



VICE PRESIDENT'S CHIEF OF STAFF TO PLEAD INNOCENT TO INDICTMENTS

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I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Vice President Cheney's former chief of staff, goes to court Thursday to face charges that he lied during the investigation into who revealed the identity of a secret agent working for the Central Intelligence Agency.

For the past two years, a grand jury made up of 23 people heard evidence against Libby and other government officials. Last week they indicted Libby, meaning they felt there was enough evidence to go to trial.

The prosecutor alleges that Libby lied to the grand jury and obstructed the investigation into whether someone in the government knowingly leaked information about a secret CIA agent to the press.

"Compromising national security information is a very serious matter. And the need to get to the bottom of what happened and whether national security was compromised ... by recklessness, by maliciousness is extremely important," said special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald.

Libby, who resigned from his White House position following the indictment, will plead innocent, his lawyers say, claiming that any incorrect information he gave was the result of lapses in memory not intentional acts of deception.

The run-up to the Iraq war

Libby's are the first charges stemming from a two-year investigation prompted by Robert Novak's July 2003 newspaper column publicly disclosing the identity of CIA operative Valerie Plame.

To knowingly unmask a covert operative is a violation of a 1982 federal law, the Intelligence Protection Act.

Plame's identity was leaked to the media after her husband, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, wrote a New York Times op-ed piece challenging President Bush's claim in his 2003 State of the Union address that Iraq had tried to buy uranium from the African nation of Niger.

When making the claim to go to war with Iraq, President Bush said former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction program posed an immediate threat to the United States.

Wilson said the CIA sent him to Niger in 2002 to investigate the uranium claim but that he found no evidence to support it. He said his wife's identity was leaked as revenge for his criticizing President Bush and the Iraq war.

In December 2003, Fitzgerald was appointed to lead an investigation into how the classified information was leaked.

Can you keep a secret?

According to Fitzgerald, Libby told the FBI he learned about Valerie Wilson and that she may have had something to do with her husband's trip to Africa from reporter Tim Russert.

Libby said he wasn't even sure if that information was accurate, but he passed it on to at least two other reporters.

Later, under oath before the grand jury Libby added that he had learned about Mrs. Wilson from Vice President Cheney before his conversation with Russert, but had forgotten it when he and Russert talked.

But this is not true, according to Fitzgerald.

The indictment alleges that Libby talked about Mrs. Wilson at least six times before his conversation with Russert. Russert said he did not mention either Wilson.

The special prosecutor said Libby was the first official to share information about Mrs. Wilson with reporters and that he lied about this several times.

No one has been charged with violating the Intelligence Protection Act.

Political fallout

If Libby does go to trial it could be a potentially embarrassing event that highlights the inner workings of a very private administration.

Many White House officials, even Vice President Cheney, could be forced to testify about how they handled intelligence, dealt with the media and built a case to go to war in Iraq, the Washington Post reported.

Democratic leader Senator Harry Reid of Nevada said the case is "about how the Bush White House manufactured and manipulated intelligence in order to bolster its cases for the war in Iraq and to discredit anyone who dared to challenge the president."

But Republican columnist David Brooks noted that the prosecutor would have announced bigger charges if there were bigger crimes.

"It was about one person, and it was about somebody calling a series of reporters, not about a big conspiracy, not about broader issues," Brooks said.

It is possible, experts say, that Libby will strike a plea agreement and avoid a public trial.

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra
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