

FOUR NEWS OUTLETS AND THE LIBBY EXONERATION

Scottie McC describes his reluctant efforts on October 4, 2003 to exonerate Libby this way:

"Were you involved in the leak in any way?" I asked him.

"No, absolutely not," Scooter replied.

"All right," I said. "I plan to tell reporters that you did not leak the classified information, nor would you condone doing so. Is that correct?"

"Yes," he replied. Then we talked about which reporters I planned to call. Scooter hung up and I set about my disagreeable task.

I called reporters for Newsweek, which I'd heard was working on a story focusing on Scooter, the AP, and the New York Times. That same day, I happened to run into Washington Post correspondent Mike Allen outside on the White House grounds, and I told him as well.

[snip]

Sure enough, pretty soon it was on the Associated Press newswire as part of a larger story on the leak investigation. [my emphasis]

The passage originally sparked my interest since the NYT was a central player in this drama. Newsweek journalist Evan Thomas was subpoenaed to testify at the trial—for a conversation he had with Libby during leak week. And Newsweek's Michael Isikoff was also among the names of people whom Fitzgerald asked Libby about during his grand jury testimony.

Given Scottie McC's indication that Libby had

some influence over which journalists Scottie McC called to exonerate Libby, is it possible that he included some who were involved in the actual leak?

So I've been playing with Lexis-Nexis to see if I can pinpoint which journalist got Scottie McC's exoneration, and whether they actually used it.

AP

The AP reporter appears to be Scott Lindlaw, who published a story dated October 5 describing the efforts of the White House to comply with DOJ's document requests.

McClellan firmly ruled out any involvement in the leak by Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby.

Libby did not provide the information, know who did and does not condone it, said McClellan said. He condemned "false, unsubstantiated accusations" that have been published in the news media about Libby's role.

Note the little addition: Scottie McC apparently also told Lindlaw that Libby did not know who leaked Plame's identity.

Newsweek

The Newsweek reporter appears to be either Evan Thomas or Michael Isikoff. A PR Newswire released on October 5 announced they would report the exoneration in an article dated October 13 but published on October 6. That Newswire piece quoted the following.

That suggests that the original leak came from someone in the White House national-security apparatus, which holds itself above politics, write Thomas and Isikoff. Many White House staffers are potential suspects, but various press reports have suggested that the Feds

will want to interview I. Lewis (Scooter) Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff.

In Joseph Wilson's original op-ed in July, in which he accused the administration of "twisting" intelligence to "exaggerate the Iraqi threat," he wrote that Vice President Cheney had asked the CIA to check out the Iraqis' alleged attempt to buy uranium in Niger. Wilson went on to say that the administration simply ignored his highly skeptical report. After reading Wilson's column, the veep's office went to some effort to tell reporters that they had never heard of Wilson's report until very recently. It may be significant that both Rove and Libby deny leaking classified information. They may say that in talking to reporters they used her name without knowing that she was undercover.

Libby was unavailable for comment, but a spokesperson for the vice president's office, Cathie Martin, tells Newsweek: "It's irresponsible to make unsubstantiated allegations. The investigation is going on and we should let the DOJ do their work." The White House spokesman, Scott McClellan, later told Newsweek that he had spoken to Libby, who told him that he "neither leaked the information nor would he condone the leaking of it."

Here's a cached version of the full Isikoff and Thomas article, which includes this paragraph (the national-security aide is presumably David Shedd).

Mrs. Wilson's identity was apparently known to the White House inner circle: a senior national-security aide with responsibility for intelligence matters had worked closely with Wilson's wife at

the CIA's Counter-Proliferation division. Nonetheless, the leaker, whether it was Libby or someone else, may not have meant to smear or intimidate anyone, or to reveal that Valerie Plame Wilson worked undercover. In Joseph Wilson's original op-ed, he wrote that Cheney had asked the CIA to check out the Iraqis' alleged attempt to buy uranium in Niger. Wilson went on to say that the administration simply ignored his highly skeptical report. After reading Wilson's column, the veep's office went to some effort to tell reporters that it had never heard of Wilson's report until very recently. It may be significant that both Rove and Libby deny leaking classified information. They may say that in talking to reporters they used her name without knowing that she was undercover.

Also note the Cathie Martin exoneration of Libby, which shows up in a few other places. Perhaps Cheney's order to Martin to exonerate Libby is what appears in her FBI interview report that was redacted before shown to Henry Waxman.

NYT

Whichever NYT reporter got the information from Scottie McC, he did not put his name to the story. The NYT reported the exoneration of Libby in an October 5 story attributed to the National Desk.

Spokesmen said I. Lewis Libby, the chief of staff for Vice President Dick Cheney, and Elliott Abrams, the director of Middle East affairs at the National Security Council, were not sources of the leak.

The White House has said the same of Karl Rove, the president's chief political adviser.

Scott McClellan, the White House spokesman, said that Mr. Libby "neither leaked the classified information, nor would he condone it."

Later in the day, the White House issued a statement saying Mr. Abrams had denied being the source.

Though presumably, the call went to either Richard Stevenson (my guess even before I began this search) or Eric Lichtblau, because they include the exoneration in a story published on October 8.

Mr. Bush's spokesman, Scott McClellan, has sought to exonerate three top aides to the president. Last week he said Karl Rove, Mr. Bush's senior adviser, had not been involved in the disclosure. Over the weekend he said that neither I. Lewis Libby Jr., Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, nor Elliot Abrams, a National Security Council official, had been involved.

I find it interesting that the NYT, the newspaper that would go to the mat to effectively defend Libby, would treat the exoneration in this fashion.

WaPo

Perhaps the most interesting reaction to being told by Scottie McC that Libby was not the leaker came from Mike Allen who, according to the 1X2X6 article, appears to have learned the names of the "2" off the record. Allen points to Libby twice in articles before Scottie McC told him Libby was not involved. First, in an article partially recapitulating the 1X2X6 article published September 30, Allen noted Libby's name in the article that would get Matt Cooper a subpoena.

In addition to Novak's column, an administration official told The

Washington Post on Saturday that two White House officials leaked the information to several journalists in an effort to discredit Wilson.

An article that appeared on the Time magazine Web site the same week Novak's column was published said that "some government officials have noted to Time in interviews . . . that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, is a CIA official who monitors the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction." The same article quoted from an interview with I. Lewis Libby, Vice President Cheney's chief of staff, saying that Cheney did not know about Wilson's mission "until this year when it became public in the last month or so."

And Allen mentions Scottie McC's refusal to exonerate Libby on September 29 and October 1 in an article that appeared on October 3.

McClellan also has been questioned in recent days about I. Lewis Libby, chief of staff to Vice President Cheney. McClellan has refused to discuss possible involvement by Libby or anyone else.

But after receiving the exoneration from Scottie McC on October 4, Allen doesn't rush it to print. He finally gets around to reporting the now-public denials in an article published October 7.

McClellan has ruled out involvement by Rove; I. Lewis Libby, Vice President Cheney's chief of staff; and Elliott Abrams, Bush's senior adviser on the Middle East. "None of them were involved in the leak of the classified information, nor would any of them condone it," McClellan said.

You get the feeling Allen trusted his 1X2X6 source more than he trusted Scottie McC?

Bonus Boehlert

While I was playing with Lexis-Nexis, I found this article from Eric Boehlert, which prominently focuses on Libby as an object of suspicion (collecting and adding to much of the speculation that had appeared thus far primarily on teevee, in Allen articles, and in foreign publications).

Criminal leak investigations are notoriously futile, and the identity of the administration officials who illegally blew the cover of CIA operative Valerie Plame may never be known. But one name keeps coming up, and so far it hasn't provoked a specific, emphatic White House denial: Lewis "Scooter" Libby, assistant to the president and Vice President Dick Cheney's powerful chief of staff.

On Wednesday the New York Daily News reported that "Democratic congressional sources said they would like to hear from Vice President Cheney's chief of staff, Lewis Libby." On MSNBC's "Buchanan and Press" on Wednesday, Pat Buchanan asked an administration critic [Larry Johnson] who claims to know the leaker's name point blank if "Scooter Libby" was the culprit (the critic wouldn't answer). And Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska made a veiled reference on CNBC this week, suggesting that President Bush could better manage the current crisis by "sitting down with his vice president and asking what he knows about it."

But below the surface there's even more chatter. Says one former senior CIA officer who served under President Bush's father, "Libby is certainly suspect No. 1."

Libby might feel more secure if the White House would issue a blanket denial about his involvement, the way it did for Bush's top political aide, Karl Rove, who was the focus of attention early in the week as the possible source. At a press briefing this week, White House spokesman Scott McClellan was adamant: "The president knows Rove wasn't involved ... It's simply not true."

And later, McClellan dismissed as "ridiculous" any suggestions that Rove may have played a role, adding, "There is simply no truth to that suggestion. And I have spoken with Karl about it."

But when a reporter asked about Libby, McClellan cut him off with a non-response.

"Does Bush know whether or not the vice president's chief of staff, Lewis Libby ..." the reporter began. McClellan interrupted: "Do you have any specific information to bring to my attention? Like I said, there has been nothing that's been brought to our attention."

Asked for a comment about speculation surrounding Libby, Cheney's spokeswoman Cathie Martin tells Salon, "This is a serious matter and we shouldn't be speculating in light of an ongoing investigation."

By all accounts, Libby was certainly at the heart of the administration's high-level arm-twisting in the intelligence community, trying to massage evidence to make the case that Iraq was an imminent danger to the world. He and his boss Cheney, along with a cadre of administration hawks, took the lead in trying to sell a number of bogus claims, from the notion that Saddam Hussein tried to buy uranium from Niger to the false assertion that hijacker Mohammed

Atta met with an Iraqi spy before 9/11.

It was by far the most extensive article from the period focusing on Libby. Note the date: October 3. Just one day later, at the crack of dawn, Bush and Cheney orchestrated a public exoneration of Libby. Did that DFH reporter Eric Boehlert—now funded by George Soros—cause Dick and Libby to panic and demand that Bush exonerate Libby and with it force Bush into obstructing justice? It sure looks like it's a possibility. Maybe I'll start calling Boehlert "meat-grinder" for now on.