

CHEENEY'S

BY JIM LOBE



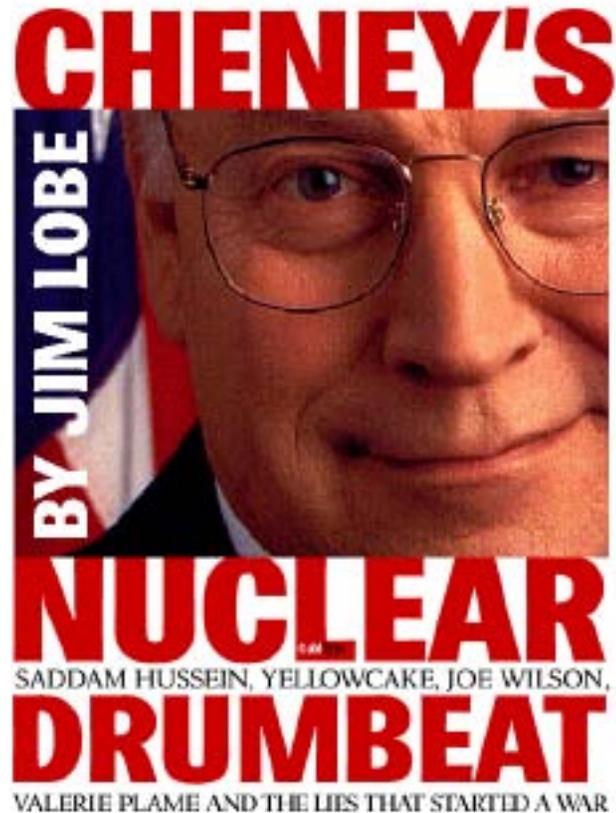
NUCLEAR

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SADDAM HUSSEIN, YELLOWCAKE, JOE WILSON,

DRUMBEAT

VALERIE PLAME AND THE LIES THAT STARTED A WAR



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In the wake of the release of the Downing Street Memo, there has been much talk about how the Bush administration “fixed” its intelligence to create a war fever in the U.S. in the many months leading up to the invasion of Iraq. What still remains to be fully grasped, however, is the wider pattern of propaganda that underlay the administration’s war effort – in particular, the overlapping networks of relationships that tied together so many key figures in the administration, the neoconservatives and their allies on the outside, and parts of the media in what became a seamless, boundary-less operation to persuade the American people that Saddam Hussein represented an intolerable threat to their national security.

Vice President Cheney, for instance, is widely credited with having launched the administration’s nuclear drumbeat to war in Iraq via a series of speeches he gave, beginning in August 2002, vividly accusing Saddam of having an active nuclear weapons program. As it happens though, he started beating the nuclear drum with vigor significantly

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earlier than most remember; indeed at a time that was particularly curious given its proximity to the famous mission former Ambassador Joseph Wilson took on behalf of the CIA.

Cheney's initial public attempts to raise the nuclear nightmare did not in fact begin with his August 2002 barrage of nuclear speeches, but rather five months before that, just after his return from a tour of Arab capitals where he had tried in vain to gin up local support for military action against Iraq. Indeed, the specific date on which his campaign was launched was March 24, 2002, when, on return from the Middle East, he appeared on three major Sunday public-affairs television programs bearing similar messages on each. On CNN's "Late Edition," he offered the following comment on Saddam:

"This is a man of great evil, as the President said. And he is actively pursuing nuclear weapons at this time."

On NBC's "Meet the Press," he said:

"[T]here's good reason to believe that he continues to aggressively pursue the development of a nuclear weapon. Now will he have one in a year, five years? I can't be that precise."

And on CBS's "Face the Nation":

"The notion of a Saddam Hussein with his great oil wealth, with his inventory that he already has of biological and chemical weapons, that he might actually acquire a nuclear weapon is, I think, a frightening proposition for anybody who thinks about it. And part of my task out there was to go out and begin the dialogue with our friends to make sure they were thinking about it."

Why do I think that Cheney moment, that particular barrage of statements about Saddam's supposed nuclear program, remains so significant today, in light of the Plame affair?

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For one thing, that Sunday's drum roll of nuclear claims indicated that the "intelligence and facts" were already being "fixed around the policy" four months before Sir Richard Dearlove, head of Britain's MI6, reached that conclusion, as recorded in the Downing Street Memo. It's worth asking, then: On what basis could Cheney make such assertions with such evident certainty, nearly six months before, on September 7, 2002, Judith Miller and Michael Gordon of the New York Times first broke a story about how Iraq had ordered "specially designed aluminum tubes," supposedly intended as components for centrifuges to enrich uranium for Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons program. Even five months later, after all, those tubes would still be the only real piece of evidence for the existence of an Iraqi nuclear program offered by Colin Powell in his presentation to the UN Security Council.

Indeed, on March 24 when Cheney made his initial allegations about an Iraqi nuclear program, we know of only two pieces of "evidence" available to him that might conceivably have supported his charges:

- 1) Testimony from Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, a "defector" delivered up by Ahmad Chalabi's exile organization the Iraqi National Congress (INC), and enthusiastically recounted by the Times' Miller on December 20, 2001 (although rejected as a fabrication by both the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency). Al-Haideri claimed to have personally worked on renovations of secret facilities for biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons in underground wells, private villas, and under the Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad as recently as 2000.
- 2) The infamous forged Niger yellowcake documents that, at some point in December, 2001 or January, 2002 somehow appeared on Cheney's desk, supposedly through the Defense Intelligence

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Agency or the CIA, though accounts differ on the precise route it took from Italian military intelligence (SISMI) to the Vice President's office. It was these and related documents that spurred Cheney to ask for additional information, a request that would eventually result in Wilson's trip to Niger in late February, which, of course, set the Plame case in motion. Wilson's conclusion – that there was nothing to the story – would echo the conclusions of both U.S. ambassador to Niger, Barbro Owens-Kirkpatrick and Marine Gen. Carlton W. Fulford Jr., then-deputy commander of the U.S. European Command who was also sent to Niger in February. A couple of days after his return to Washington, Wilson would be debriefed by the CIA.

How far up their respective chains of command Wilson's and Fulford's reports made it remains a significant mystery to this day. Cheney's office, which reportedly had reminded the CIA of the Vice President's interest in the agency's follow-up efforts even while Wilson was in Niger, claims never to have heard about either report. We do know that Fulford's report made it up to Joint Chiefs Chairman Richard Myers whose spokesman, however, told the Washington Post in July 2003, shortly after Wilson went public on the New York Times op-ed page, that the general had "no recollection" of it and so no idea whether it continued on to the White House or Cheney's office.

Meanwhile, Cheney, whose initial curiosity set off this flurry of travel and reporting, appeared to have lost interest in the results by the time he left on a Middle Eastern trip in mid-March; at least, no information has come to light so far indicating that he ever got back to the CIA or anyone else with further questions or requests on the matter of whether Saddam had actually been in the market for Niger yellow-cake uranium ore. Yet, within four days of his return to Washington, there he was on the Sunday TV shows assuring the nation's viewers

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that Iraq was indeed “actively pursuing nuclear weapons at this time.”

Did he then acquire new information, perhaps from Iraq’s neighbors, during his trip to the Middle East, or had he simply decided by then that the “facts” really had to be “fixed” – or more precisely in Wilson’s case, ignored altogether – if the American people were to be persuaded that war was the only solution to the problem of Saddam Hussein? In any event, one can only describe his sudden lack of curiosity combined with his public certainty on the subject as, well... curious.

That Cheney did indeed make the initial request to follow up on the Niger yellowcake report appears now to be beyond dispute, and it also draws attention to another little-noted curiosity of the Plame case – the knowledge and role of Clifford May, ex-New York Timesman, recent head of communications for the Republican National Committee (1997-2001), and president of the ultra-neo-conservative Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD). In an article at National Review Online (NRO) on September 29, 2003 (as pressure was building on John Ashcroft to appoint a special prosecutor in the case), he boasted that he had been informed by an unnamed former government official of Wilson’s wife’s identity long before her outing as a CIA operative by Robert Novak, on July 14, 2003, and so had assumed that her identity (and relationship to Wilson) had been an “open secret” among the Washington cognoscenti. He has subsequently told the Nation magazine’s David Corn among others that he was interviewed by the FBI but has never been asked to testify on the subject before Special Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald’s grand jury.

In that NRO article, he also noted that he “was the first to publicly question the credibility of Mr. Wilson” following the ambassador’s Times op-ed. Indeed, only five days after that op-ed appeared, on July 11, 2003, NRO published May’s first attack on Wilson – many more

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would follow right up to the present – depicting the ambassador as a “pro-Saudi, leftist partisan with an axe to grind.” The article – and this is the curious part – included the following passage: “Mr. Wilson was sent to Niger by the CIA to verify a U.S. intelligence report about the sale of yellowcake – because Vice President Dick Cheney requested it, because Cheney had doubts about the validity of the intelligence report.” This phrasing is fascinating because it purports to know Cheney’s subjective motivation, and the motivation ascribed to him – that he had “doubts” about the Niger story – conflicts with everything we’ve otherwise come to understand about why he asked for the Niger story to be investigated. It hints, certainly, at how consciously Cheney would indeed fix the facts when it came to Saddam’s nuclear doings.

Given this tidbit of curious information hidden in May’s piece, it’s important to know what former government officials might not only have told May about Plame’s identity but possibly about Cheney’s real thoughts on the subject of Saddam’s nuclear program – presuming, that is, that Cheney himself or Scooter Libby, his chief of staff, was not the source. Among May’s board of advisers at FDD were several former government officials, a number of whom were known to be very close to Cheney and Libby as well as to Pentagon hawks like Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith. They included Richard Perle, head of the Center for Security Policy Frank Gaffney, former CIA Director James Woolsey, and Weekly Standard Editor Bill Kristol. All of them played starring roles in efforts to tie Saddam’s Iraq to al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks as well as in raising the nuclear bogeyman well before Cheney did so on March 24, 2002.

In fact, a close examination of how the pre-war propaganda machine worked shows that it was led by the neocons and their asso-

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ciates outside the administration, particularly those on the Defense Policy Board (DPB) like Perle, Woolsey, and Kenneth “Cakewalk” Adelman (and Judith Miller of the Times) who had long championed the cause of Ahmad Chalabi and his Iraqi exile organization, the INC, and were also close to the Office of Special Plans that Douglas Feith had set up in the Pentagon to cherry-pick intelligence. They would invariably be the first to float new “evidence” against Hussein (such as the infamous supposed Prague meeting of 9/11 conspirator Mohammed Atta with an Iraqi intelligence officer). They would then tie this “evidence” into ongoing arguments for “regime change” in Iraq that would often appear in the Times or elsewhere as news and subsequently be picked up by senior administration officials and fed into the drumbeat of war commentary pouring out of official Washington.

It is by now perfectly clear that the neo-conservatives on the outside were aided by like-minded journalists, particularly the Times’ Miller – then the only “straight” reporter on the client list of neoconservative heavyweights and columnists represented by Benador Associates – and media outlets, especially the Wall Street Journal’s editorial page and Fox News. Working hand-in-glove with the war hawks on the inside, they created a powerful and persuasive machine to convince the public that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq represented an imminent and potentially cataclysmic threat to the United States that had to be eliminated once and for all. The failure to investigate and demonstrate precisely how seamlessly this web of intra- and extra-administration connections worked in the run-up to the war – including perhaps in the concoction of the Niger yellowcake documents, as some former intelligence officials have recently suggested – has been perhaps the most shocking example of the mainstream media’s failure to connect the dots (the reporters from Knight-Ridder excepted.)

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In that context, it is worth noting the first moment that the specter of an advanced Iraqi nuclear-weapons program was propelled into post-9/11 public consciousness. On December 20, 2001, the New York Times published Judith Miller's version of the sensational charges made by Chalabi-aided defector al-Haideri. Her report was immediately seized on by former CIA Director and DPB member Woolsey, (who had just spent many weeks trying desperately but unsuccessfully to confirm the alleged Mohammed Atta meeting in Prague that would have linked Saddam to the 9/11 attackers). Appearing that same evening on CNBC's "Hard Ball," he breathlessly told Chris Matthews, "I think this is a very important story. I give Judy Miller a lot of credit for getting it. This defector sounds quite credible." Within a week, he was telling the Washington Post that the case that Iraq was developing nuclear weapons was a "slam dunk." (Now, there's a familiar expression!) He continued confidently, "There is so much evidence with respect to his development of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles... that I consider this point beyond dispute."

One week later, Perle weighed in with an op-ed in the New York Times in which he also referred to Miller's work, albeit without naming her. "With each passing day, [Saddam] comes closer to his dream of a nuclear arsenal," he wrote.

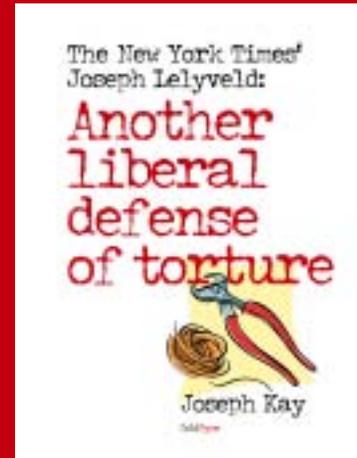
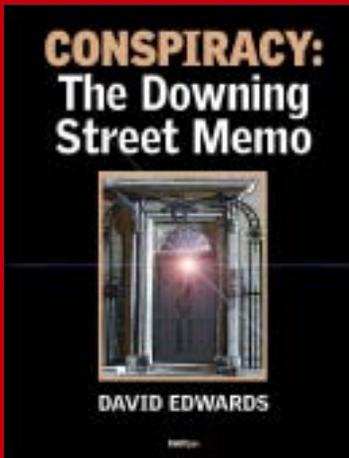
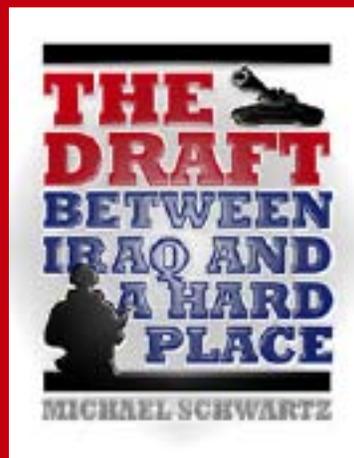
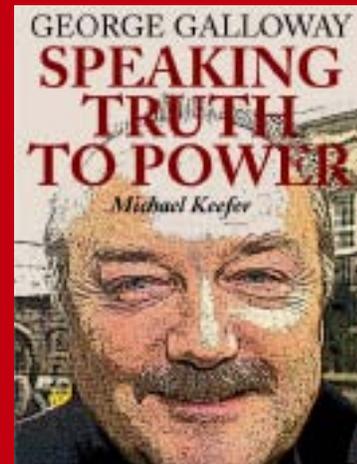
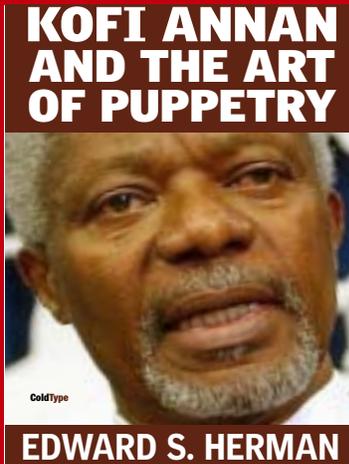
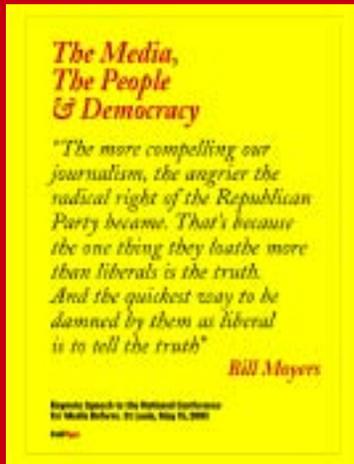
"We know he has a clandestine program, spread over many hidden sites, to enrich Iraqi natural uranium [Niger's yellowcake perhaps?] to weapons grade. We know he has the designs and the technical staff to fabricate nuclear weapons once he obtains the material. And intelligence sources know he is in the market, with plenty of money, for both weapons material and components as well as finished nuclear weapons. How close is he? We do not know. Two years, three years, tomorrow even? We simply do not know, and any intelligence esti-

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mate that would cause us to relax would be about as useful as the ones that missed his nuclear program in the early 1990's or failed to predict the Indian nuclear test in 1998 or to gain even a hint of the Sept. 11 attack.”

It was a new argument being taken out for a test run, one that would become painfully familiar in the months that followed. At about that time, or shortly thereafter, a report about the mysterious Niger documents landed on Cheney's desk and the rest would be history.

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