



JUSTICE DEPARTMENT LAUNCHES INVESTIGATION INTO WHITE HOUSE LEAK

October 1, 2003

The U.S. Justice Department said Tuesday that it would launch a formal investigation into claims that White House officials leaked the name of a CIA agent to newspapers in order to punish her husband, a former U.S. ambassador, for speaking out against the Iraq War.

In July, former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson wrote an opinion piece in *The New York Times* outlining his trip to the African nation of Niger in 2002. The purpose of his trip was to investigate claims that Iraq had tried to buy uranium, a nuclear weapon-making material, from Niger.

Upon his return, Wilson said, he reported that it was “highly doubtful” that Iraq had tried to buy the uranium from Niger. In his *Times* essay, Wilson questioned why President Bush then used the claim against Iraq to launch the war despite knowing the information was false.

“Based on my experience with the administration in the months leading up to the war,” wrote Wilson, “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.”

A week after Wilson’s article, conservative columnist Robert Novak wrote a column about Wilson’s Niger trip. In it, he revealed the name of Wilson’s wife, an undercover CIA agent. Novak said “two senior administration officials” led him to the information.

The Charge

Now Wilson, along with several Democrats, has accused the White House of purposely leaking his wife’s name in order to punish him for criticizing President Bush’s policies on Iraq.

“The idea, it seemed to me, in going after me and then later making these allegations about my wife, was clearly designed to keep others from stepping forward,” Wilson told CNN last month.

The president’s charges against Iraq, which he made during a State of the Union Address in January, have also led to criticism from foreign leaders, who accuse the American and British governments of hyping pre-war intelligence in order to gain support for the war. To date, U.S. military inspectors have found no evidence of nuclear weapons in Iraq.

The White House has denied Wilson’s claims, but says it will support a “thorough” investigation by the Justice Department.

“The president believes leaking classified information is a very serious matter and it should be pursued to the fullest extent by the appropriate agency and the appropriate agency is the Department of Justice,” White House spokesman Scott McClellan said Monday.

Democratic members of Congress have asked for an independent counsel to lead the investigation, saying Attorney General John Ashcroft, who heads the Justice Department and is a Bush-appointed administrator, is unfit because of his relationship to the president.

“There is a real concern about objectivity,” said Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.).

Though the reporter, Robert Novak, has denied any wrongdoing in the matter, he too has been criticized for printing the name of the agent. He has refused to give the names of the White House officials he quoted in his column.

“Novak may be really just an instrument of Republican revenge here,” said Los Angeles Times and MSNBC media critic Tom Rosenstiel.

The CIA and covert operations

According to former CIA analyst Larry Johnson, leaking the name of a CIA employee puts her and the people she has come in contact with, in danger.

“She works in an area where people she meets with overseas could be compromised,” Johnson said. “When you start tracing back who she met with, even people who innocently met with her, who are not involved in CIA operations, could be compromised,” he said.

Knowingly disclosing the name of a CIA agent, according to CNN reports, is a felony and could be punished by up to 10 years in prison.

By Kristina Nwazota, Online NewsHour