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Gene Collier



Fiction review: State of the Union

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By Gene Collier, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Last year's State of the Union address didn't come until Jan. 28, but back then there were no Iowa caucuses to divert attention from, and, in the judgment of White House political operatives, there was no particular rush to have George Bush lie on the record.

If you go to the [White House Web site](#), in addition to video of the first dog ("Barney II: Barney reloaded" is the icon), you'll find the same lies still lying there in the text of last January's speech, including "We will not pass along our problems to . . . other generations" (see the deficit and add the moon and Mars), and the big one, "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

The deceitful chronology of how that whopper got to Bush's nationally televised lips, and the administration's reaction to the proof that it was a lie to help launch a war on skimpy intelligence, remain the most illuminating episodes to date on a White House that does what it pleases even if means people have to die.

When Dick Cheney urged the dispatch of Joseph Wilson, an African ambassador during the first Bush administration, to Niger to investigate Hussein's interest in that country's supply of "yellowcake" uranium (the kind needed to develop nuclear weapons), one might reasonably assume that Cheney would have some interest in the outcome of that investigation.

Oh no. Not if the outcome was that no such Niger-to-Saddam transaction is even possible, its existence later revealed as a loosely linked fantasy of forged documents. Wilson briefed the American ambassador in Niger, the CIA and the State Department upon his return. That was in February of 2002, 11 months before last year's State of the Union address.

As recently as June 2002, Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser, said she was unaware that Wilson had even been sent to Niger until asked about it on a

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talk show. But as former senior CIA analyst Ray McGovern told the journalist William Rivers Pitt last month, "There's too much deception here. Condoleezza Rice insisting she only learned about Ambassador Wilson's mission in June means that neither she nor her staff reads The New York Times. [Op-ed columnist] Nick Kristof on May 6 had a very detailed explication of Wilson's mission to Niger. It is inconceivable. Her remark -- that she didn't know about Joe Wilson's mission to Niger until she was asked on a talk show on June 8 -- is stretching the truth beyond the breaking point."

When Wilson wrote an editorial in The Times explaining the results of his mission, revealing that it was known at the highest levels of the administration that the Niger claim was bogus, and that, obviously, someone let Bush lie about it anyway to maintain momentum during the ramp-up to war, he was "Plamed," as the saying now goes. Someone in the administration called journalists with the revelation that Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, was a deep cover CIA operative. One columnist, Robert Novak, wrote it, and the administration was avenged.

"I operate from the assumption," Wilson told Pitt, "that the reason for doing this was to discourage others who were talking to the press -- and there were many -- from coming forward more openly. The message was, 'Be very careful; do a Wilson on us, and we will do a Plame on you.' This may have discouraged many of them from coming forward. I don't know to be sure, but I've seen far less insider stories about what we were hearing, stories of Cheney pressuring CIA analysts and the like, than there were a few months ago."

As for the famous weapons of mass destruction justification for the pre-emptive Iraq action, the same phantom numbers also remain on the White House Web site: 25,000 liters of anthrax, 38,000 liters of botulinum toxin, 500 tons of sarin, mustard and VX nerve agent, and 30,000 munitions for delivering chemical weapons. And even though Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said, "we know where they are," not an ounce of any of it has been found after nearly a year of investigation and occupation.

In the meantime, 500 young Americans are dead, thousands more maimed, and the far greater number of Iraqi civilians blown to bits, many of them children, can't even be reliably estimated.

But sure, the White House got what it wanted. Maybe in November it'll get what it deserves.

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