

THE SECRETS NOVAK BRINGS TO THE GRAVE

I tried to say nothing when news of Novak's announcement came. I had nothing good to say, though my own father died of brain cancer and I empathize with Novak and his family for that—it is a horrible way to die, particularly for someone whose identity was tied with his intellect.

But I couldn't resist a snark on twitter:

Cue Woodward claiming he got deathbed confession about what really happened during the 7/9/03 conversation Novak & Libby hid.

Perhaps Woodward will—as he did with Reagan's CIA Director and Iran-Contra co-conspirator, Bill Casey, who also died of brain cancer—make dubious claims about deathbed conversations with Novak.

But the fact is that Novak died with most of his role in the Plame outing still shrouded in secrecy. That's partly true because of the significant changes in Novak's story over time. All of the following Novak claims changed as the stage of the investigation suited:

- Whether he understood the leak was intended to seed a story or it was an offhand remark
- From whom he learned the name "Plame," changing from "they" (his sources, then in the plural, not "two"), to possibly *Who's Who*, to definitely *Who's Who*
- From whom he learned that Valerie Wilson worked in

counterproliferation and whether that person made it clear this meant she was covert

- His use of the word "operative" and whether he really confused Valerie Wilson with someone running a congressional campaign in Wyoming (really! he claimed to have—and other journalists bought it!)
- From whom he learned that Joe Wilson had learned that an "Iraqi delegation had tried to establish commercial contacts"—a detail that was in the CIA report on Wilson's trip (which remained classified until after Novak spoke to his claimed sources for the story), though Novak used the wrong date for it
- When he spoke to Rove—which changed from July 9 to maybe July 8 or 9

On all those details, Novak's story changed repeatedly. And then there's one I've never heard anyone ask: from whom Novak got the talking point, "The White House, the State Department and the Pentagon, and not just Vice President Cheney, asked the CIA to look into it," a talking point that shows up in Libby's note from Cheney on Plame's identity and may appear in Judy Miller's notes.

Yet today, most journalists assume Novak's final answers—the ones that eventually shielded Rove

and Libby and Cheney from most consequences—were truthful, and believe they know what happened.

Me, I don't claim to know what happened. But I see no reason to trust Novak's most recent answers when there was so much volatility in his story over time.

And I'm just as interested in unanswered questions about Novak's timeline. For example:

July 7: As more details of Novak's story came out, it became clear that he said he was working on a planted story impugning Frances Fragos Townsend on July 7 (one which was published on July 10). Murray Waas once suggested that that story had been planted by Scooter Libby and David Addington. And we now know that shortly after Novak sat for a deposition with Fitzgerald in fall 2004, the White House did a search (presumably pursuant to a Fitzgerald request) on "Plame Wilson Novak" on select dates including July 7. So did Novak talk with Scooter Libby on July 7, one day before Novak asked Richard Armitage a rather stupid question that nevertheless elicited Valerie Plame's role at the CIA? Did Novak talk with Scooter Libby on July 7, the same day Libby told Ari Fleischer Plame's name and status and just hours before Novak called Fleischer asking for information on Wilson (Fleischer did not return the call)? Novak testified to disliking Wilson from their appearance on Meet the Press on July 6; if Novak spoke with Libby on July 7, is it even plausible that Wilson wouldn't come up? Scooter Libby might one day be able to answer those questions, but Novak will bring his side of the story to the grave.

July 8: As I mentioned, Novak ultimately could never decide whether his conversation with Rove, in which Rove confirmed Valerie Plame's identity, occurred on July 8 or July 9. I suspect the date is significant because if it was on July 8, then some of what Novak said to a friend of Joe Wilson's on July 8—"Wilson's an asshole. The CIA sent him. His wife, Valerie, works for the CIA. She's a weapons of mass

destruction specialist. She sent him."—could be attributed to Rove, not Armitage. Indeed, at least as of August 2004, Armitage and Novak disagreed about whether or not Armitage revealed either Valerie's first name or her role in counterproliferation, and the latter is one part of Novak's public story that kept changing. I suspect this story remained fluid for some very good reasons—because if it were solved, then Novak's Armitage story might break down. But we're not going to find out from Novak now.

July 9: Ah, the secret conversation with Scooter Libby! I'm most interested in this conversation because Novak and Libby appear to have very deliberately hid it. Fitzgerald appears to have been unaware of the conversation as late as September 2004. And Libby and Novak both used a strategy on journalist waivers—refusing global while accepting specific ones—that would have and did shield this conversation for years. Furthermore, there are hints that Judy Miller knew of a Libby-Novak conversation and suggestions that Libby's unconscious was revealing it even when he was denying it to Fitzgerald. In short, this conversation stinks. And given that the aspects of Novak's story that remain most dubious—where he got the name "Plame" and whether his use of "operative" meant he knew Plame was covert—are two things Libby was spilling to Ari Fleischer on July 7, that stinky conversation really stinks. Maybe Libby's unconscious—or the burgeoning war between Cheney and Bush—will reveal these things. But Novak won't.

In other words, short of Woodward making up some wildarsed story about a conversation with Novak on his deathbed, much of this story will likely remain unrevealed.

May Novak's family have the solace that comes now that he is at peace. And may some of the others keeping these secrets eventually tell them.