

# July 14, 2003: A Day of Infamy

**From the Archive:** July 14 is a French holiday celebrating the 1789 liberation of the Bastille prison in Paris, leading to the overthrow of the monarchy. But there were less auspicious events connected to that date in 2003, during the autocratic presidency of George W. Bush, ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern wrote in 2007.

By Ray McGovern (Originally published July 14, 2007)

For 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 this 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 disparage former Ambassador Joseph Wilson and punish him by destroying the undercover life of his wife, Valerie Plame.

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 dissuading other potential truth-tellers tempted to follow his example.

The former ambassador had spent several days in Niger, at the CIA's behest, to investigate a dubious report in which Vice President Dick Cheney had taken inordinate interest, the strange story that Iraq was seeking yellowcake uranium in Niger.

From the outset, intelligence analysts had deemed 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., who was then deputy commander of the United States European Command (EUCOM) with purview over huge swaths of Africa, and former Ambassador Wilson took separate journeys to Niger to investigate the report.

They both found it spurious. Almost a year later, they and U.S. Ambassador to Niger Barbro Owens-Kirkpatrick were thus amazed when President George W. Bush used that same cockamamie report in his State of the Union Address on Jan. 28, 2003, to help build a case for attacking Iraq.

After confirming that Bush was using the same story and after attempting in vain to get the White House to issue a correction, Wilson went public on July 6, 2003, with a *New York Times* op-ed titled "What I Didn't Find in Africa."

This brought White House wrath down upon him. Cheney and his then-chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, went on the offensive, using friendly journalists like Novak, whose 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 citing of that bogus report "begs the question regarding what else they are lying about."

### **Lying About War**

Reflecting the concern driving the White House counteroffensive, Novak wrote that the administration's "mistake" in using the Iraq-Niger report "has led the Democrats ever closer to saying the president lied the country into war."

The primary concern of the White House 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 report should have had no place in Bush's State of the Union Address. As he packed his bags to leave his post as White House spokesman, Ari Fleischer had memorized the essential talking point to reporters.

Without even being asked about Cheney's role, Fleischer was quick to offer gratuitous insistence that the Vice President was not guilty of anything. Also in July 2003, former CIA director George Tenet also did his awkward best to absolve Cheney of any responsibility for giving the Iraq-Niger story more credence than 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 farfetched charges against Iraq, into then-Secretary of State Colin Powell's embarrassing speech at the UN on Feb. 5, 2003.

While Powell let himself be bamboozled 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 all but the kitchen sink into his UN speech condemning Saddam Hussein, but avoided the Niger report like the plague. When asked why he did not cite the Iraq-Niger fable when President Bush

had featured it with such solemnity just a week before in his State of the Union Address, Powell resorted to faint praise, describing the report as “not totally outrageous.”

White House officials calculated correctly that a four-star general, though retired, would 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 integrity and considerable courage.

Wilson saw the Iraq-Niger report as a consequential lie, a monstrous lie in that it greased the skids for launching a war of aggression, condemned at the Nuremburg Tribunal as the “supreme international crime.”

And rather than grouse about it privately over sherry in Georgetown drawing rooms, as is the usual custom with retired ambassadors, Wilson went public.

### **On the Offensive**

And so on July 14, 2003, Robert Novak slipped into his accustomed role of “conservative” pundit and launched the White House counteroffensive.

The best Cheney and Libby 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 (please stop laughing, those of you who have been in Niger).

The regime pundits then eked almost four years of mileage out of the next diversion; namely, denying that Valerie Plame was really undercover.

Under White House pressure, the CIA was slow to set the record straight and avoided doing so until March 14, 2007, when the patience of Rep. 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 undercover until Robert Novak blew that cover: that Plame had been a covert employee, whose status with the CIA was classified information. Waxman made that public. But (surprise, surprise) “neo-conservative” drummers are still beating the drum of doubt.

“Scooter” Libby agreed to take the hit and was convicted of perjury and obstruction of justice. In his closing argument, special counsel Fitzgerald made it clear that the role of Vice President Cheney in blowing the deep cover status of Valerie Plame 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 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. But a pardon would have allowed Fitzgerald to put Libby back on the stand without the ability to plead Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination. So the Bush/Cheney lawyers advised the president to simply commute Libby's 30-month jail sentence, which he did.

According to Michael Isikoff, veteran journalist for *Newsweek*, there was no doubt where Cheney stood, and what influence he exerted. One of the White House advisers 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.

And 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.”

The Donnybrook started with Novak's column exactly four years ago, on July 14, 2003.

### **Resignation Request**

**Second**, that same day we Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) sent a formal Memorandum to President Bush, recommending that he “ask for Cheney's immediate resignation.”

This unprecedented appeal even caught the eye of the corporate press, since our Memorandum for the President reviewed some of the deceit engineered by the vice president in conjuring up a synthetic rationale for war on Iraq and leading the cheerleading for it.

We noted that Cheney, skilled at preemption, had stolen a march on his vacationing colleagues by launching, in a major speech on Aug. 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 senior advisers raising the specter of a “mushroom cloud” threatening our cities. (Never mind how Iraq could mount such a strike with no nuclear weapons and no delivery systems with enough range.) The synthetic clouds bore the label “made

in the office of the Vice President.”

And poor George Tenet. In his 2007 book he complains that Cheney’s assertion that Iraq would acquire nuclear weapons “fairly soon” did not square with the intelligence community’s assessment that it could not do so until near the end of the decade.

Tenet adds, “I was surprised when I read about Cheney’s assertion that, ‘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 a copy of the speech for clearance. The malleable CIA director quickly got over it, though, 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.

Tenet says he believes that President Bush was also blindsided by Cheney, adding lamely that “I should have told the vice president privately that, in my view, his speech had gone too far...and not let silence imply agreement.” Yes, George; and you should have resisted Cheney’s pressure for a dishonest NIE to support the unnecessary war he was promoting.

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, 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 by the summer of 1991.

In mid-2002, the Iraqi foreign minister, whom my former CIA colleagues had recruited in place, was telling us the same thing.

### **Unwelcome Intel**

When they briefed the President and his senior advisers on this, CIA operations officers were astonished to learn first-hand that this intelligence was unwelcome. These officers, who had used every trick in the book to “turn” the foreign minister and get him working for us, were told that further reporting from this source was not needed: “This isn’t about intel anymore. This is about regime change.”

Astonished Tenet was not. From documentary evidence in the Downing Street Minutes we know that Tenet on July 20, 2002, told the chief of British intelligence that the intelligence was being “fixed” around the policy.

And former UN inspectors like Scott Ritter could verify 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.

The reporting from Hussein Kamel and the Iraqi foreign minister, sources with excellent access, was suppressed in favor of "evidence" like the Iraq-Niger report. When finally U.S. officials were forced to concede that the Iraq-Niger information was based on a forgery, lawmakers like Waxman protested loudly, but too late.

Three days before President Bush let slip the dogs of war, NBC's Tim Russert 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 cited 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 has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons."

We? Maybe his wife Lynne was on board for that judgment; few others believed. Indeed, the whole thing was made out of whole cloth. Contrary to Cheney's claims, the most knowledgeable analysts, those who knew Iraq and nuclear weapons, scoffed at Cheney's faith-based intelligence.

In our July 14, 2003, appeal to President Bush to ask for Cheney's resignation, we warned of the likelihood that intelligence analysts would conclude that the best way to climb the ladder of success is to acquiesce in the cooking of their judgments, since neither senior nor junior officials would ever be held accountable.

### **Ignored Testimony**

**Third:** On July 14, 2003, Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, frustrated by all the deceit, had a room reserved for 11:00 a.m. in the Rayburn House Office Building for a briefing on weapons of mass destruction, if ever any, in Iraq. The star witness was Col. Andrew Wilkie, a senior intelligence analyst from Australia's CIA equivalent, the Office of National Assessments (ONA).

Wilkie was the only allied intelligence officer to refuse to take part in the charade leading to war on Iraq. He quit, loudly, nine days before the war, when it became clear to him 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 invited Wilkie to Washington and 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 he could not escape the conclusion that war was totally unnecessary, because options short of war had not been exhausted. He 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. Would this be a breakthrough enabling TV viewers to learn what the Iraq War was all about? Glued to the TV on the afternoon and evening of July 14, we could find no coverage on any channel. And it was a slow news day.

Wilkie, however disappointed, was entirely professional about the experience. He had not been naive enough to believe that by loudly quitting ONA he could stop the juggernaut toward war. And he was not surprised to find the U.S. media as domesticated as the media in Australia.

To VIPS, 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, in cooperation 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 Australian Senate’s public censure of his government.

## 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 revisionist version of why Saddam Hussein and the Iraqis were at fault for the invasion:

“We gave them a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he wouldn’t let them in. And, therefore, after a reasonable request, we decided to remove him from power, along with other nations, 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 the reluctant withdrawal of UN inspectors from Iraq, made necessary by the imminent U.S. 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 [Iraq] region. I have just informed the Council that we will withdraw the [UN] inspectors.”

Someone ought to remind President Bush 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 “wrongfoot” Saddam into such refusal by demanding a rigorous inspection regime of the kind they thought he would be sure to reject. And the Washington and London would have the *casus belli* after which they were lusting.

Please, someone, remind the President that that ruse didn’t work; that, rather, Saddam outfoxed London and Washington by acceding to very intrusive inspections, that they were going well (but finding no WMD) before Annan was told to withdraw the inspectors just days before the attack on Iraq.

So the allies opted for Plan B: get the UN inspectors out of Iraq before it became still clearer that, if any WMD remained, certainly there was not enough to pose any kind of a threat. In other words, Plan B was war without pretense.

It was hard to watch Kofi Annan squirm as Bush played fast and loose with history. And Bush continued doing it, 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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