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Condoleezza Rice at the Center of the Plame Scandal

The Source Beyond Rove

By **ROGER MORRIS**

Former NSC staffer

"We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

It was September 2002, and then-National Security Advisor, now-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was fastening on CNN perhaps the most memorable and frightening single link in the Bush regime's chain of lies propagandizing the war on Iraq. Behind her carefully planted one-liner with its grim imagery was the whole larger hoax about Saddam Hussein possessing or about to acquire weapons of mass destruction, a deception as blatant and inflammatory as claims of the Iraqi dictator's ties to Al Qaeda.

Rice's demagogic scare tactic was also very much part of the tangled history of alleged Iraqi purchases of uranium from Niger, the fabrication leading to ex-Ambassador Joseph Wilson's now famous exposé of the fraud, the administration's immediate retaliatory "outing" of Wilson's wife Valerie Plame as a CIA operative, and now the revelation that the President's supreme political strategist Karl Rove and Vice President Dick Cheney's Chief of Staff Lewis Libby were involved in that potentially criminal leak-altogether the most serious political crisis Bush has faced. In fact, though her pivotal role has been missed entirely or deliberately ignored-in both the media feeding frenzy and the rising political clamor, Condoleezza Rice was also deeply embroiled in the Niger uranium-Plame scandal, arguably as much as or more so than either Rove or Libby.

For those who know the invariably central role of the NSC Advisor in sensitive political subjects in foreign policy and in White House leaks to the media as well as tending of policy, especially in George W. Bush's rigidly disciplined, relentlessly political regime, Rice by both commission and omission was integral in perpetrating the original fraud of Niger, and then inevitably in the vengeful betrayal of Plame's identity. None of that spilling of secrets for crass political retribution could have gone on without her knowledge and approval, and thus complicity. Little of it could have happened without her participation, if not as a

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leaker herself, at least with her direction and with her scripting.

* * *

The evidence of Rice's complicity is increasingly damning as it gathers over a six-year twisting chronology of the Nigerien uranium-Wilson-Plame affair, particularly when set beside what we also know very well about the inside operations of the NSC and Rice's unique closeness to Bush, her tight grip on her staff, and the power and reach that went with it all. What follows isn't simple. These machinations in government never are, especially in foreign policy. But follow the bouncing ball of Rice's deceptions, folly, fraud and culpability. Slowly, relentlessly, despite the evidence, the hoax of the Iraq-Niger uranium emerges as a central thread in the fabricated justification for war, and thus in the President's, Rice's, and the regime's inseparable credibility. The discrediting of Wilson, in which the outing his CIA wife is irresistible, becomes as imperative for Rice as for Rove and Libby, Bush and Cheney. And when that moment comes, she has the unique authority, and is in a position, to do the deed. Motive, means, opportunity-in the classic terms of prosecution, Rice had them all.

* * *

1995: Saddam Hussein's son-in-law Hussein Kamel, in charge of Iraq's strategic weaponry, defects to the West. He tells CIA debriefers that at his command after the Gulf War, "All weapons, biological, chemical, missile, nuclear, were destroyed." His claim is supported by continuing reports of UN inspectors and US intelligence, including sophisticated imagery analysis by both the CIA and Pentagon.

1999: The first rumors begin to circulate in Europe that the Iraqis may be trying to buy "yellow cake" weapons grade uranium from Niger, a poor West African country that earns more than half its export income from the strategic ore. Since Iraq is known to have used only amply available Iraqi uranium in nuclear research until its disbanding in 1991, and because Niger's yellow cake is produced solely at two mines owned by a French consortium and the entire output strictly controlled and committed to sale to France, European intelligence agencies and UN officials soon discount the story-though the rumors persist along with other alarming allegations by Iraqi exile groups long working to incite the US Government to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Meanwhile, American embassies and CIA stations in Europe routinely report the rumors in repeated, widely circulated cable traffic to Washington over the summer and fall of 1999. Among the recipients is the nuclear non-proliferation section of the Clinton Presidency's NSC staff, whose files on Iraq, a "red flag" country, are turned over to Rice and her staff when she assumes office eighteen months later

January 2001: Parties unknown burgle the Nigerien embassy in Rome. Stolen from the torn-up offices are various valuables along with stationery and official seals, which the Italian police warn might be used to forge documents.

February 24, 2001: "Saddam Hussein has not developed any significant capacity with respect to weapons of mass destruction," says Secretary of State Colin Powell. "He is unable to project conventional power against his neighbors."

July 29, 2001: "We are able to keep his [Saddam's] arms from him," NSC advisor Rice tells the media. "His military forces have not been rebuilt."

August 2001: An African informant reportedly hands Italian intelligence what are purported to be official Nigerien documents of "great importance." Among them are letters apparently dealing with Niger's sale of uranium to Iraq, including an alleged transaction in 2000 for some 500 tons of uranium oxide, telltale in a weapons program. The Italians routinely pass the letters on through NATO channels

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to the US, where by the fall of 2001 both State Department and Department of Energy nuclear intelligence analysts doubt the genuineness of the documents, and duly report their findings to Rice's NSC staff.

January 2002: In cables cleared by both Secretary of State Colin Powell and Rice, the first high-level reference to the subject after 9/11, Washington asks the US ambassador to Niger to uncover any possible Iraqi purchases of uranium. After talks with senior Nigerien officials and French executives in the uranium mining operations, along with a still wider investigation by the embassy, including the CIA, the ambassador reports back that there is no evidence of such dealings, and no reason to suspect them.

February 2002: Vice President Cheney hears "about the possibility of Iraq trying to acquire uranium from Niger," according to what his chief of staff Libby later tells Time. In his daily intelligence briefing by the CIA, as Libby relates, Cheney asks about "the implication of the [Niger] report." CIA briefing officers tell Cheney and Libby of the documents passed on months before by the Italians, including the State and Energy Department judgment that the papers are probable forgeries.

A few days later, with the routine concurrence of Rice and her staff, Cheney through Libby asks the CIA to look into the matter further. The Agency has no ready experts in Niger suitable to assign the Vice President's requested inquiry. After routinely canvassing the relevant offices and relatively brief discussion, they seize on the suggestion of one of their operatives working on nuclear proliferation issues, a mid-level CIA veteran named Valerie Plame who has worked abroad and in Washington under "NOC" non-official cover in private business in contact with several foreign sources. Her pertinent if personal recommendation for the assignment is her husband, then-fifty-three year-old Joseph Wilson IV, a retired Foreign Service Officer who has served briefly as Charge d'Affairs in Baghdad in 1990 and then from 1992-1993 as US Ambassador to Gabon, a seasoned diplomat with experience in both Iraq and West Africa, and even some specialization in African strategic minerals.

February 19, 2002: A meeting at the CIA discusses sending Wilson to Niger. Attending is an analyst from the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research who says the trip is unnecessary, since the US embassy in Niger and European intelligence agencies have already disproved the story of an Iraqi purchase-and whose notes of the meeting, including the facts of Valerie Plame's CIA identity as an NOC operative on WMD and her role in recommending her husband, will be the basis for later crucial memos in the scandal.

Despite State Department objection, the CIA decides to go ahead with the Wilson mission to satisfy the Vice President's request, and the former ambassador is "invited out [to CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia] to meet with a group of people at the CIA who were interested in this subject," as he will remember it. Wilson is introduced to the gathering by his wife, who then leaves the room.

In late February, with the concurrence of CIA Director George Tenet as well as Rice and Powell, Wilson flies to Niger.

February 24, 2002: Meanwhile, to further emphasize the importance of the issue and with Washington's concurrence, the US Ambassador in Niger has invited to the capital of Niamey Marine four-star General Carlton Fulford, Jr., deputy commander of the US-European Command, which is responsible for military relations with sub-Saharan West Africa. Fulford meets with Niger's president and other senior officials on the 24th, and afterward confirms the Ambassador's earlier findings, as he later tells the Washington Post, that there is no evidence of the sale of yellow cake to Iraq, and that Niger's uranium supply is "secure." The General's report duly goes up through the chain of his command to the Joint Chiefs in the Pentagon and on to Rice at the NSC, Powell at State, the CIA, the Energy Department and

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other interested agencies.

March 5, 2002: Having met with several Nigerien officials and sources over a ten-day visit and debriefed at length the US Embassy staff and Ambassador (who promptly cables a report on to Powell and Rice), Wilson returns from Niger and gives CIA officers, as they request, an oral report which is the basis for a CIA-written memo on his trip then forwarded to Rice and Powell, and for a further CIA debriefing for Cheney in response to his original request. Republicans will later dispute about how categorical or emphatic Wilson's report and its derivatives actually are at this point. He refers to "an Algerian-Nigerien intermediary" for Iraq who had approached Niger about sales of ore, though adds that Niger "ignored the request." But the essence of his conclusion is, once again, that there is no evidence of Iraq procuring uranium from Niger. In de facto acceptance of this finding, the several Washington agencies involved in the issue, including Rice and her NSC staff, make no other effort-beyond the US embassy investigation, General Fulford's trip, and the Wilson mission-to investigate the matter further in Niger or anywhere else.

May-June 2002: With the Iraq-Niger uranium issue apparently laid to rest, Defense Secretary Don Rumsfeld establishes in the Pentagon, with the full knowledge of Rice, a new Office of Special Plans, under the direction of Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and the cabal of neo-conservatives the Bush regime has assembled at the upper civilian reaches of the Defense Department. Believing the CIA, FBI and other agencies in myriad negative reports, including the Wilson mission, have simply "failed" to find existing evidence of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and Saddam's ties to al-Qaeda, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz direct "Special Plans" to gather and interpret its own "intelligence" on Iraq. Meanwhile Rice takes over coordination of efforts to stymie ongoing arms inspections of Iraq by the United Nations.

June 26, 2002: In a meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair and other senior British officials at Ten Downing Street, Sir Richard Dearlove, "C," head of MI6 British intelligence, reports on what he found during recent Washington conversations at the highest levels of the CIA, White House and other US official quarters. "Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD," as a summary records his words. "But intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."

July 2002: Concerned at the potential opposition to the war, and to coordinate policy and media relations for the coming attack on Iraq, a special White House Iraq Group (WHIG) is set up, chaired by White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, and composed of Rice, Rove, Libby, Rice's deputy Stephen Hadley, and media strategists Karen Hughes, a longtime Bush aide, Mary Matalin and others. The WHIG is to plan and control carefully all high-level leaks and public statements on Iraq and related issues. "Everything, I mean everything, was run through them and came out of them," a ranking official will say of the group. "It was understood, of course, that Condi or Hadley would clear everything from a policy point of view, Rove and Libby would do the politics, and the rest would handle the spin."

August 26, 2002: "Now we know," Vice President Cheney tells the VFW convention, "Saddam Hussein has resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear weapons." Rice routinely clears this speech.

September 2002: Several months earlier, the US and UN embargo of Iraq has seized a shipment of high strength aluminum tubes, which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the US State and Energy Departments duly identify as designed solely for launch tubes for conventional artillery rockets. Despite those expert findings, Rice now claims publicly that the tubes are "only really suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs."

Apparently reflecting the original rumors of the Iraq-Niger deal and the subsequent

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dubious documents handed the Italians thirteen months before (copies of which have reportedly been given to MI6 British intelligence by an Italian journalist), a British Government White Paper on Iraq released in September mentions that Baghdad "had recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." Pressed on the issue by the CIA (on the basis of its now-several reports debunking the story) to drop that statement as inaccurate, the British claim they have sources for the assertion "aside from the discredited [Nigerien] letters," but never identify them. Rice is fully briefed on all these exchanges.

(Eventually, British intelligence officials will admit the 2002 White Paper statement on uranium from Africa was "unfounded." Meanwhile, however, much of official Washington is aware of the CIA-MI6 squabble over the Niger uranium and questionable letters. "The Brits," a Congressional intelligence committee staffer will later tell the New Yorker's Sy Hersh in discussing the issue, "placed more stock in them than we did.")

It's also that September, in answer to a question in a CNN interview about what evidence the White House has of Iraqi nuclear weapons, that Rice makes her infamous quip, a line first authored by Mary Matalin-"We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

September 26, 2002: In closed-hearing testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (with a transcript closely reviewed by Rice), Powell refers to "reports" of an Iraqi purchase of Nigerien uranium as "further proof" of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.

October 2002: Seizing on the British White Paper, despite the documented disagreement of the CIA as well as the State and Energy Departments, the Office of Special Plans inserts in a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq, apparently one of the few documents Bush reads in this sequence, a reference to the British report of an Iraq-Niger uranium transaction. Though the NIE at CIA insistence notes "different interpretations of the significance of the Niger documents," and that the State Department judges them "highly dubious," the reference to Nigerien uranium is listed among other reasons to conclude that Iraq poses a danger to American national security.

"Facing clear evidence of peril," Bush says in a speech in Cincinnati that October, "we cannot wait for the final proof, the smoking gun that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud." Behind the scenes, an earlier draft of the October speech has also contained a reference to an Iraqi purchase of 500 tons of uranium from Niger, the now-revived claim from the discredited documents of fifteen months before. CIA Director Tenet urges that the White House take out that reference, and though the Pentagon's Special Plans office is pushing for inclusion of the reference, Rice's deputy (and eventual successor) Stephen Hadley, after two memoranda and a phone call from Tenet, finally agrees to drop the passage. Rice is fully briefed on all this.

December 19, 2002: As preparations are hurried for the attack on Iraq, a State Department "Fact Sheet," cleared by Rice, asks ominously, "Why is the Iraqi regime hiding their uranium procurement?"

The assumption of the Niger-Iraq uranium connection now begins to appear regularly in the President's Daily Brief, the CIA intelligence briefing which is now also drafted under the influence of the Office of Special Plans.

January 23, 2003: In a New York Times op-ed entitled "Why We Know Iraq is Lying," Rice refers prominently to "Iraq's efforts to get uranium from abroad."

January 28, 2003: "The British government," Bush says in his State of the Union litany on the dangers of Iraq, "has [sic] learned that Saddam Hussein recently

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sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Rice and her staff, of course, have as always laboriously worked and reworked the national security passages of the speech. In readying the address, Rice's NSC Staff assistant for nonproliferation, Robert Joseph, asks Alan Foley, a ranking CIA expert on the subject, about the "uranium from Africa" passage, which obviously refers to the old Niger issue. Foley says the CIA doubts the Niger letters and connection, has disputed the British White Paper (as Rice and Joseph well know), and recommends that the NSC strike the reference. In typical bureaucratic fashion, however, Foley also says it would be "technically accurate" to say that the British had in fact issued such a report on Iraq, however mistaken. With the approval of Rice and her deputy Hadley, the passage stays, becoming a major piece of "evidence" in the case for war.

February 5, 2003: In his now infamous presentation to the United Nations, a factor in silencing many potential dissenters in Congress, Powell pointedly omits any reference to the Nigerien uranium. The story "had not stood the test of time," he says later.

That February, too, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, as part of his own propaganda for war, issues a Ten Downing Street paper called "Iraq: Its Infrastructure of Concealment, Deception, and Intimidation," which includes a reference to the Nigerien uranium. Thought to be drawn from authoritative MI6 intelligence, the paper is soon widely ridiculed, eleven of its sixteen pages found to be copied verbatim from an old Israeli magazine.

March 7, 2003: In response to a request four months before, the State Department finally hands over to the IAEA copies of the Niger letters, which UN experts promptly dismiss as "not authentic" and "blatant forgeries." "These documents are so bad," a senior IAEA official tells the press, "that I cannot imagine that they came from a serious intelligence agency. It depresses me, given the low quality of the documents, that it was not stopped. At the level it reached, I would have expected more checking." A former high-level intelligence official tells *The New Yorker*, "Somebody deliberately let something false get in there. It could not have gotten into the system without the agency being involved. Therefore it was an internal intention. Someone set someone up."

March 8, 2003: In reply to questions about the forgery, a State Department spokesman says the US Government "fell for it." "It was the information that we had. We provided it," Powell will say lamely on "Meet the Press." "If that information is inaccurate, fine."

March 17, 2003: Bush, in a statement cleared by Rice, repeats that, "Iraq continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised."

March 19, 2003: Bush orders the invasion of Iraq.

March 21, 2003: Senator John D. Rockefeller IV (D. WVa) writes FBI Director Robert Mueller asking for an investigation of the Niger letters. "There is a possibility," Rockefeller says, "that the fabrication of these [Niger] documents may be part of a larger deception campaign aimed at manipulating public opinion and foreign policy regarding Iraq,"

May 6, 2003: In an anonymous interview with *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, Ambassador Wilson-identified none too subtly as "a former US Ambassador to [sic] Africa," says about the failure to find WMDs in Iraq: "It's disingenuous for the State Department people to say they were bamboozled because they knew about this [that Saddam had no nuclear program or weapons] for a year."

June 10, 2003: Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman asks the Bureau of

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Intelligence and Research (INR) for a briefing on the Niger uranium issue, and specifically the State Department's opposition to the continuing White House view that Iraq had tried to buy yellow cake. The resulting memo is dated the same day, and drawn from notes on the February 19 meeting at the CIA on the Wilson mission and other sources. Befitting the sensitivity of the information, the memo is classified "Top Secret," and contains in one paragraph, separately marked "(S/NF)" for "Secret/No dissemination to foreign governments or intelligence agencies," two sentences describing in passing Valerie "Wilson's" identity as a CIA operative and her role in the inception of the Wilson trip to Niger. This June 10 memo reportedly does not use her maiden name Plame.

June 12, 2003: The Washington Post reports that an unnamed "former US ambassador" was sent to Niger to look into the uranium issue and found no evidence of any Iraqi purchase.

At the State Department, Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage asks INR to prepare a memorandum on the background of what the Post is reporting, and INR sends to Armitage that same day a copy of the June 10 memo to Grossman. The memo is also sent to Undersecretary for Arms Control and International Security (and future UN Ambassador-designate) John Bolton.

July 6, 2003: Outraged by continuing references to the Nigerien uranium, Wilson breaks his anonymity with a sensational New York Times op-ed disclosing his mission to Niger sixteen months before, and the fact that he found no evidence of an Iraqi purchase of ore. "Based on my experience with the administration in the months leading up to the war," Wilson writes, "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." He tells "Meet the Press," "Either the administration has information that it has not shared with the public or ... they were using the selective use of facts and intelligence to bolster a decision that had already been made to go to war."

Later in the day, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage calls INR Assistant Secretary Carl W. Ford at home, and asks him to send a briefing memo to Powell about the Niger uranium issue. Ford simply pulls out the previous June 10 memo with its reference to Wilson's wife (her name now corrected from Wilson to Plame), addresses it to Powell, and forwards the memo to Rice to be passed on to Powell, who is due to leave the next day with the Presidential party on a trip to Africa.

Meanwhile, the WHIG is also moving that Sunday to deal aggressively with the Wilson op-ed. They will no longer focus on the too obviously fraudulent claim of an Iraqi purchase of yellow cake-White House orthodoxy before the invasion-but will instead discount the issue, discredit Wilson, and shift blame for the now-embarrassing State of the Union reference. White House press secretary Ari Fleischer is to try to downplay and dismiss Wilson's article on-the-record at the next day's press briefing, while Rice and others begin to make off-the-record calls to the media to do the same. While pursuing their own contacts among right-wing reporters and columnists, Rove and Libby are also to work with CIA Director George Tenet in a statement by Tenet taking responsibility for any inaccuracy in the State of the Union passage.

July 7, 2003: Under a barrage of questions at a 9:30 am press briefing, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer says of the Wilson claims, "There is zero, nada, nothing new here," adding that "Wilson's own report [shows] that officials in Niger said that Iraq was seeking to contact officials in Niger about sales." (A reference to the "Algerian-Nigerian intermediary" in Wilson's debriefings.) ("That then translates into an Iraqi effort to import a significant quantity of uranium as the President alleged?" Wilson later that day replies to Fleischer. "These guys really need to get serious.") But as the briefing wears on, Fleischer's defense grows "murkier," as the New York Times reports, and he seems to "concede" that the State

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of the Union reference to Niger uranium "might have been flawed."

That evening, with the White House scrambling to defend itself against Wilson's resonating charges, Bush leaves for a trip to Africa, accompanied by Rice and Powell. Before the party flies out of Andrews, Rice is in several meetings with Rove, Libby and other senior aides of the WHIG.

The scene now shifts to the plush but still relatively close quarters of Air Force One, the specially configured 747 where the accompanying media are boarded through a rear door and funneled directly to their mid-level section closed off from the forward official compartment, and where Administration VIPs like Rice and Powell are in conference rooms and adjoining lounge chairs in closer and easier proximity and informality than in any other official venue. It is in this setting, soon after takeoff, as the New York Times will report two years later, that Powell is seen walking around carrying the INR June 12/July 6 memo detailing Wilson's mission and Plame's identity and role in the "(S/NF)" paragraph. Powell discusses the memo with Rice and other presidential aides on board, including press secretary Ari Fleischer. Witnesses later see Fleischer "perusing" the memo. There are reports, too, of several calls between the plane and the White House discussing the Wilson affair. En route over the Atlantic, Rice and Fleischer both call contacts at the Washington Post and New York Times "to make it clear," the Times will report, "that they no longer stood behind Mr. Bush's statement about the uranium-the first such official concession on the sensitive issue of the intelligence that led to the war."

It is in these hours of late July 7 and early July 8 that Rove, Libby and other officials get word of Plame's identity from Air Force One. Rove and Libby will hear of Plame in the drafting with Tenet of his mea culpa, but officials on the plane reading the INR memo cannot know or be sure of this, and the memo's passages on Wilson, including his wife, are now relayed back to Washington. Reporters later speculate that Powell might have called either Rove or Libby with such information, but as one concludes aptly, "That was above his pay grade." The President himself might have read the memo and called the two aides. But given Bush's style and grasp, that, too, is implausible, though he may well have been informed of the calls and given his approval. The only official on board Air Force One with the knowledge and authority-motive, means and opportunity-to instruct Rove and Libby and so betray Plame was Condoleezza Rice.

July 7-8, 2003: Right-wing Columnist Robert Novak is called by thus far unidentified senior officials leaking to him that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame (they use her maiden name), is a CIA operative who instigated her husband's trip to Niger. "I didn't dig it out, it was given to me," Novak tells Newsweek of the leak. "They thought it was significant. They gave me the name and I used it."

July 9, 2003: Rove discusses the Wilson imbroglio, including the role of Wilson's CIA wife, with columnist Robert Novak, who identifies her by her maiden name, Valerie Plame.

July 11, 2003: Peppered by questions about Wilson's charges, Bush in a press conference in Uganda says, "I gave a speech to the nation that was cleared by the intelligence services." That evening, aboard Air Force One flying over East Africa, Rice speaks at length with the media about the "clearances" of the President's speech. "Now I can tell you," she says, "if the CIA, the director of central intelligence, had said, 'Take this out of the speech,' it would have gone without question." She says nothing about the actual maneuvering behind the now-troublesome passage, the Joseph-Foley exchange, the controversial British memorandum US intelligence has disputed, the shadowy history of the yellow cake fraud.

July 11, 2003: Back in Washington, working to discredit Wilson, Rove leaks to Time's Matthew Cooper that "Wilson's wife" is, in fact, in the CIA "working on WMD"

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and has been behind his mission to Niger. Rove "implied strongly," Cooper later emails his editor, "there's still plenty to implicate Iraqi interest in acquiring uranium from Niger."

After that conversation, in evidence of the central role of Rice and her staff in the betrayal of Plame's identity to discredit Wilson, Rove emails Rice's NSC deputy Hadley that he has "waved Cooper off" Wilson's claim, and that he (Rove) "didn't take the bait" when Cooper offered that Wilson's revelations had damaged the Administration. Hadley immediately relays this message to Rice in Africa.

That same day, after extensive deliberations with Rove and Libby, CIA Director Tenet makes a public statement that the Nigerien uranium allegation should never have appeared in the Bush 2003 State of the Union. "This did not rise to the level of certainty which should be required for presidential speeches," he confesses, "and CIA should have ensured that it was removed,"

July 12, 2003: When asked by Cooper about Plame being CIA, Libby confirms the story to the Time reporter. That same day, in a talk with the Washington Post's Walt Pincus, an unidentified "senior administration official" brings up Plame's CIA identity, in what is now a widely authorized leak approved by Rice as well as Rove.

July 14, 2003: Columnist Robert Novak, attributing the story to "two senior administration officials" -neither of which is Rove or Libby-identifies Plame as a CIA "operative on weapons of mass destruction" who was behind her husband's mission to Niger.

July 20, 2003: "Senior White House sources" call NBC reporter Andrea Mitchell to say, "the real story here is not the 16 words [Bush's reference to Niger uranium in the State of the Union] but Wilson and his wife."

July 21, 2003: On MSNBC, host Chris Mathews tells Wilson, "I just got off the phone with Karl Rove. He says, and I quote, 'Wilson's wife is fair game.'"

July 30, 2003: Alarmed about the impact of the betrayal of Plame's identity on current and future agents and sources abroad, the CIA asks the Justice Department to investigate the leak, which leads to the naming of US Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald as a Special Prosecutor.

September 2003: An unidentified "White House official" tells the Washington Post that "at least six reporters" had been told about Plame before Novak's column appeared. The disclosures, the source says, were "purely and simply out of revenge."

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The chronology will no doubt continue to expand in the days and weeks ahead. There may well be a ticking time-bomb in the Grand Jury investigation of the Plame leak that goes beyond anything we now envision. In earlier findings in cases of reporters refusing to testify, DC Circuit Judge, David Tatel, a distinguished jurist known for his devotion to civil liberties and especially press freedoms, had stoutly maintained a federal privilege for the media, shielding it from being compelled to testify except under the most exceptional conditions. But in then later joining his colleagues in ordering Cooper and the New York Times' Judith Miller to testify, Tatel reviewed extensive secret information from the prosecutor, devoted eight blacked-out pages of his judgment to the material, and concluded that the privilege he had upheld throughout his career as a lawyer and judge had to give way before "the gravity of the suspected crime." No other element of the scandal bodes so ill for the Bush regime.

There is also the intriguing relationship between John Bolton, the regime's stymied

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appointee to the UN, and Judith Miller, the New York Times correspondent sent to jail for contempt in refusing to divulge her sources on Plame even for a story she never wrote. Bolton's close relationship to Miller, in which many suspect the right-wing lobbyist handed the reporter much of the fraudulent accounts of Iraqi weaponry that ended up on the front page of the Times, may well have encompassed as well the passing of information from the INR memo on Plame, which Bolton saw before Powell or even Rice.

Then, too, as the Progressive Review's Sam Smith and Counterpunch's Alexander Cockburn have pointed out from their lonely perch of substance and perspective atop what's left of American journalism, there is, in the end, much less to the whole story than meets the eye. In their too obvious relish of celebrity, Wilson and Plame as heroes are as dubious as the Niger letters. The CIA, and the Presidents who used it as a private mafia, account for a more than half-century history far more catastrophic than a legion of seedy Roves and Libbys or even multiple Bush regimes. Relentlessly corrupt, inept, anachronistic, if ever an institution deserved to be "outed" and prosecuted in its numbers, it is our vastly bloodstained intelligence agency. But as so often in politics, we are left with the lesser, still needed reckoning at hand.

And in that, of course, the larger issue beyond Plame is the Bush regime's Big Lie behind the invasion of Iraq, in which the phantom Nigerien yellowcake was an important malignant element. No government since World War II has more blatantly invented the pretext for waging a war of aggression. The Rove and Libby collusion only begins to peel away the layers of the crime. Rice is the next skein to be pulled.

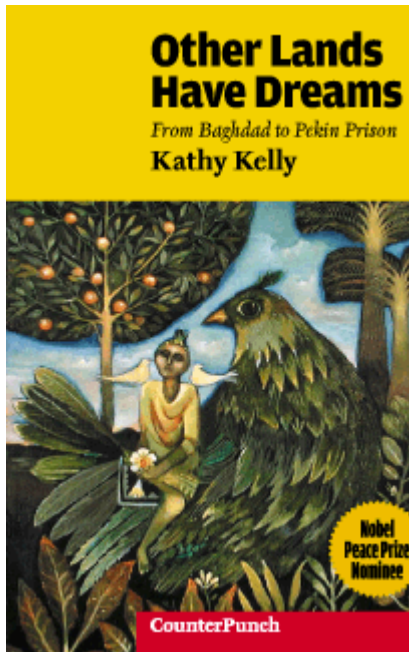
Her manifest failures in the fateful months before 9/11 in meeting the principal responsibilities of the National Security Advisor—the sheer incompetence and shallowness that left so much intelligence uncoordinated, so much neglected or misunderstood—should have been enough to have run her from public office long ago, of course, were it not for her hold on this tragically flawed president, and her deplorable immunity amid the chronic political cowardice of both the Democrats and the media.

Now, however, her role in the Plame scandal cannot be ignored or excused. She alone among senior officials was knowing and complicitous at every successive stage of the great half-baked yellow cake fraud. She alone was the White House peer—and in national security matters the superior—to Rove and Libby, who never could have acted without her collusion in peddling Plame's identity. She as much as anyone had a stake in smearing Wilson by any and all means at hand. If Rove and Libby are to be held criminally or at least politically accountable for a breach of national security, our "mushroom cloud" secretary of state should certainly be in the dock with them.

(This article owes a primary debt to the ground-breaking research of Professor Gary Leupp of Tufts University in his "Faith-Based Intelligence," CounterPunch.org, July 26, 2003.)

Roger Morris was Senior Staff on the National Security Council under both Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, until resigning over the invasion of Cambodia. Morris is the author of *Partners in Power: the Clintons and Their America* and with Sally Denton *The Money and the Power: the Making of Las Vegas*. He is completing *Shadows of the Eagle*, a history of US policy and covert interventions in the Middle East and South Asia over the past half-century, forthcoming from Alfred Knopf. Morris can be reached at: rpmbook@gmail.com

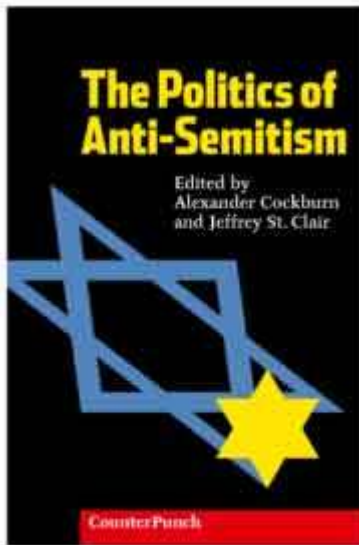
This article originally appeared on the Green Institute GP360 web site, egp360.net.



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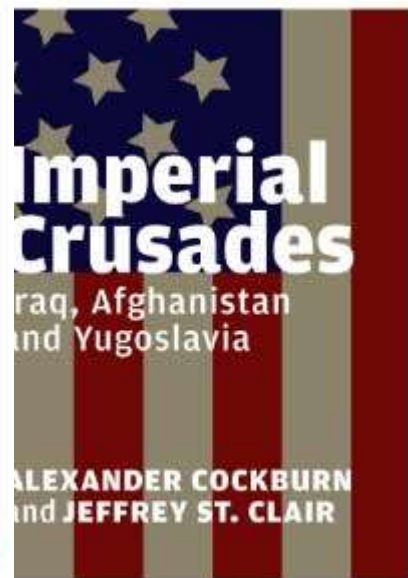


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Imperial Crusades

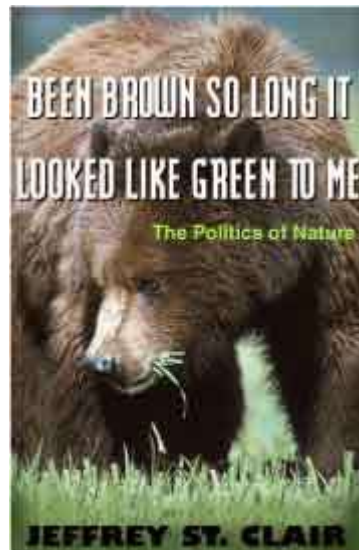
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