

ISIKOFF DOUBLES DOWN ON HIS ANONYMOUS LEAK FROM CHENEY'S LAWYER

Michael Isikoff's coverage of Dick Cheney's interview (h/t Leen) seems designed as much to defend his bad reporting on the CIA Leak case as to report the content of the interview itself. It's not that I expected Isikoff to point out that Cheney refused to say things to Fitzgerald that Cheney's own lawyer had been willing to say to Isikoff. Whatever the ethical and logical problems with reporting O'Donnell's leak uncritically, Isikoff granted him anonymity and I fully expected Isikoff to continue to honor that pledge.

What's pathetic about Isikoff's coverage, however, is that he doubles down on the content of the leak O'Donnell gave to him!

Perhaps the most intriguing parts of the interview occurred toward the end, when Cheney was asked about President Bush's decision in June 2003 to declassify portions of a National Intelligence Estimate about Iraqi WMD. The federal investigators wanted to know what he had told Libby about the president's decision. (The declassification led to Libby's selective leaking to *New York Times* reporter Judy Miller about some portions of the NIE that appeared to bolster the White House position about Iraqi WMD.)

Isikoff here repeats the several details from O'Donnell's leak that almost certainly were invented in 2006 to fix the obvious, glaring logical inconsistencies in Scooter Libby's story (but which, regardless of what O'Donnell said to Isikoff anonymously, remain glaring

inconsistencies): the claim that the declassification occurred, the claim that it occurred in June, and the claim that the declassification led to the leak to Judy Miller. Note, the FBI didn't ask Cheney about the date at all! The only one who mentions the day is Michael Isikoff, based on what Cheney's defense attorney told him. And in fact, some of Cheney's comments during this interview actually undermine that story (though his comments about the NIE declassification are thoroughly incoherent, which ought to make a reporter think twice about the NIE story itself). In other words, Isikoff's reporting on this is actually Isikoff glossing Cheney's interview with comments Cheney's own defense attorney made anonymously to Isikoff at a time when Cheney had the need to shore up the inconsistencies in that part of the story.

And besides, don't you think Isikoff should have thought seriously about what it meant that Cheney's NIE story in his interview was so incoherent, but that Cheney's defense attorney gave Isikoff such a coherent story?

Interestingly, Isikoff also goes out of his way to establish his cred here. He notes that Cheney claimed he had a low opinion of Newsweek.

Asked if he had authorized Libby to provide information about the issue to NEWSWEEK as well as *Time*, Cheney said "he could not conceive" of doing so because "he does not have a very favorable view of NEWSWEEK."

Again, you have to wonder what went through Isikoff's head when he wrote this. Such an unfavorable opinion of Newsweek that when they needed to plant a cover story about the NIE, they chose Isikoff? (Sort of like when OVP wanted to seed its "Libby was not the leaker" story in October 2003, they instructed Scott McClellan to go to Isikoff.) There are several ways to unpack this comment, but Isikoff revels in the claims Cheney made about Newsweek in an

interview packed with lies, anyway, and in fact turns the story into “Cheney versus the press” rather than “Cheney using the press.”

Also, somewhat bizarrely, Isikoff appears to mis-attribute a comment Cheney made to the NYT. He said,

(Cheney appeared to have expressed similar views of *The New York Times*, although for reasons that are not clear, portions of the passage in which he discusses the newspaper are redacted.)

I believe Isikoff is talking about this passage:

The Vice President advised he had always been the subject of unfavorable press coverage by [three lines redacted] The Vice President did not recall [name redacted] coverage of the Joe Wilson matter in the week following the publication of Wilson’s editorial on 7/6/03 as being a particular problem, but he acknowledged that it was possible. The Vice President advised that he was not aware of any attempts by Libby to complain to [one line redacted] and Libby did not discuss any such plan with the Vice President. When asked if he had been told of any conversation that Scooter Libby might have had with [name redacted] Vice President Cheney said it was possible, but that he could not recall.

The passage shows up in the FBI notes this way:

[name redacted] unfavorable coverage—always—that week—he doesn’t recall [three letter word redacted] per se being a partic. problem—but it’s possible

[name redacted] not aware of plan or if he did talk w/him [half line redacted]

And the DOJ filing explains these passages were redacted as “names of non-government third-parties and details of their extraneous interactions with the Vice President.”

I say Isikoff must be referring to this reference because there is no other passage pertaining to journalists that is significantly redacted, and the two passages where Cheney talks about the NYT (which he gets delivered in Jackson Hole) and Judy Miller have no significant redactions around it. In fact, in an unredacted passage Cheney describes Judy Miller’s “reporting expertise,” which is a far cry from a complaint about NYT’s coverage.

The redacted passages pretty clearly relate to Chris Matthews and Tim Russert. A guy named Michael Isikoff wrote a book that explained in detail how Libby met with Tim Russert during leak week to complain about Matthews’ coverage of him and the Vice President, but later claimed that during that conversation Russert told Libby of Plame’s identity.

Now I have no idea why Isikoff made that mistake. A number of readers here recognized the reference, and they didn’t write a book on this subject. But I find it mighty amusing that in a piece that totally neglects to mention that Libby—having received orders from Cheney to leak something to Judy Miller—leaked Valerie Wilson’s identity to her, also mistakes an attack on Chris Matthews for an attack on NYT.

It’s a funny piece.

Most reporters, I would hope, would rethink the NIE cover story after seeing the utter incoherence and self-contradiction of Cheney’s comments on the NIE. But Isikoff has chosen instead to reassert the cover story and his own role in it.