

THE CIA REPORT ON JOE WILSON'S TRIP

I see eRiposte is busy documenting the differences between CIA claims and Niger forgery “realities” (go check out his [series](#)). So I’m going to have to delve into the weirdness of the CIA report on Joe Wilson’s trip myself. Just a reminder of why this trip report is important:

- A copy of it was almost certainly one of the documents faxed to Libby and “another person in the Office of the Vice President” on June 9, 2003, so it is an early source of Libby’s information on Wilson
- The trip report is the primary source of the attack Ari Fleischer [launched](#) against Wilson on July 12, 2003, to which Dick Cheney personally [instructed](#) Libby to direct journalists
- The great truth-teller Robert Novak [indicated](#) that the White House was trying to declassify this trip report as part of its campaign against Joe Wilson, so we can presume the White House thought the report discredited Wilson

That ought to be enough reason to look at this trip report closely. But as I discovered the

other day, there's some major weirdness to it, so it certainly bears further scrutiny.

Just a bit of review. The CIA's Counter-Proliferation Division invited Wilson to a meeting on February 19, 2002 to discuss ways they might assess the intelligence on an Iraq-Niger uranium deal they had received. There were about 6 to 8 people at the meeting, including experts on proliferation and Africa, from both CIA and INR. At that meeting, there was some discussion of the contents of the Iraq-Niger intelligence—although it is unclear just how much discussion. After the meeting, Wilson was given a set of talking points to use on the trip that referred to uranium deals with rogue nations, but did not specifically mention the Iraq intelligence. And shortly thereafter, he went on the trip.

Wilson did not write the trip report himself. Rather, a D0 reports officer (and apparently a D0 case officer) debriefed Wilson. Then, the case officer drafted a report, and the reports officer then added "additional relevant information from his notes." As a result, there is a pretty significant difference between what Wilson says he reported and what the trip report says.

Joe Wilson's Book

Let's start with what Wilson says in his book. While we can't trust autobiography from *anyone* to be completely forthright, at least Wilson's report has the advantage of being a narrative, not interrupted by redactions. Here's how Wilson described his meeting with former Prime Minister Mayaki:

He had mentioned to me that on the margins of a ministerial meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1999, a Nigerien businessman had asked him to meet with an Iraqi official to discuss trade. My contact said the alarm bells had immediately gone off in his mind. Well aware of the United Nations sanctions on Iraq, he met with the Iraqi

only briefly and avoided any substantive issues. As he told me this, he hesitated and looked up the sky as if plumbing the depths of his memory, then offered that perhaps the Iraqi might have wanted to talk about uranium. But since there had been no discussion of uranium—my contact was idly speculating when he mentioned it—there was no story. I spoke with this Nigerien friend again in January 2004, and he recollected our conversation in 2002. He told me that while he was watching coverage of press conferences in Baghdad prior to the second Gulf War, he recognized the Iraqi information minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, known to Americans as “Baghdad Bob,” as the person whom he had met in Algiers. (28)

And here is Wilson’s description of what he said about his trip and this meeting in his debriefing session.

Within an hour of my return to Washington in early March 2002, a CIA reports officer, at my request, arrived at my home. Over Chinese takeout, I gave him the same details of my trip and conclusions that I had provided to Owens-Kirkpatrick in Niamey before my departure. These included the account of the meeting between my Nigerien contact and the Iraqi official on the margins of the OAU meeting, as well as my observations about where our government might inquire further if it was not persuaded by my report or those of the ambassador and the general whose inquiries had preceded mine. (29)

SSCI Report

Now compare that to what appears in the SSCI Report, including the direct citations from the CIA report itself. (since this is a report of a report, I’ve bolded the passages that quote

directly from the **CIA report** and indented the citations from the SSCI report). The CIA report did not name Wilson or identify him as a former ambassador (which is one of the pieces of evidence that suggests it was in the documents sent to Libby on June 9). Rather, it described him as a **“contact with excellent access who does not have an established reporting record.”** The report described Wilson’s conversation with former Minister for Energy and Mines Mai Manga, who explained:

He knew of no contracts signed between Niger and any rogue states for the sale of uranium. He said that an Iranian delegation was interested in purchasing 400 tons of yellowcake from Niger in 1998, but said that no contract was ever signed with Iran.(44)

In addition, the CIA report described Wilson’s conversation with former Prime Minister Ibrahim Mayaki who explained that he knew of no contracts signed between Niger and any rogue states between 1996 and 1999, when he had been in a position to know. Mayaki went on to explain the famous meeting with an Iraqi delegation:

Mayaki said, however, that in June 1999, [redacted] businessman, approached him and insisted that Mayaki meet with an Iraqi delegation to discussion **“expanding commercial relations”** between Niger and Iraq. The intelligence report said that Mayaki interpreted “expanding commercial relations” to mean that the delegation wanted to discuss uranium yellowcake sales. The intelligence report also said that **“although the meeting took place, Mayaki let the matter drop due to the UN sanctions on Iraq.”** (43)

The SSCI report provides more detail on the CIA report when discussing differences between Wilson’s version of what he reported and the CIA

report. The CIA report included details of the uranium industry in Niger and noted that it would be almost impossible to sell uranium to rogue states,

but did not refute the possibility that Iraq had approached Niger to purchase uranium.(44)

And here's the part that stunned me, when I first realized what it said:

In fact, the intelligence report made no mention of the alleged Iraq-Niger uranium deal or signatures that should have appeared on any documentation of such a deal. The only mention of Iraq in the report pertained to the meeting between the Iraqi delegation and former Prime Minister Mayaki. (44)

As I said when I first wrote about this, this suggests the CIA report completely obscured the reason behind Wilson's trip, which was to respond specifically to a piece of intelligence alleging an Iraqi-Nigerien uranium deal.

Joe Wilson's SSCI Interview

The SSCI staff asked Wilson for more details about his report. He provided important details that apparently weren't in the CIA report.

The former ambassador said that Mayaki did meet with the Iraqi delegation but never discussed what was meant by "expanding commercial relations." The former ambassador said that because Mayaki was wary of discussing any trade issues with a country under United Nations (UN) sanctions, he made a successful effort to steer the conversation away from a discussion of trade with the Iraqi delegation. (44)

In other words, Wilson specifies that Mayaki was only speculating when he said the expanding

trade referred to Iraq. And that Mayaki ended the meeting before the Iraqis could make such a detail more clear.

Wilson's version of his report differed from the CIA report in a few more important ways.

First, the former ambassador described his findings to Committee staff as more directly related to Iraq and, specifically, as refuting both the possibility that Niger could have sold uranium to Iraq and that Iraq approached Niger to purchase uranium.

[snip]

Second, the former ambassador said that he discussed with his CIA contacts which names and signatures should have appeared on any documentation of a legitimate uranium transaction. In fact, the intelligence report made no mention of the alleged Iraq-Niger uranium deal or signatures that should have appeared on any documentation of such a deal.

[snip]

Third, the former ambassador noted that his CIA contacts told him there were documents pertaining to the alleged Iraq-Niger uranium transaction and that the source of the information was the [redacted] intelligence service. (44)

So already, we can see some sources for the major problems that would come later.

- Wilson understood his trip to be an investigation of a specific piece of intelligence alleging an Iraq-Niger uranium deal; the reports officer reported it as a general trip about

uranium trades with rogue nations.

- Wilson claims to have provided the information the CIA needed to assess the uranium deal allegations; the reports officer recorded no such thing.

There's one piece of information that may or may not have appeared in the CIA report, which caused some problems later on.

- Wilson knew the meeting between Mayaki and Baghdad Bob took place in Algiers, not in Niger. From what we know of the CIA report, it's not clear whether that detail was included.

But we know the CIA report *did* include a detail that Ari Fleischer seems to have willfully obscured later.

- The CIA report makes it clear that Mayaki, not Wilson, met with Baghdad Bob. But Ari seems to have intentionally confused that issue when he started using tidbits from this report.

I'll look at what Tenet and Ari made of this report in just a bit. But first, I'd like to consider a few of the reasons behind these discrepancies.

Compartmentalized Information

I'm not alleging anything nefarious happened to produce two such different versions of Wilson's report. As far as the most troubling

discrepancy—that Wilson knew he was responding to a specific piece of intelligence, while the case officer was treating it as more general information—that **might** (or might not) be attributable to the way the CIA collects information. They were treating Wilson as a source, not as a CIA officer or an analyst himself. Therefore, they did not treat him as someone who could go out and answer a question, but simply as someone who could bring information, which the CIA would then assess the validity of. In other words, they were pretending that Wilson never went to the meeting at Langley where they discussed in detail how to assess such information. The report was written to allow CIA analysts to assess the information, to not prejudge its veracity or value.

Further, it's fairly clear that the report did not include the contents of Wilson's discussion on February 19. He had given some advice and information on that date, but since it didn't directly relate to the trip itself, it doesn't appear to have been captured officially.

The February 19 Meeting

The problem, of course, was that Wilson did attend that February 19 meeting and he did participate in these discussions. The SSCI admits this discrepancy, without acknowledging that Wilson is largely proven correct. The DO reports officer's refutation of Wilson's claims to know about the Iraq intelligence are vague:

The DO reports officer told Committee staff that he did not provide the former ambassador with any information about the source or details of the original reporting as it would have required sharing classified information and, noted that there were no "documents" circulating in the IC at the time of the former ambassador's trip, only intelligence reports from [redacted] intelligence regarding an alleged Iraq-Niger uranium deal. (44-45)

It appears the SSCI wants to suggest with this tidbit that Wilson **couldn't** have known of the Iraq-Niger allegations. But some of its other evidence shows clearly he did know. The previous bullet continues, for example,

Meeting notes and other correspondence show that details of the reporting were discussed at the February 19, 2002 meeting, but none of the meeting participants recall telling the former ambassador the source of the report [redacted].(45)

And earlier, the SSCI admits:

The INR analyst's notes [on which the INR memo is based] also indicate that specific details of the classified report on the Iraq-Niger uranium deal were discussed at the meeting, as well as whether analysts believed it was plausible that Niger would be capable of delivering such a large quantity of uranium to Iraq. (41)

In other words, even the SSCI admits that Wilson had very good reason to understand his trip was a response to a specific piece of intelligence, even if the talking points they gave him referred more generally to rogue nations, rather than Iraq specifically.

In fact, if you read Wilson's book, it's clear that he believes he gave feedback as to the possible veracity of the Iraq-Niger allegation at the February 19 meeting, in addition to the trip.

A report purporting to be a memorandum of sale of uranium from Niger to Iraq had aroused the interest of Vice President Dick Cheney. His office, I was told, had tasked the CIA to determine if there was any truth to the report. I was being asked now to share with the analysts my knowledge of the uranium

business and of the Nigerien personalities in power at the time the alleged contract had been executed, supposedly in 1999 or 2000. The Nigeriens were the same people I had dealt with during and after my time at the National Security Council, people I knew well.

The report, as it was described to me, was not very detailed. For example, it was not clear whether the reporting officer—not present for this meeting—had actually laid eyes on the document or was simply relaying formation provided by a third party. The amount of the uranium product—a lightly processed form of uranium ore called yellowcake—involved was estimated to have been up to five hundred tons but could also have been fifty, suggesting that the account had been written from memory (and an imperfect one at that), rather than with the document at hand. It would have been of keen interest to me to know who might have signed the contract on behalf of the Niger government, but no information was provided on this either. (14)

This passage, if accurate, clears up many of the issues raised elsewhere. Wilson was told specifically of details of the intelligence, including one detail—the 500 ton allegation—that anyone with a passing familiarity of Niger's uranium industry would have doubted. Further, Wilson had at least a general sense of the timing of the alleged deal. And he knew that he had very close relationships with the people in charge of the country at the time. He clearly did **not** know what names were on the documents. But he did know who played what role at the time. And he would clarify, on his trip, the job titles of the people who would have been involved in a uranium sale. This is important because, while CIA hadn't **yet** received anything

with names that could be verified, they did on March 25, just a few weeks after Wilson's return.

Update: As expected, eRiposte would find an error. (Thanks eRiposte.) As he points out, the first bit of intelligence CIA got—in October 2001—had names. So Wilson's information could have provided some means to assess the first piece of intelligence. **If** it had gotten into the report and **if** it had gotten circulated.

Who Wrote the Report?

Wilson's account of the February 19 meeting raises one more—giant—question about the way the trip report was produced. He says clearly, the reporting officer was not present at the meeting. Before I look at the implications of this, let me review some of the other confusing details about who wrote this report.

First, Wilson's account differs from the SSCI in the number of people who contributed to the report. Wilson describes one CIA officer—a reports officer—receiving his briefing. But here's how the SSCI describes the writing process behind the trip report:

Later that day, two CIA DO officers debriefed the former ambassador who had returned from Niger the previous day. The debriefing took place in the former ambassador's home and although his wife was there, according to the reports officer, she acted as hostess and did not participate in the debrief. Based on information provided verbally by the former ambassador, the DO case officer wrote a draft intelligence report and sent it to the DO reports officer who added additional relevant information from his notes. (43)

In other words, Wilson says he debriefed to one officer, the SSCI says he debriefed to two, both of whom had a role in writing the report. This may not be suspicious. For example, the presence

of a case officer (who is presumably covert) would be the kind of thing you might hide for security reasons (Wilson seems to have done this with other information, such as Mayaki's name, so it's possible he left out mention of the case officer deliberately).

Further, it's not clear that the reports officer who debriefed Wilson is the same who was not at the meeting. But there's a hint that may be true. After all,

The DO reports officer told Committee staff that he did not provide the former ambassador with any information about the source or details

But it's clear that several people who attended that meeting were aware they had mentioned just those details to Wilson. The DO reports officer may just be CYAing, making it clear that he didn't pass on classified information. But the comment makes it quite likely that the DO reports officer **wasn't** at the meeting.

Which would explain a few things. If the DO reports officer wasn't at the meeting, after all, he wouldn't have known that Wilson had a lot of details in mind when he was in Niger. The reports officer wouldn't have known how closely connected with Iraq Wilson knew this trip was. And he wouldn't have learned some of the details about the personalities in Niger if Wilson mentioned them in the meeting and not the debrief. In other words, it's very likely that Wilson gave the CIA most of the information they needed to debunk the piece of intelligence that came in on March 25, earlier, during the meeting on February 19. And then he gave them the last details they needed to debunk the documents during the debriefing. But because the DO reports officer didn't attend the February 19 meeting (again, this is speculation), he wouldn't have had the context to include that in the report.

CIA Interference in the Report after the Fact

But there is one detail that suggests the final form of the report might not be error—a detail that shows **someone** at CIA was censoring the information that got out about Wilson’s trip.

In the SSCI report, one of the pieces of evidence supporting the claim that Plame recommended Wilson is attributed to the CPD reports officer.

The CPD reports officer told Committee staff that the former ambassador’s wife “offered up his name” (39)

But in the preface to the paperback edition of his book, Wilson notes:

When that CIA officer read the quote in the report, he went to see Valerie to tell her that he had never said anything of the kind. He was so distraught that he offered to write a memo to clarify that it had been him, not Valerie, who had initially suggested that the CIA talk to me. Valerie made it clear to him that she could not advise him one way or another. Valerie told me he wrote such a memo and shared the contents with her, but that the supervisor would not allow him to send it to the committee. (lvi)

It is not clear whether this reports officer is the same who did not attend the February 19 meeting or the one who eventually wrote the trip report. CPD is a sub-division of DO, so it is certainly possible the CPD reports officer is same person as the reporting officer who didn’t attend the February 19 meeting and the reports officer who last touched the trip report. In which case, it is plausible this reports officer wrote one report—on how Wilson got selected and what he reported back, without ever mentioning what had occurred in the interim meeting.

But at the very least this incident shows that CIA management intervened to alter the reporting

of this event *after the fact*.

Tenet's and Ari's Use of the Report

I'd like to turn, finally, and see how this memo got used, given what we know of it. Ari made a few mentions of it in his July 9 [press briefing](#). At this point, his references to the CIA report are, for the most part, correct (which is different, of course, from saying the CIA report was an accurate description of Wilson's findings).

Q: Ambassador Wilson said he made a case months before that there was no basis to the belief –

MR. FLEISCHER: No, he reported that Niger denied the allegation. That's what Ambassador Wilson reported.

Q: Was that report weighed against other –

MR. FLEISCHER: And of course they would deny the allegation. That doesn't make it untrue. It was only later – you can ask Ambassador Wilson if he reported that the yellow cake documents were forged. He did not. His report did not address whether the documents were forged or not. His report stated that Niger denied the accusation. He spent eight days in Niger and concluded that Niger denied the allegation. Well, typically, nations don't admit to going around nuclear nonproliferation.

Q: But he said there was a basis to believe their denials.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's different from what he reported. The issue here is whether the documents on yellow cake were forged. He didn't address that issue. That's the information that subsequently came to light, not prior to the speech.

Sure, Ari makes it sound like Wilson was on a

boondoggle, lazing away 8 days in the all garden spots of Niamey (which is probably intentional). But Ari makes no mention of the Baghdad Bob meeting. And he does stick to what we know the CIA report says.

Tenet first brings up the Baghdad Bob meeting.

In an effort to inquire about certain reports involving Niger, CIA's counter-proliferation experts, on their own initiative, asked an individual with ties to the region to make a visit to see what he could learn. He reported back to us that one of the former Nigerien (sic) officials he met stated that he was unaware of any contract being signed between Niger and rogue states for the sale of uranium during his tenure in office. The same former official also said that in June 1999 a businessman approached him and insisted that the former official meet with an Iraqi delegation to discuss "expanding commercial relations" between Iraq and Niger. The former official interpreted the overture as an attempt to discuss uranium sales. The former officials also offered details regarding Niger's processes for monitoring and transporting uranium that suggested it would be very unlikely that material could be illicitly diverted. There was no mention in the report of forged documents – or any suggestion of the existence of documents at all.

Here are some important points about this statement:

- Tenet reinforces the Cheney claim that OVP had nothing to do with Wilson's trip, which we know to be untrue
- Tenet parrots some of the

phrasing we know the report uses: “rogue states” instead of Iraq and “individual with ties to the region” instead of “former ambassador”

- Tenet fails to mention that “Mayaki let the matter drop due to the UN sanctions on Iraq,” that Mayaki’s interpretation that “expanding commercial relations” was inference, and that the meeting took place in Algiers, not Niger

So except for the blatant lie that Cheney had nothing to do with the meeting, Tenet’s leaking of the CIA report’s contents are misleading by silence, rather than misrepresentation. He makes the report as incriminating as he can, without misrepresenting what the report says.

But Ari, the next day, goes [further](#), much further (and I’ll remind you, this is the press gaggle Fitzgerald subpoenaed). He says,

In fact, in one of the least known parts of this story, which is now, for the first time, public – and you find this in Director Tenet’s statement last night – the official that – lower-level official sent from the CIA to Niger to look into whether or not Saddam Hussein had sought yellow cake from Niger, Wilson, he – and Director Tenet’s statement last night states the same former official, Wilson, also said that in June 1999 a businessman approached him and insisted that the former official, Wilson, meet an Iraqi delegation to discuss expanding commercial relations between Iraq and Niger. The former official interpreted the overture as an attempt to discuss

uranium sales.

This is in Wilson's report back to the CIA. Wilson's own report, the very man who was on television saying Niger denies it, who never said anything about forged documents, reports himself that officials in Niger said that Iraq was seeking to contact officials in Niger about sales.

In the first paragraph, Ari either willfully or sloppily suggests that **Joe Wilson met with an Iraqi delegation to discuss expanding commercial relations between Iran and Niger**. Now, in the next paragraph, Ari clears up that blatant accusation, saying only that Iraq was seeking to contact officials in Niger about sales—insinuating, without all the caveats the Wilson had made, that sales means uranium sales. But twice in the previous paragraph, Ari had specified that **Wilson** was the one involved. He refers to Wilson differently than either the CIA report (individual with good contacts) or other references (former ambassador) usually refer to him. And as a result makes a completely baseless accusation.

(Note, I've always assumed Ari was working from a copy of the CIA memo. After all, he'd have the clearance to see it. But when I see the way he parroted Tenet's use of "the official" (even if he does so erroneously), I wonder whether Ari was working from ~~Libby's~~ someone's report of what the CIA report said on July 9, and then Tenet's report on July 12. But then, I also wonder whether it was the CIA report—and not the INR memo—that Ari was perusing on Air Force One.)

The CIA report was clearly a central part of the smear BushCo tried to launch against Wilson (using, again, classified information). It's clear that on the front end (through either innocent or nefarious means) and the back end (through deliberate misrepresentation), the CIA report made of Wilson's trip something it was

not.