

Case #14

On Friday, April 7, 2006 the White House appeared to confirm that President Bush had authorized a leak of classified information about pre-Iraq War intelligence, describing the release of such information as beneficial for the “public interest.” The statement came the day after disclosures in court documents that the White House, despite Bush’s frequent criticisms of leaks, secretly provided material to a reporter in early July 2003.

The government did not announce declassification and publicly release the material until 10 days later. The gap suggests that Bush authorized the leak before his senior intelligence aides and advisors fully concluded that its release would not violate national security. Some legal scholars contend that by authorizing the leak, Bush’s action was tantamount to an official declassification.

A White House press secretary was quoted as saying “There were irresponsible and unfounded accusations being made against the administration, suggesting that we had manipulated or misused that intelligence in order to justify going to war.” The press secretary went on to state “Because of the public debate that was going on and some of the wild accusations that were flying around... we felt it was very much in the public interest that what information could be declassified, be declassified. And that’s exactly what we did.” The White House’s position was that the release of the material was intended to inform public debate about the war.

The document that Bush declassified, a summary of the “National Intelligence Estimate,” was provided to counter the claims of an administration critic. Former Ambassador Joseph Wilson had been sent to Africa by the CIA in 2002 to investigate administration claims that Iraq was seeking to purchase nuclear materials. Joseph Wilson determined the claims to be unfounded. Wilson later charged that the administration had “twisted” intelligence when it said Saddam Hussein’s attempts to get uranium were proof that he was trying to rebuild his nuclear-weapons program.

To counter Wilson’s claims, the administration disclosed classified information which they used to attack his arguments and undermine his credibility, recent court filings show. Bush’s role came to light in documents filed by a special prosecutor seeking a perjury conviction against Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney’s former chief of staff. According to the documents, Libby testified that he leaked the classified information to New York Times reporter Judith Miller after Bush gave Cheney his personal authorization.

That criminal investigation was launched after another leak engineered by White House officials; the identity of Wilson’s wife, undercover CIA agent Valerie Plame. Her name was allegedly disclosed to journalists in an effort to taint Wilson by suggesting that his mission to Africa had been arranged as a personal junket by his wife. It is illegal to knowingly leak the name of a covert operative.

The ensuing controversy has centered on long-standing complaints that the Bush Administration uses intelligence data for political advantage; particularly in making the case for

invading Iraq and defending the war. Democrats have publicly stated the leak was part of an administration pattern of “selective disclosure” to support its arguments and rebut its critics while guarding data that could prove embarrassing or politically damaging.