

Why does this page look this way?

It appears that your Web browser can not find this page's style and presentation information. You are welcome to use the page as is or, for the best experience, upgrade your browser to its latest version by visiting your browser's Web site or [NYTimes.com's download page](#).

Editorials/Op-Ed

The New York Times

[More Articles in Opinion >](#)

[Skip to article](#)

[NYTimes.com](#)

[Go to a Section](#)

Welcome, [ctzcrank](#) - [Member Center](#) - [Log Out](#) - [Help](#)

Site Search:

[Editorials/Op-Ed Home](#) [Editorials](#) [Columnists](#) [Contributors](#) [Letters](#) [New York/Region Opinions](#)

Op-Ed Columnist

Follow the Uranium

•

[E-Mail This](#)

- [Printer-Friendly](#)
- [Single-Page](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY

SEPARATE LIES
IN THEATERS OCT. 7

By FRANK RICH

Published: July 17, 2005

"I am saying that if anyone was involved in that type of activity which I referred to, they would not be working here."

- Ron Ziegler, press secretary to Richard Nixon, defending the presidential aide Dwight Chapin on Oct. 18, 1972. Chapin was convicted in April 1974 of perjury in connection with his relationship to the political saboteur Donald Segretti.

"Any individual who works here at the White House has the confidence of the president. They wouldn't be working here at the White House if they didn't have the president's confidence."

- Scott McClellan, press secretary to George W. Bush, defending Karl Rove on Tuesday.

WELL, of course, Karl Rove did it. He may not have violated the Intelligence Identities Protection Act of 1982, with its high threshold of criminality for outing a covert agent, but there's no doubt he trashed Joseph Wilson and Valerie Plame. We know this not only because of Matt Cooper's e-mail, but also because of Mr. Rove's own history. Trashing is in his nature, and bad things happen, usually through under-the-radar whispers, to decent people (and their wives) who get in his way. In the 2000 South Carolina primary, John McCain's wife, Cindy, was rumored to be a drug addict (and Senator McCain was rumored to be mentally unstable). In the 1994 Texas governor's race, Ann Richards found herself rumored to be a lesbian. The implication that Mr. Wilson was a John Kerry-ish girlie man beholden to his wife for his meal ticket is of a thematic piece with previous mud splattered on Rove political adversaries. The difference is that this time Mr. Rove got caught.

Even so, we shouldn't get hung up on him - or on most of the other supposed leading figures in this scandal thus far. Not Matt Cooper or Judy Miller or the Wilsons or the bad guy everyone loves to hate, the former CNN star Robert Novak. This scandal is not about them in the end, any more than Watergate was about Dwight Chapin and Donald Segretti or Woodward and Bernstein. It is about the president of the United States. It is about a plot that was hatched at the top of the administration and in which everyone else, Mr. Rove included, are at most secondary players.

To see the main plot, you must sweep away the subplots, starting with the Cooper e-mail. It has been brandished as a smoking gun by Bush bashers and as exculpatory evidence by Bush backers (Mr. Rove, you see, was just trying to ensure that Time had its facts straight). But no one knows what this e-mail means unless it's set against the avalanche of other evidence, most of it secret, including what Mr. Rove said in three appearances before the grand jury. Therein lies the rub, or at least whatever case might be made for perjury.

Another bogus subplot, long popular on the left, has it that Patrick Fitzgerald, the special prosecutor, gave Mr. Novak a free pass out of ideological comradeship. But Mr. Fitzgerald, both young (44) and ambitious, has no record of Starr- or Ashcroft-style partisanship (his contempt for the press notwithstanding) or known proclivity for committing career suicide. What's most likely is that Mr. Novak, more of a common coward than the prince of darkness he fashions himself to be, found a way to spill some beans and avoid Judy Miller's fate. That the investigation has dragged on so long anyway is another indication of the expanded reach of the prosecutorial web.

Apparently this is finally beginning to dawn on Mr. Bush's fiercest defenders and on Mr. Bush himself. Hence, last week's erection of the stonewall manned by the almost poignantly clownish Mr. McClellan, who abruptly rendered inoperative his previous statements that any suspicions about Mr. Rove are "totally ridiculous." The morning after Mr. McClellan went mano a mano with his tormentors in the White House press room - "We've secretly replaced the White House press corps with actual reporters," observed Jon Stewart - the ardently pro-Bush New York Post ran only five paragraphs of a wire-service story on Page 12. That conspicuous burial of what was front-page news beyond Murdochland speaks loudly about the rising anxiety on the right. Since then, White House surrogates have been desperately babbling talking points attacking Joseph Wilson as a partisan and a liar.

These attacks, too, are red herrings. Let me reiterate: This case is not about Joseph Wilson. He is, in Alfred Hitchcock's parlance, a MacGuffin, which, to quote the Oxford English Dictionary, is "a particular event, object,

factor, etc., initially presented as being of great significance to the story, but often having little actual importance for the plot as it develops." Mr. Wilson, his mission to Niger to check out Saddam's supposed attempts to secure uranium that might be used in nuclear weapons and even his wife's outing have as much to do with the real story here as Janet Leigh's theft of office cash has to do with the mayhem that ensues at the Bates Motel in "Psycho."

1 [2](#)

[Next Page >](#)

[More Articles in Opinion >](#)

Related Articles

- [Bush Says He Will Withhold Judgment on Rove Inquiry](#) (July 14, 2005)
- [Rove Case May Test Bush's Loyalty to His Closest Aides](#) (July 13, 2005)
- [Bush to Hold Comments on Rove During Inquiry](#) (July 13, 2005)
- [Editors at Time Inc. Offer Reassurances to Reporters](#) (July 13, 2005)

Related Searches

- [Rove, Karl](#)
- [Bush, George W](#)
- [Plame, Valerie](#)
- [Novak, Robert](#)

Inside NYTimes.com



[In Violin Sections, Women Dominate](#)



[Can Anyone Read My Pet's Tag?](#)



[Undercover With a Biker Gang](#)



[New York Online: Reader, I Dated Him](#)



[Krugman: China Unpegs Itself](#)

Most E-Mailed Articles *The New York Times*

[Past 24 Hours](#) | [Past 7 Days](#)

1. [How Costco Became the Anti-Wal-Mart](#)
2. [Op-Ed Contributor: Why Do They Hate Us? Not Because of Iraq](#)
3. [Paul Krugman: China Unpegs Itself](#)
4. [Thomas L. Friedman: Giving the Hatemongers No Place to Hide](#)
5. [U.S. Will Offer Doctors Free Electronic Records System](#)

[Go to Complete List](#)

1. [How Costco Became the Anti-Wal-Mart](#)
2. [Frank Rich: Follow the Uranium](#)
3. [In Croatia, a New Riviera Beckons](#)
4. [Housing Goes Frothy to Flat in Denver Area](#)
5. [Secrets to Good Hard-Drive Hygiene](#)

[Go to Complete List](#)

[Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company](#) [Home](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Search](#) [Corrections](#) [XML](#) [Help](#) [Contact Us](#)
[Work for Us](#) [Back to Top](#)