

LaRouche Drive Has Created Potential For Cheney To Be Out Soon

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Word is out all over the world. As the headline in the Feb. 11 London *Guardian* announced, “Cheney’s Future At Stake After Leaking of CIA Agent’s Name.” Next day, the leading Swiss daily *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* ran a nearly identical half-page feature, declaring the Vice President the leading liability in George W. Bush’s quest to win the Nov. 2004 Presidential elections.

As London *Guardian* Washington correspondent Julian Borger summed up Cheney’s dilemma: “Until recently, President Bush has insisted that Mr. Cheney would be his vice-presidential candidate in the November elections, despite his history of heart trouble. But recent polls conducted by the White House have suggested that growing unpopularity of the taciturn ex-businessman and powerful administration hawk threatens to sink the President. Mr. Cheney is already under intense fire from Democrats for his personal role in shaping the case for war against Iraq, frequently visiting the CIA to question assessments that played down Saddam Hussein’s arsenal. His former role as head of a giant oil services corporation, Halliburton, is also under scrutiny, as the company is under investigation for bribery when Mr. Cheney was in charge and, more recently for war-profiteering in Iraq. But the grand jury investigation into the CIA leak is potentially the most explosive threat to his long-term political survival.”

Prosecutors Becoming Aggressive

Indeed, at least three Federal grand juries are now carrying out probes that directly impact the Vice President. According to sources in the Federal law-enforcement community, there is a growing sense of aggressivity among prosecutors, and indictments of top Cheney aides, in at least one of the cases, are expected soon. The most high-profile of the Cheney-gate probes involves the July 2003 leak, by “senior Administration officials,” of the identity of undercover CIA officer Valerie Plame, wife of former Ambassador Joseph Wilson IV.

After Attorney General John Ashcroft stalled for two months on launching a probe into that leak to syndicated columnist Robert Novak, pressure from CIA Director George Tenet—himself under immense pressure from senior career Agency officers—forced the probe last September.

In December, Ashcroft recused himself from the case, and

Deputy Attorney General James Comey appointed Chicago U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald to head an independent probe.

Underscoring the CIA-DOJ bureaucratic tussle leading to the launching of the probe, the CIA’s Director of Congressional Affairs, Stanley M. Moskowitz, wrote to Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), the former chairman and ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, on Jan. 30, providing a precise chronology of the repeated efforts by the Agency to trigger the DOJ probe. The initial request was made, by telephone, on July 24, 2003, and repeated written and telephonic requests were made, leading to the final confirmation from Justice to CIA, on Sept. 29, that the FBI had been ordered to launch the investigation into the source of the leak. The Jan. 30 Moskowitz letter was in reply to a Conyers query to CIA Director George Tenet on Sept. 29, 2003.

That belatedly launched probe now centers on Cheney’s office, and on top Cheney aides Lewis “Scooter” Libby and John Hannah. According to a Feb. 10 *New York Times* story, Libby has been interviewed by the FBI, and has turned over personal handwritten notes, which are being scrutinized by prosecutors.

According to sources close to the Bush Administration, Cheney’s troubles really began with a falling out with Attorney General Ashcroft, who had been counted on to block any serious probe into the crimes of Cheney and his neo-con underlings, even after the “formal” DOJ investigation had been launched. According to one version of the story, Ashcroft felt that he was being “iced” out of policy deliberations, and that Cheney was behind that isolation. Ashcroft, an ambitious and vindictive politician, stepped out of the way of a serious probe of the Plame leak, and now Cheney is sweating.

Ashcroft’s actions also reflect, according to several sources, a growing discontent, among hardline conservatives, with the Bush Administration, which they see as now caving in to the United Nations in Iraq, and running up “big government” deficits.

Forgery and Bribery

The two other Federal grand jury probes involve the origins of a forged document, purporting to be a Niger

government report, detailing Iraqi attempts to obtain large amounts of uranium precursor from the African state in 2000-01; and \$180 million in bribes allegedly paid to Nigerian government officials by a Halliburton Corp.-led consortium at the time that Cheney was CEO of the Texas-based oil-industry firm.

The purported Niger government documents were exposed as shoddy forgeries by International Atomic Energy Agency head Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, in testimony before the United Nations Security Council in early March 2003. The documents had been originally obtained by the Italian intelligence service SISMI, and passed to American, British, and Israeli counterparts in 2001.

According to at least one former CIA official, at the time of the original surfacing of the Niger forgeries, Michael Ledeen, a leading Washington neo-con and self-professed “universal fascist,” was working as a paid informant for the SISMI. Ledeen, the source insists, knows a great deal about the Niger documents hoax.

Ledeen was also, according to several Pentagon sources, a “personal service contract” consultant to the Office of Special Plans (OSP), the civilian unit headed by Under Secretary of Defense Doug Feith that ran unauthorized covert operations and “stovepiped” intelligence activities, on behalf of Cheney’s chief of staff Scooter Libby. One of Ledeen’s “missions” for OSP was the rekindling of contacts between the Pentagon and Iranian “dissidents,” to facilitate covert efforts to destabilize and bring down the government in Tehran. Towards this objective, Ledeen put two OSP staffers in touch with Manucher Ghorbanifar, the swindler-*cum*-arms broker, who was a central player in the 1980s Iran-Contra scandals.

One Federal law-enforcement source has reported that information developed in the Niger forgery probe has provided vital leads to the Plame leak investigators, as well. This is not surprising, given that the hyping of the fake Niger documents was a vital part of the Cheney-led “Big Lie” campaign to force Congressional support for the Iraq war, on the grounds that Iraq was on the verge of building a nuclear bomb.

It was on the basis of reports of the existence of the Niger documents, suggesting that Saddam Hussein was building a nuclear bomb, that Vice President Cheney tasked the CIA to pursue the Iraq-Niger story in early 2002. The CIA, in turn, dispatched former Ambassador Wilson, in February 2002, to visit Niger and report back on whether the story was credible. He came back convinced that there was no covert pipeline of uranium precursor to Iraq—findings that were backed by the U.S. Ambassador, and by a retired U.S. Marine General sent to Niger shortly after Wilson.

Cheney and Libby claim they never knew about the Wilson mission, and never received a briefing on the results. Ambassador Wilson is convinced otherwise. As he told a recent gathering at the University of Virginia Miller Center, there are standing procedures for tasking the intelligence community, and for reporting back to Executive Branch offi-

cial. He was debriefed both before and after his Niger trip, a written report on the visit was prepared by the U.S. Ambassador in Niger, and other communiques were also prepared, memorializing his findings. The idea that neither Cheney nor Libby ever were informed of the mission is inconceivable.

However, Cheney has good reason to deny he was “in the loop” on the Wilson mission. Even after Dr. ElBaradei exposed the Niger documents as fakes, Cheney continued to insist that Iraq had a nuclear bomb program. In a March 16, 2003 appearance on “Meet the Press,” Cheney denounced ElBaradei by name, for being naive about Saddam’s aggressive and secretive nuclear weapons program, claiming that he was convinced Saddam already had a bomb.

Right after ElBaradei’s UN testimony, Joseph Wilson appeared on CNN and reminded the Bush Administration that a careful search of their files would show that they knew a great deal about the Niger uranium hoax. According to several sources, a meeting took place in Cheney’s office immediately after the CNN interview, and the “Get Wilson” operation was launched. This is the origin of the Valerie Plame leak, these sources say.

The Plame leak probe is also reportedly targeting members of the Defense Policy Board, including its former chairman Richard Perle, and member Kenneth Adelman. DPB members reportedly were involved with the Cheney staffers in spreading the word about Valerie Plame’s CIA identity to “the usual neo-con suspects,” including Center for Security Policy boss Frank Gaffney.

Halliburton

The third grand jury, dealing with the charges that Halliburton paid out \$180 million in bribes in the late 1990s to Nigerian government officials, to secure a monopoly over the country’s natural-gas fields, is posing a special problem for both Cheney and the Bush re-election team. Halliburton is already under public scrutiny and government investigation for padding their bills to Uncle Sam for Iraq occupation contracts; and Cheney still has financial interests in the company—despite his efforts to conceal them (a recent General Accounting Office probe of Cheney’s Halliburton stock options and annual deferred salary payments found that he had significant interests in his former employer).

There is a growing sentiment among even Republican voters that Cheney’s ties to Halliburton are corrupt, and that the stench of corporate sleaze is all over the Bush Administration.

If the Nigeria bribe case leads to indictments, Cheney is going to be in big political trouble, whether he is named as a defendant or not.

Sources in Washington say that an indictment of top Cheney aides, particularly Libby, would mean curtains for the Veep. And with the Cheney protection racket gone, they say, the entire neo-con apparatus inside Team Bush would soon fall.