

THE OFF THE RECORD CLUB WEIGHS IN

Say, does anyone remember the Off the Record Club? It was one of the most interesting details revealed at the Libby trial—that there's this group of GOP-lobbyist-hacks who meet monthly and serve as an on-call damage control group for the Republicans.

But **[Richard] Hohlt's** more significant role may be his leadership of a secretivesocial group of GOP heavy hitters and, occasionally, White Houseofficials, who convene to smoke cigars and mull over politics. Thegroup's name: the Off The Record Club. Hohlt is the club's "keeper of the flame," says one participant who, like others contacted for thisstory, didn't want to be named because it violates the group's rules.Each month or so for more than 15 years, Hohlt has booked a room at a posh Washington hotel or restaurant and invited the guests for dinner.Among the regulars, according to three participants: fellow lobbyists**Ken Duberstein, Charlie Black and Vin Weber.** Rove and White House chief of staff Josh Bolten "have both attended these meetings on occasion," says a White House spokesperson.

[snip]

The club, participants say, helps the White House with damage control—they prodded GOP pols to back the president's post-Katrina cleanup—and thinks up ways to get the party's message across to the press. [my emphasis]

I haven't forgotten what the Off the Record Club is. I particularly remember that there is a good deal of circumstantial evidence that the leak of

Plame's identity got laundered right through the group. Ken Duberstein set up the meeting between Bob Novak and Richard Armitage and then, when the shit started hitting the fan in the fall, he made some kind of obstructive call to Bob Novak. And Richard Hohlt seems to have pressed Novak to write a story on Plame; once Novak wrote that story, Hohlt gave a copy to the White House, three days before the story's publication. Right there, right at the heart of the leak case ... remarkable. You might call it the "Leak in a Box Club."