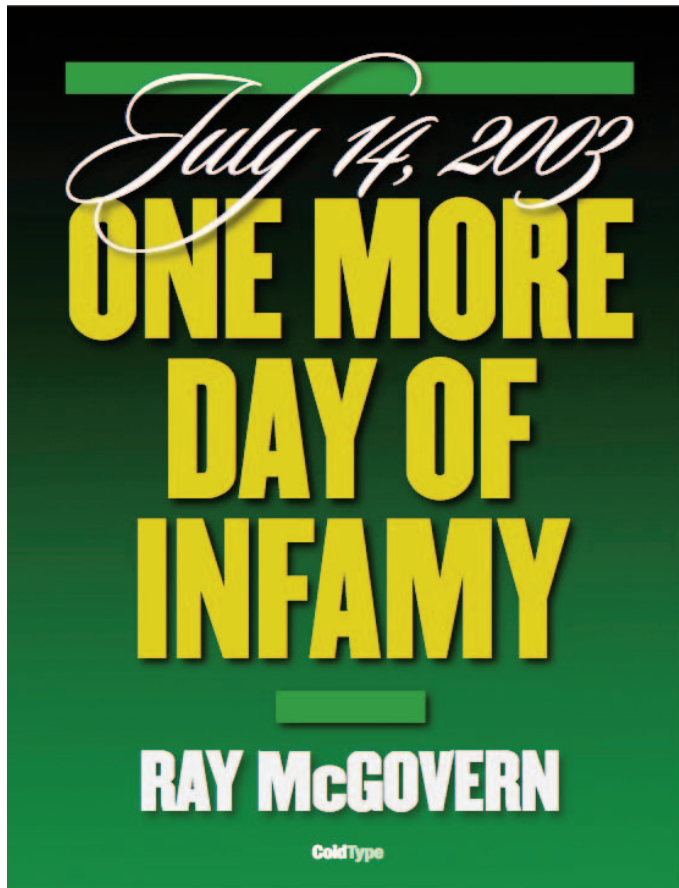


July 14, 2003

**ONE MORE
DAY OF
INFAMY**

RAY McGOVERN

ColdType



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those tracking the long train of abuses and usurpations of a modern-day George who would be King and his eminence grise behind the throne, July 14 has a resonance far beyond the fireworks of Bastille Day. Four loosely related events on that same day four years ago throw revealing light on key ingredients of the debacle in Iraq.

First, on July 14, 2003 the Washington Post and other papers carried a column by Robert Novak titled “Mission to Niger,” in which he set out to do the White House’s bidding by disparaging former ambassador Joseph Wilson and punishing him by making it impossible for his wife, Valerie Plame, to continue working in her chosen (covert) profession. The White House offensive against Wilson had been in the planning stage for several months. Novak’s column was, in effect, the first shot in a sustained, rapid-fire volley aimed at neutralizing Wilson and deterring other potential truth-tellers who might be tempted to follow his example.

The former ambassador had spent several days in the African country of Niger at the CIA’s behest to investigate a dubious report in which Vice President Dick Cheney had taken inordinate interest – a strange story that Iraq was seeking to acquire yellowcake uranium from Niger. For substantive reasons, serious intelligence analysts had judged the report false on its face, well before they learned it was based on forged documents.

But the vice president had taken quite a shine to it. As a result, in February 2002 four-star Marine General Carlton Fulford, Jr. (then deputy commander of the United States European Command with purview over most of Africa) and Ambassador Wilson made separate journeys to Niger to investigate the report. They both found it spurious. Hence, they and U.S. ambassador to Niger, Barbro Owens-Kirkpatrick, were amazed when President George W. Bush used the same cockamamie report in his state-of-the union address on January 28, 2003 to help build a case for attacking Iraq.

After confirming that Bush was using the same dubious “evidence” and after attempting in vain to get the White House to correct the record, Wilson went public on July 6, 2002 with an op-ed in The New York Times titled “What I Didn’t Find

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in Africa.” This brought White House wrath down on him. Cheney and his then-chief of staff, Irv Lewis “Scooter” Libby, went on the offensive, throwing friendly journalists like Novak into the fray. Novak’s July 14 column reflected Cheney’s neuralgic reaction not only to Wilson’s New York Times piece, but also to his July 6 remark to the Washington Post that the administration’s use of that bogus report “begs the question regarding what else they are lying about.” So un-ambassadorial. But Wilson was angry – and with good reason.

Lying the country into war

Reflecting the concern driving the White House counteroffensive, Novak wrote that the administration’s “mistake” in using the Iraq-Niger report “led the Democrats ever closer to saying the president lied the country into war.” That concern, coupled with the priority need to protect the vice president, showed through in the defensive tone of Novak’s protestation that it was “not just Vice President Dick Cheney” who had asked the CIA to look into the report.

Wilson’s op-ed forced the White House to acknowledge that the spurious Iraq-Niger report should have found no place in Bush’s state-of-the-union address. Then-White House spokesman, Ari Fleischer, while packing his bags to leave that post, took time to memorize the main talking point for use with reporters. Without even being asked about Cheney’s role, Fleischer was quick to offer instant, gratuitous insistence that the vice president was not guilty of anything. At the same time, then-CIA director George Tenet did his awkward best to absolve Cheney of any responsibility for giving the Iraq-Niger story more legs and credence than, by any objective measure, it deserved.

That this was a matter of protesting too much can be seen in Libby’s Herculean effort earlier in the year to crank the Iraq-Niger story – as well as a host of other far-fetched charges against Iraq – into then-secretary of state Colin Powell’s embarrassing speech at the UN on February 5, 2003. While Powell let himself be browbeaten into using much of the spurious material urged on him by Libby, the Iraq-Niger fairy tale had long since taken on an acrid smell. Besides, Powell’s own intelligence analysts had branded the report “highly dubious” and, for once, he listened.

In the end, Powell decided to throw virtually everything but the kitchen sink into his UN speech condemning Saddam Hussein. The kitchen sink was the Iraq-Niger report. When asked why he did not include that story, when President Bush had featured it with such solemnity just a week before in his state-of-the-union address, Powell damned it with faint praise, publicly describing the report as “not totally outrageous.”

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White House officials calculated correctly that a four-star Marine general, even a retired one, could be counted on to keep his mouth shut rather than expose his former commander-in-chief in a bald-faced lie. But they “misunderestimated” Joseph Wilson, who turned out to be a man of substantial integrity and courage. Wilson saw the Iraq-Niger report as a consequential lie – a monstrous one, in that it greased the skids for launching a war of aggression, condemned at the post-WWII Nuremberg Tribunal as the “supreme international crime.” And rather than grouse about it with knowing smirk, cigar, and sherry in Georgetown drawing rooms, as is the more familiar practice among retired ambassadors, Wilson went public.

Swords drawn

And so on July 14, 2003, Robert Novak slipped into his familiar role as “conservative” pundit and launched the White House counteroffensive. As for friends Cheney and Libby, the best idea they could come up with to divert the focus from themselves was to spread the word that Wilson’s wife, a CIA employee, had sent him to Niger on some kind of boondoggle. (I know; I know. Please stop laughing, those of you who have been in Niger. And Wilson performed his investigation gratis).

House pundits and other co-travelers then eked almost four years of mileage out of the next White House diversion; namely, the claim that Valerie Plame was not really under cover. Under strong White House pressure to delay, top CIA functionaries were in no hurry to set that record straight and avoided doing so until March 14, 2007, when the patience of Henry Waxman (D-California), Chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, ran out. CIA Director Michael Hayden confirmed to Waxman that Plame had been under cover until Robert Novak blew that cover; that Plame had been a covert employee, whose status with the CIA was classified information. Waxman has made that public. But (surprise, surprise) this has not stopped “neo-conservative” drummers from continuing to beat drums of doubt.

Cheney’s chief of staff, “Scooter” Libby, agreed to take the hit and was convicted of perjury and obstruction of justice. In his closing argument, special counsel Patrick Fitzgerald made it clear that the role of Vice President Dick Cheney in blowing Valerie Plame’s cover remains the key mystery, and that Libby’s lies ensured that Cheney’s role would remain a mystery. Fitzgerald could hardly have made this key finding clearer:

“There is a cloud over the vice president.... And that cloud remains because this defendant obstructed justice”... There is a cloud over the White House. Don’t you

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think the FBI and the grand jury and the American people are entitled to straight answers?”

Libby was convicted, and it was widely expected that President Bush would pardon him. Not yet. A pardon would have allowed Fitzgerald to put Libby back on the stand having forfeited the advantage of being able to plead Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination. So the Bush/Cheney lawyers advised the president to defer a pardon until later and simply commute Libby's 30-month jail sentence. The president commuted it to zero before Libby spent one day in jail.

According to Michael Isikoff, veteran investigative journalist for Newsweek, there was no doubt where Cheney stood on the need to spare Libby before the rigors of prison might prompt him to sing about Cheney's and Bush's own knowledge of and involvement in what Libby had been doing. And there was no doubt about the powerful influence the vice president had on the commutation decision. One White House adviser told Isikoff, "I'm not sure Bush had a choice; if he didn't act, it would have caused a fracture with the vice president." Interesting. So who is in charge over there?

So Libby walks, and Bush and Cheney remain protected precisely because, as Fitzgerald put it, "Libby threw sand in the eyes of the FBI and grand jurors, obstructed justice, and stole the truth from the judicial system."

Out of a similarly cynical past, Ollie North's reported words come immediately to mind: "Is this a great country or what?" In any case, this new Donnybrook started with Novak's column exactly four years ago, on July 14, 2003.

Second, that same day we Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) sent a formal Memorandum to President Bush, recommending strongly that he "ask for Cheney's immediate resignation." This unprecedented appeal even caught the eye of the corporate press – the more so, inasmuch as our Memorandum for the President reviewed some of the deceit engineered by the vice president in conjuring up a rationale for war on Iraq and leading the cheerleading for it.

We noted that Cheney, skilled at preemption (and an expert on clouds), had stolen a march on his vacationing colleagues by launching, in a major speech on August 26, 2002, a meretricious campaign to persuade Congress and the American people that Iraq was about to acquire nuclear weapons. That campaign mushroomed, literally, in early October, with Bush and his senior advisers raising the specter of a "mushroom cloud" over American cities. (Never mind how Iraq could mount such a strike with no nuclear weapons and no delivery systems with enough range.) To any serious onlooker, the synthetic mushroom clouds bore the label "made in the office of the vice president."

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And poor George Tenet. In his recent book he complains that Cheney's claim on August 26, 2002 that Iraq would acquire nuclear weapons "fairly soon" did not square with the intelligence community's assessment that Iraq could not do so until the end of the decade, if then. The former CIA director adds, "I was surprised when I read about Cheney's assertion, 'Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction.'" Tenet whines that the vice president did not send him an advance copy of the speech. Not one to cause trouble, the malleable CIA director quickly got over it, and told CIA analysts to compose the kind of National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that would provide ex post facto support for Cheney's bogus assertions and help deceive Congress into approving war.

Tenet believes President Bush, too, was blindsided by Cheney, and writes lamely, "I should have told the vice president privately that, in my view, his speech had gone too far...and not let silence imply agreement."

But wait, George. You were, by law, the president's principal intelligence adviser. Did it not occur to you to fulfill your statutory responsibility and tell the president what was going on? At very least, you might have summoned the courage to resist Cheney's pressure for a dishonest NIE – the one you signed on October 1, 2002 – to support an unnecessary war with the entirely predictable consequences the world is now experiencing.

Afraid of being cut from the White House team? Were you not smart enough to recognize this as, in any case, inevitable? And, please, you are very familiar with Georgetown University's propensity for hiring celebrities, including war criminals like Douglas Feith. There would always be a large soft chair there for you. Ironically, that's where you now sit anyway – having brought disgrace to the profession of intelligence analysis and fitting right in with the Feiths of this world.

They knew all too well

In fact Cheney, as well as Tenet, knew very well that Cheney's assertions were lies. How? Saddam's son-in-law, Hussein Kamel, whom Saddam had put in charge of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, as well as missile development, told us when he defected in mid-1995 that all (that's right, ALL) such weapons had been destroyed at his order in July 1991 after the Gulf War.

And not only that. In mid-2002, Iraq's foreign minister, Naji Sabri, whom my former CIA colleagues had recruited in place, was telling us the same thing. When CIA operations officers, justifiably proud at having recruited Sabri, briefed the president and his senior advisers on what Sabri had said, they were astonished to be treated like skunks at a picnic – shocked to experience first hand that their hard won intelligence was decidedly not welcome. They had used almost every trick in the thick

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book of tradecraft to “turn” the foreign minister and get him working for us. Now they were being told that the White House wanted no further reporting from him: “This isn’t about Intel anymore. This is about regime change.”

Astonished Tenet was not. From the documentary evidence in the authoritative Downing Street Minutes we know that he told the chief of British intelligence, Richard Dearlove, during his visit to CIA headquarters on July 20, 2002, that the intelligence was being “fixed” around the policy. That is precisely what Dearlove reported back to then-prime minister Tony Blair and his senior national security officials at Downing Street three days later.

Meanwhile, former UN inspectors like Scott Ritter were saying that some 90 percent of the WMD Iraq earlier possessed had been destroyed – some during the Gulf War in 1991, but most as a result of the inspections conducted by the UN. No one had seen any of the “missing” ten percent, and even freshmen analysts found it unprofessional to apply to serious intelligence work either the newly introduced concept of “faith-based analysis” or, worse still, the Rumsfeld Theorem: “The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

The intelligence from Hussein Kamel and then-Iraqi foreign minister Ali Sabri, sources with the best access imaginable and proven track records for reliability, was suppressed in favor of “evidence” like the Iraq-Niger report. When finally (but still before the war started) US officials were forced to concede that the Iraq-Niger information was based on a forgery, lawmakers like Congressman Henry Waxman (D-CA) hit the roof. But it was too late.

On March 16, 2003, three days before President Bush let slip the dogs of war, NBC’s Tim Russert of Face the Nation braced Cheney with the assertion by the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that Saddam Hussein did not have a nuclear program. Cheney strongly disagreed and claimed support for his view from the CIA and other parts of the intelligence community. He even ratcheted up his bogus assessment of Iraq’s nuclear capability: “We believe he [Saddam] has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.”

“We?” Perhaps Lynne Cheney was on board with that judgment. But there were precious few, if any, other true believers. Indeed, the nuclear claim was simply fabricated. Contrary to Cheney’s claims, the most knowledgeable analysts – those who knew Iraq and nuclear weapons – scoffed at Cheney’s brand of faith-based intelligence analysis.

In our July 14, 2003 Memorandum to President Bush urging him to demand Cheney’s resignation, we warned the president that if he did not, intelligence analysts would conclude that the best way to climb the ladder of success is to acquiesce

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in the cooking of their judgments, since neither senior nor junior officials would ever be held accountable.

Ignored testimony

Third: On July 14, 2003 Congressman Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), frustrated by all the deceit regarding WMD, had a room reserved for 11:00 AM in the Rayburn Office Building for a briefing on weapons of mass destruction, if any, in Iraq. Star witness was Lt. Col. Andrew Wilkie, formerly a senior intelligence analyst working in Australia's CIA equivalent, the Office of National Assessments (ONA). Wilkie was the only allied intelligence officer to refuse to take part in the dishonest charade leading to war on Iraq. He quit, loudly, nine days before the war, when it became clear that his government had decided to take part in launching an unprovoked war based on "intelligence" he knew to be specious.

Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity had invited Wilkie to Washington (and had passed the hat around for his airfare and hotel.) At the Rayburn Building briefing, Wilkie gave a low-key but devastating account of how he viewed from his vantage point the corruption of intelligence to "justify" war on Iraq. He stressed that, in view of the evidence he saw, he could not escape the conclusion that war was totally unnecessary, partly because options short of war had not been exhausted. Wilkie accused his government of taking a willing part in fabricating the case for war:

"The claims about Iraq cooperating actively with al-Qaeda were obviously nonsense. As was the Government's reference to Iraq seeking uranium in Africa, despite the fact that the Office of National Assessments, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade all knew the Niger story was fraudulent. This was critical information. It beggars belief that ONA knew the story was discredited but didn't advise the prime minister; Defense knew but didn't tell the Defense Minister, and Foreign Affairs knew but didn't tell the Foreign Minister.

"Please remember the Government was also receiving detailed assessments on the U.S. in which it was made very clear the U.S. was intent on invading Iraq for more important reasons than WMD and terrorism. Hence, all this talk about WMD and terrorism was hollow."

Wilkie's testimony was electrifying. And three months later Wilkie was vindicated when the Australian Senate, in a rare move, publicly censured the government for misleading the public in justifying sending Australian troops off to war. But on that day, July 14, 2003 in the Rayburn Building, 14 TV cameras, including those of the corporate media, were whirring away, recording it all for history and truth. Would this be a breakthrough enabling information-deprived TV viewers to access some fact-

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based intelligence about how the U.S. got into the quagmire in Iraq?

Glued to the TV that afternoon and evening, we could find no coverage on any channel. Zero. And it was a slow news day, as the pundits had not yet grasped the significance of the Robert Novak column. However disappointed, Wilkie was entirely professional about the experience. He assured us he had not been so naive to believe that by loudly quitting ONA he could stop the juggernaut toward war. And he was not surprised to find the US media as domesticated as the media in Australia.

To VIPS, though, Wilkie was an inspiration. What was clear to him was that he had a moral duty to expose the deliberate deception in which his government, together with the U.S. and U.K., had become engaged. And, though he had to endure the customary character assassination back home, he found vindication of a sort in the subsequent censure of his government by the Australian Senate. We were also pleased that Andrew Wilkie agreed to join Katharine Gun, formerly of British intelligence, Major Frank Grevil, formerly of Danish intelligence, and former U.K. ambassador Craig Murray as part of the “coalition” contingent of VIPS.

Revisionist history

Fourth (as if further proof of duplicity were needed): on July 14, 2003, President Bush, during a Q and A session with reporters after an Oval Office meeting with then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, provided this remarkable version of why Saddam Hussein was to blame for the invasion:

“We gave them a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he [Saddam] wouldn’t let them in. And, therefore, after a reasonable request, we decided to remove him from power, along with other nations [sic], so as to make sure he was not a threat to the United States and our friends and allies in the region.”

Compare that statement to that of Kofi Annan on March 17, 2003, announcing his reluctant withdrawal of UN inspectors from Iraq, made necessary by the imminent shock, awe, and invasion:

“Yesterday [we] got information from the United States authorities that it would be prudent not to leave our staff in the region. I have just informed the Council that we will withdraw the inspectors.”

Someone ought to tell the president that his version about Saddam Hussein refusing to allow the inspectors in was Plan A; i.e., the plan worked out with the British to “wrong foot” Saddam into such refusal by demanding the most intrusive inspection regime in modern history – the kind that Saddam would be sure to reject (or so it was thought). Washington and London would then have the casus belli after

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which they had been lusting. (Plan A is fully described in official British documents leaked to and published by the London press.)

Please, quickly, someone remind the president that, as things turned out, Plan A was foiled; that Saddam outfoxed London and Washington by acceding to a very rigorous inspection regime and that in early 2003 intrusive inspections, and one-on-one interviews with Iraqi scientists, were being conducted without serious interference (but, alas, with no success in finding WMD). Please remind President Bush that, nonetheless, someone who worked for him and Cheney abruptly told Annan to pull out the inspectors two days before the attack on Iraq. Remind Bush that he and Blair had to default to Plan B; i.e., get the UN inspectors out of Iraq before it became even clearer that, if any WMD were eventually found, they would certainly not be of such quality or quantity as to pose a serious threat.

In other words, Plan B was war without pretense. No one knew that better than Kofi Annan. So it was difficult to watch him squirm on July 14, 2003, as Bush played fast and loose with the facts...as the president continues to do, without challenge from the corporate media. To wit, at his press conference on July 12, 2007:

Q. Mr. President, you started this war, a war of your choosing.... Thousands and thousands are dead...you brought the al-Qaeda into Iraq.

A. Actually, I was hoping to solve the Iraqi issue diplomatically. That's why I...worked with the United Nations Security Council, which unanimously passed a resolution that said disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. That was the message, the clear message to Saddam Hussein. He chose the course...It was his decision to make.... I firmly believe the world is better off without Saddam Hussein.



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