THE TANGLED WEB OF LIES

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Brian Birch presents one of the most disturbing cases to rock the American people in more than a decade as he analyzes the complex web of facts and lies involved in the Valerie Plame Wilson case. Few even knew of Plame’s undercover CIA role until the catastrophic leak in Robert Novack’s column. Some White House officials attempted to deny that they knew Plame was a CIA operative. While undercover, Plame was known as an “energy analyst” for “Brewster Jennings and Associates.” The CIA later acknowledged this was a front company for certain investigations.\(^1\) Former CIA official Larry C. Johnson, explained that Plame had been a “non-official cover operative” (NOC). He said, “. . . that meant she agreed to operate overseas without the protection of a diplomatic passport. If caught in that status, she would have been executed.”\(^2\) Special Counsel Fitzgerald admitted that Plame Wilson’s status was not known until her cover was blown when Robert Novak published a column on July 14, 2003.\(^3\)

The big mystery in the Valerie Plame Wilson case is why did they leak her undercover status to reporters? What could be the motive for a top White House official for “outing” a CIA officer whose main responsibility was working in nuclear nonproliferation? The Valerie Plame Wilson case is about political payback against her husband’s public statements which undermined the rational for going to war in Iraq. It is a case of lying, breaking the law, political payback and a clumsy attempt to harm critics of the current administration. As Birch thoroughly explains, numerous journalists were damaged in the case, professionally and personally. However, the individual who lost her career was Valerie Plame Wilson. It is my position that officials in the public trust should not lie. In this case, we see that lying and abuse of power by top White House officials have much greater impacts and consequences than a lie told by a “lay” person (i.e. I’ll read your paper tonight.). Through lies and misrep-
resentations, these political officials were able to harm the reputations of journalists, force one journalist to go to jail, and damage the personal and professional lives of the Wilsons. Lying when one is in a position of public trust is pernicious, corrosive and clearly unethical.

Many believe that Plame’s husband was the main target of the leak. Joe Wilson was a supporter of John Kerry and was a pinch hitter for Kerry during the elections in Iowa, New Hampshire and Maine. Now Wilson IV enters the scene in a controversial assignment for George W. Bush in his second term of office. Wilson explains the assignment in the *Washington Post* as:

I traveled to Niger and found it unlikely that Iraq had attempted to purchase several hundred tons of yellowcake uranium. In his 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush referred to Iraqi attempts to purchase uranium “from Africa.” Between March 2003 and July 2003, the administration refused to acknowledge that it had known for more than a year that the claim on uranium sales from Niger had been discredited, until the day after my article in the *New York Times*. The next day the White House issued a statement that “the sixteen words did not rise to the level of inclusion in the State of the Union address.” Those facts are amply supported in the Senate report.4

In the same article Wilson also states, “Last July 14, Robert Novak, claiming two senior sources, exposed Valerie as an “agency operative [who] suggested sending him to Niger.” Allegedly, we are now dealing with two lies, leaked by one or two Senior White House sources. Novak went ahead with his column despite the fact that the CIA had urged him not to disclose her identity. That leak to Novak may well have been a federal crime and is under investigation.”5

Why did Wilson’s mission to Niger provoke such extreme retaliation against his wife? Clearly, those doing the exposing knew that outing a CIA operative is a felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison and a $50,000 fine. Did they think they could get away with lying through the entire debacle? Did these individuals believe they could get away with lies about Plame’s status and the assignment of Wilson IV to Niger? Why were so many journalists baited in the scheme to disseminate lies? Did the journalists investigate the information and find it to be harmful, not newsworthy or false? Many prominent journalists knew of the information about Plame Wilson as a CIA operative and for one reason or another, refused to print stories after thorough research. This only
brought on more problems for the journalists who refused to become involved in something suspect or a web of lies. As Birch points out, the journalists were indited by a grand jury and asked to reveal sources. The earlier lies about Plame Wilson and Wilson IV brought credibility problems to the journalists and their news organizations as they revealed sources or denied revealing sources.

This entire debacle started with lies that seemed necessary to start a war. In the field of ethics, many philosophers and journalists remind us that lying is one of the worst of practices in which one could become involved. Sir Walter Scott reminds us, “Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.”

It appears that individuals such as Vice President Dick Cheney, Scooter Libby, and others believed that going to war in Iraq was essential. They found the trip and subsequent statements by Joseph Wilson disconcerting. In a web of lies, information was released from the CIA and White House indicating that Valerie Plame Wilson had arranged for her husband’s assignment to Niger. This is a claim vigorously denied by all identified with the trip to Niger. Seymour M. Hersh finds in a *New Yorker* article that a senior Bush official had to deliberately let something false get released. Hersh found that the Plume Wilson information could not have gotten into the system without the agency being involved. Therefore it was an internal intention. Someone set someone up.”

Is it acceptable to ruin the careers of the Wilsons, and as a side bar taint or ruin the careers of several journalists? Is lying acceptable for those in high governmental positions to protect national security?

Philosopher Sissela Bok believes there are few instances when it is appropriate to lie. Bok tells us “a liar often does diminish himself by lying, and the loss is precisely to his dignity, his integrity.” And Gandhi relates that everyone has access to truthfulness if they will but use it, when he says, “Truthfulness is the master-key. Do not lie under any circumstances whatsoever, keep nothing secret, take your teachers and your elders into your confidence and make a clean breast of everything to them.”

Plato may be the philosopher who would allow the lies. In *The Republic*, Plato discusses both the “noble lie” and also the “divine lie.” In the former, rulers for the sake of the state are the only persons allowed to lie. However, Plato, in a Socratic dialogue, relates that the gods have no need to lie or deceive. Public officials should rarely find themselves in a circumstance where a “noble lie” is needed. The case of the Wilsons would not rise to this occasion.
Aristotle would agree as he moves away from the divine lie while considering the character of the individual and therefore the character of the state. He condemns falsehood as “bad and reprehensible” and explains that the truth is “fine and praiseworthy.” Aristotle asks for a moderate individual who neither boasts or disparages the self. The individual would understand the nature of truth because it has been cultivated, fostered, and enriched on a daily basis. This individual would not battle over truth or falsehood; it would be second nature to his/her character.  

Lee Baker has studied politicians, public relations and political spin much of his career. He believes that, “Politicians are willing to believe the most outrageous things if they happen to be saying them. But believing whatever one wants, without bothering to take in the evidence that would warrant an assertion, is a way of avoiding the truth. And that is a lie.”

Are the American people comfortable with their leaders lying to them? In a recent episode of the popular television series “Boston Legal,” an actress portraying a secretary complained that she didn’t mind if the U.S. needed to go to Iraq to get rid of a bad leader. She was embarrassed and offended that the government lied to her unnecessarily about weapons of mass destruction. “I’m patriotic; I support our troops.” However, she couldn’t support lies. Neither can philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant declares: “A lie is a lie . . . whether it be told with good or bad intent . . . But if a lie does no harm to anyone and no one’s interests are affected by it, is it a lie? Certainly.”

There are those who tell us to just lighten up. They believe that lying happens every day, in most political and social situations. That some get carried away in weaving a web of lies, however, would be a problem. Mark Twain wrote a delightfully sarcastic essay entitled “On the Decay of the Art of Lying.” Twain tells his readers that everyone lies; some do it artfully, and others with clumsiness. “Everybody lies — every day; every hour; awake; asleep; in his joy; in his mourning; if he keeps his tongue still, his hands, his feet, his eyes, his attitude, will convey deception — and purposely.”

In the name of national security and peace, can the truth be told? In the case of Valerie Plame Wilson, it appears that information was forged to document weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Most sources in the intelligence community who will go on record, believe that the forgeries were easy to spot. There was never a thought of truth to them until the information was delivered in George W. Bush’s State of the Union
Address. Those sixteen words that stated the weapons existed had to be retracted by a White House that rarely admits error.

In knowing politics, war, and advantages needed in war, Sir Winston Churchill believed that, often, telling the truth became a situational matter of convenience or inconvenience for individuals. He stated, “Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.”\textsuperscript{14} This seems to be the case in our Valerie Plame Wilson affair. I support our philosophical heroes who were not afraid of truth-telling. Socrates supposedly died in the name of truth. For Francis Bacon, truth is “the sovereign good of human nature,” and for Milton, truth has a “bright countenance.”\textsuperscript{15}

Philosopher Robert Solomon reminds us that other philosophers have staked their very reputations on truthfulness. “Epictetus, the early Stoic, defended, above all, the principle ‘not to speak falsely.’” In more modern times, Immanuel Kant took the prohibition against lying as his paradigm of a “categorical imperative,” the unconditional moral law. There could be no exceptions, not even to save the life of a friend. Even Nietzsche took honesty to be one of his four “cardinal” virtues, and the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre insisted that deception is a vice, perhaps indeed the ultimate vice.\textsuperscript{16}

Admitting to a lie and setting the record straight is the first step in the process. As this scandal metastasizes, and threatens to destroy the White House, one chief of staff at a time, we might hope that this administration would learn the lesson of history from the philosophers — lying is rarely for a good purpose.

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NOTES


3 \textit{Ibid.}

5 Ibid.


