

Justice Department to probe CIA leak, White House link

The FBI will investigate if White House employees leaked a CIA officer's name

By Ron Hutcherson, Shannon McCaffrey and Jonathan S. Landay
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WASHINGTON — The Justice Department on Tuesday announced a full-scale investigation to determine whether White House officials leaked the name of a CIA officer in an attempt to discredit and punish a leading critic of President Bush's Iraq policy.

Bush ordered his staff to cooperate, and White House counsel Alberto Gonzales directed presidential aides to save documents and any other material that might help investigators. Justice Department officials held open the possibility that Attorney General John Ashcroft might appoint an independent special counsel to oversee the FBI investigation.

"No options are closed," department spokesman Mark Corallo said.

The developments raised the prospect of a full-blown White House scandal while Bush is sinking in the polls, struggling to win international help in Iraq and grappling with Congress over his request for another \$87 billion in war-related spending.

"If there's a leak out of my administration, I want to know who it is. If the person has violated the law, the person will be taken care of," Bush said on a campaign trip to Chicago and Cincinnati.

At issue is whether White House of-

ficials leaked the name of CIA officer Valerie Plame to retaliate against her husband, Joseph Wilson, a former ambassador to Iraq.

At the CIA's request in early 2002, Wilson investigated reports that Iraq had tried to buy bomb-making uranium in the West African nation of Niger. Last July, he went public with his conclusion that the allegation was unfounded and accused the Bush administration of twisting the facts.

A week later, conservative columnist Robert Novak reported that "senior administration officials" had told him that Wilson got the Africa assignment with his wife's help, implying that Wilson wasn't qualified to determine whether Iraq had sought enriched uranium in Niger.

The column identified Plame by name, blowing any hope that she could continue to work undercover and potentially endangering her overseas contacts. Federal law makes it a crime, punishable by up to 10 years in prison, for anyone with access to classified information to reveal the name of a covert government agent.

Although the agency sends the Justice Department roughly one case a week involving a leak of classified information, they rarely result in prosecutions because of the difficulty of finding the leaker.

"It's hard, very hard," the CIA official said. "At the end of the day, it turns out there are a lot more people who know secrets than you think."

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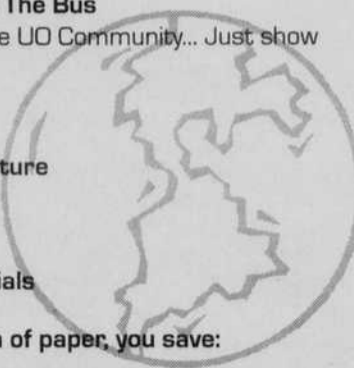
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