of. Secondly, if we're hit again here in the U.S., with all these National Guard call-ups, we've got a lot of our first-responders over there instead of here. And thirdly, just because of the way we've prosecuted this war and how offensive it's been to the rest of the world, especially the Muslim world, we've created an exponentially larger pool from which actual terrorists might be drawn down the road. I don't think we're safer at all as a consequence of this.

Q: The Bush administration declared war on you after you published your New York Times opinion piece in July charging they had cooked the intelligence on Iraq. Why did you risk their wrath by writing that piece?

It was pretty clear to me that unless somebody from outside wrote the story, that the government wasn't going to admit that it had information about this business that it wasn't revealing. The government sat on [International Atomic Energy Agency chief] Dr. ElBaradei's finding that [papers documenting uranium sales between Niger and Iraq] were clear forgeries. They were stonewalling the whole thing. Remember Condi Rice's ill-advised statement that maybe someone in the bowels of the agency knew they were forgeries but no one in her circle? Now we know from memoranda that the language (about the uranium sales) had been taken out of the speech four months before the State of the Union address, and gee, they just sort of forgot.

Q: And the CIA had warned them the information was false.

Of course they had. This was a rumor that wouldn't go away, it was a piece of bullshit that couldn't be verified. It was clearly the selective use of facts to support a political

decision that had already been made, rather than letting the decision flow from facts that everybody agreed on.

When a government goes to war, particularly a democracy, it is the most solemn and awesome responsibility of our leaders—to decide to send our kids to go off and kill and die for us. And generally that debate ought to take place based upon a commonly accepted set of facts. And so the question is, were these verifiable facts that we were debating, or the selective use of data that did not accurately represent the level of the threat we faced.

Q: Why did they cling to this one piece of information about Niger yellowcake, despite its lack of credibility?

Because without that and without the aluminum tubes, they had no nuclear threat, and the nuclear threat of course is the Holy Grail of WMD threats. And you heard it in their speeches—”The next time we have a terrorist attack, it might be a mushroom cloud from Saddam Hussein. Are we going to wait for the next attack from Saddam Hussein to be a mushroom cloud?”