

SCOTTIE AND CONDI AND THE NIGER INTELLIGENCE

My posts on Scottie McC's book have, thus far, treated issues closely connected to the CIA Leak investigation (well, except for the post in which he calls cracking down on deadbeat dads "trivial").

In this post, I want to look at how he deals with the underlying issue—the Niger intelligence and the White House's response to it. I find his treatment particularly curious. As many of you have pointed out, Scottie McC is fairly critical of Condi Rice.

Over time, I was struck by how deft she is at protecting her reputation. No matter what went wrong, she was somehow able to keep her hands clean, even when the problems related to matters under her direct purview, including the WMD rationale for war in Iraq, the decision to invade Iraq, the sixteen words in the State of the Union address, and postwar planning and implementation of the strategy of Iraq.

But his book, in some key ways, helps her protect her reputation. Now, most of this is—I think—ignorance on the part of Scottie McC, not any attempt to put Condi in a good light. Nevertheless, it is rather telling that he seems to be unaware of some of the key roles that Condi played in precisely these intelligence issues. Which is another way of saying he really misses some of the tensions between NSC and CIA the week of the leak—and therefore some of the underlying skirmishes that contributed to Plame's outing.

For this post, I'm going to do a timeline—both of the events he covers, and the events he misses.

June 8, 2003: Condi gets beat up by George Stephanopoulos

Scottie McC does not mention this appearance at all, gliding directly from Kristof's column to Pincus', and ignoring Condi's appearance as the decisive factor in leading Joe Wilson to publish his op-ed and, apparently, in getting Bush to tell Libby he was interested in the Kristof allegations:

In early June, while making inquiries about what Kristof wrote, Pincus had contacted Cathie Martin, who oversaw the vice president's communications office. Martin went to Scooter Libby to discuss what Pincus was sniffing around about. The vice president and Libby were quietly stepping up their efforts to counter the allegations of the anonymous envoy to Niger, and Pincus's story was one opportunity for them to do just that.

[snip]

In this atmosphere of growing controversy—and with no WMD in sight anywhere in Iraq—Kristof's anonymous source, Joe Wilson, decided to go public.

Let me clear—Scottie McC may well not be aware of Bush's comments to Libby on June 9, apparently the intensified oppo campaign against Wilson and he may well not have read Wilson's book, in which Wilson makes clear that he decided to write his column because Condi ignored Wilson's demand to set things straight. Scottie McC may not realize that Cathie Martin appears to have discussed an earlier Pincus column with Libby—one that revealed that Libby and Cheney had been cracking heads at CIA. But because he does not deal with these issues, he underplays Bush's role and the role of the animosity between the CIA and WH in the leak.

July 5-9, 2003: White House responds to Wilson's

column

Here's how Scottie McC describes the White House response to Wilson's column and to Ari Fleischer's admission, in his July 7 gaggle, that the Niger claim was based on the forgeries and therefore shouldn't be used.

Throughout the day [July 7], there was much discussion among the president's advisers on whether or not to acknowledge the obvious. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice emerged as one of the chief advocates for acknowledging a mistake, and her point of view prevailed.

[snip]

Authorized by the president, "senior officials" [almost certainly including Condi] were quoted as elaborating on this concession.

Meanwhile, Scottie McC explains, OVP was hitting back at Wilson.

Vice President Cheney and his staff were leading a White House effort to discredit Joe Wilson himself. On a broader front, the White House sought to dispel the notion that the intelligence had been "cooked" by showing that it had been provided and cleared by the CIA.

These two passages are curious for a number of reasons. First, he separates the attacks on the CIA and Wilson from the larger question of how to respond to the sixteen words controversy. Not only does this belie the fact that, at a White House senior staff meeting on July 7 or 8, there was a discussion,

Uranium story is becoming a question of the President's trustworthiness. It leads all news.

With Karl Rove adding:

Now they have accepted Joe Wilson as credible expert. We're one day late at getting CIA to write a response.

That discussion ties the 16 words question directly to the question of a CIA response and Joe Wilson.

Further, Scottie McC's account of the White House—in isolation from the CIA—deciding what to say conflicts with Woodward's account (and note, Scottie McC explains that he was taking a few days to talk to prior WH spokespeople and NSC directors this week, suggesting he was tangentially involved in the response, if at all, so both these accounts are substantially second-hand). Here's Woodward:

On Saturday, July 5, Tenet talked to the chief NSC spokesperson, Anna Perez. As best she could tell, the fact that the 16 words about the uranium had made it into the State of the Union address was the result of failures in both the NSC staff and the CIA. "We're both going to have to eat some of this," Perez said. Something should be done to correct the record on what the president had said in his speech.

[snip]


Tenet agreed with Perez that all would share the blame. The plan was to work on a joint statement over the weekend that would be put out on Monday. Rice and Tenet spoke next and agreed that they had to put the issue to bed. Rice was with the president traveling in Africa. Hadley and some NSC staffers worked on a draft but they couldn't reach an agreement. (231-2)

I think Scottie McC's partly right (about the timing—I doubt this happened on July 5) and

Woodward's partly right (about the cooperation between Condi and Tenet). If that assessment is right, then for some reasons Scottie McC either doesn't know about or doesn't include the CIA's involvement and he pretends OVP was the only one pushing a response to Joe Wilson.

July 10 to 12: NSC, CIA, and OVP fight over a response

Now, as I said before, I don't think Scottie McC's neglect of these issues is necessarily deliberate. Some of this stuff is pretty weedy and he may honestly not have been told about it.

 But for someone who says he followed the trial, I don't know how he could miss the NSC-CIA-OVP tensions later in the week. As he presents it, Condi's decision to blame Tenet came directly on the heels of her willingness to accept the blame.

But that still left open the emerging question, How and why did our intelligence about Iraq go so badly wrong? And how did the now discredited Niger claim make it into the most heavily vetted speech of the year, the State of the Union.

In a July 11 briefing with the traveling press pool aboard Air Force One on the way to Uganda, Condoleezza Rice was peppered with questions—forty in all—about the infamous "sixteen words."

[snip]

Was it true, Rice was asked, that the CIA had expressed doubts about the Niger claim to the White House well before the State of the Union? "The CIA cleared the speech in its entirety," Rice replied. "If the CIA, the director of Central Intelligence, had said, take this out of the speech, it would have been gone, without question. What we've said subsequently is, knowing what we now

know, that some of the Niger documents were apparently forged, we wouldn't have put this in the president's speech." (Rice would find out several days later that the National Security Council, which she oversaw, bore primary responsibility for the error.)

And Scottie McC reports Tenet's mea culpa as a pure mea culpa, without noting the good deal of push-back he included in it or the debates underlying it.

This ignores several things that were prominent in other accounts of the week and in the trial coverage. Take Ron Suskind's version of it—which depicts Condi calling Tenet in Sun Valley in the middle of the night before July 11 to argue over who would take blame. Suskind describes Tenet laying out all the evidence CIA had that NSC was responsible, and Condi, as a result, screwing Tenet the next day.

They talked briefly about flurries of faxes between NSC and CIA on the day before the State of the Union in January, and that it was difficult for CIA to get a handle on all that NSC was proffering, fax by fax, on deadline. In other words, there was, in this case, a trail of paper, a few clear recollections, and visible actions.

Tenet's rendition of the key, probably discoverable, evidence in the matter might incline someone like Rice—who, along with the President, bears some culpability in this matter—to acknowledge what she knew and when she knew it. (244)

[snip]

While the conventional response is to surmise Rice said what she said *in spite* of Tenet's predawn briefing, it is probably more apt to say she singly blamed CIA *because* of what Tenet told

her. He had a strong case of shared culpability to make; her job was to preempt the emergence of that case with overwhelming force.

Meanwhile, through the morning hours, Tenet was on the phone with his team back at Langley, as they constructed their own statement to release—a statement that they ran by Karl Rove and other aides at the White House. (245-6)

And take all the dramatic testimony from the trial. There was Cathie Martin's testimony about sitting outside a room while Libby, Cheney, Hadley, and John McLaughlin argued over the content of the CIA speech. There's the news that, when McLaughlin faxed the statement to OVP later in the week, Cheney wrote "unacceptable" on it. But most of all, there's the meeting in which Hadley passed on the news, via Condi, that the President was "comfortable"—at least with plans to declassify a bunch of stuff, including at a minimum the CIA trip report and possible mentions of the NIE and "CP"—but possibly, given the timing, with blaming everything on the CIA in spite of the evidence.

There was a huge fight all week between NSC, CIA, and OVP. It's a fight that is necessary context to the outing of Valerie Plame and the subsequent sharing of her identity with reporters. And it's a fight that put Condi—and in one key instance, through Condi, Bush—squarely in these fights.

The aftermath

To some degree, this all sets the scene for Scottie McC to tell the fiction of a remarkably transparent effort in the aftermath of the leak (which of course is precisely the time he waltzed onto the scene as the spokesperson). In addition to ridiculously claiming (cited above) that Condi didn't find out that NSC was responsible for the 16 words until after the leak, he describes an effort to come clean on

the 16 words.

Andy [Card directed] everyone on the White House staff to provide all relevant recollections and documents tracing the genesis and handling of the uranium claim and Dan [Bartlett organized] the information and develop[ed] a clear forthright presentation that showed how such an egregious error occurred.

He describes a curious meeting that may explain why Patrick Fitzgerald was looking for WHIG records from from July 6 to July 30.

On July 21 there was a late-night gathering among select senior staff advisers in Andy Card's office to discuss our communications strategy for dealing with the issue. Present were Card, Bartlett, Condi Rice and deputy Steve Hadley, White House counsel Alberto Gonzales, staff secretary Harriet Miers, and myself.

(I have a gut feel that this crowd decided to publish the NIE over Tenet's reluctance, which would have pissed him off about Valerie's cover even more. But that's just an outtamyarse guess.)

And, much later in the book, in the section explaining Scottie McC's surprise at learning Bush had authorized the leaking of the NIE, Scottie claims that Condi first raised declassifying the NIE on July 18, and that the NIE was declassified right away.

A week later, on July 18, Condi Rice requested formal declassification of part of the October NIE, including the "key judgments" section and the paragraphs relating to Iraqi attempts to secure uranium in Africa. This was done through the normal CIA channels the same day, and Tenet personally spoke with

Cheney and Rumsfeld that day to let them know it had happened.

Now, I'm sorry, say what you will about Scottie McC narrativizing things in such a way that it protects his fragile notion of Bush the honest man, but this is plain out hooey. Scottie McC doesn't even mention Alan Foley—the head of WINPAC who told NSC to take the Niger claim out of the SOTU—even though there were public accounts of Foley meeting with SSCI in this time frame to tell his side of the story (and, in more subtle news, Libby recorded Tenet saying he'd have to get Foley's buy-off on the final version of whether and how CIA warned the White House not to use the intelligence). And there is abundant evidence that Condi and Hadley and Bush were at least aware of Cheney's insistence on declassifying—at the least—the CIA leak report and the NIE, starting well before July 18.

If Scottie McC had a deliberate purpose for the way he tells the story of the clash between CIA and OVP/NSC, I suspect it's an attempt to deny that tension, not to mention pretend that the White House's inclusion of the Niger claim in the SOTU was innocent. But it has the remarkable effect of helping Condi "keep her hands clean," even while criticizing her for managing to do just that.

And perhaps not incidentally, it makes the whole notion that Bush authorized the leak of the NIE (and, most likely, Plame) without anyone suspecting or knowing about it much more plausible.