

The Washington scandal that wasn't

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Has a Washington scandal ever ended with a more anti-climactic splat than the Valerie Plame/Joe Wilson affair?

This week it was at last fully and finally confirmed that it was former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage who had leaked the name of CIA agent Valerie Plame.

Put like that, the story sounds pretty bare. So let me put it another way. Imagine that Ken Starr's investigation had concluded that Monica Lewinsky had made the whole thing up -- and that it was established beyond all possible doubt that at the very moment Monica claimed she was experiencing ecstasy in the Oval Office with Bill Clinton, Clinton was in fact up in the White House family quarters helping Hillary sort old wedding photographs.

Imagine all that, and you only begin to imagine how utterly the biggest scandal of the Bush years has fizzled into nothing.

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The scandal originated in George Bush's Jan. 28, 2003, State of the Union address:

"The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Six months later, on July 6, 2003, The New York Times published an op-ed by one Joseph Wilson that accused the president of twisting intelligence. Wilson explained that the CIA had sent him to Niger in 2002 to investigate Iraqi uranium buying — and that he had reported back that it was all bunk. Suddenly all Washington was asking the same question: Who the hell was Joe Wilson?

Wilson, a former ambassador to Gabon now struggling to earn a living as an international business consultant, seemed a very unlikely person to investigate a secret nuclear transaction. The next week, syndicated columnist Robert Novak provided the answer: Wilson had been proposed for the assignment by his wife, Valerie Plame, "an Agency operative on weapons of mass destruction."

The administration's critics immediately erupted in outrage. "Did senior Bush officials blow the cover of a U.S. intelligence officer working covertly in a field of vital importance to national security — and break the law — in order to strike at a Bush administration critic and intimidate others?" So demanded David Corn of The Nation magazine.

For his part, Ambassador Wilson vehemently denied that his wife had anything to do with his assignment.

The administration succumbed to media pressure and appointed a special prosecutor, Patrick Fitzgerald, to investigate the case. Critics gleefully

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settled in to wait for "Fitzmas" — the happy day when the prosecutor would indict the so-called neocon cabal. Many speculated that the scandal must touch the Vice President, even the President. Wilson himself said he was looking forward to seeing Karl Rove frog-marched out of the White House in handcuffs.

Over time, it became clear that almost every detail of Joe Wilson's original story was false. Wilson's appointment was engineered by his wife. The report he filed did not acquit the Iraqis. Wilson had not detected forged documents. Above all: An Iraqi trade mission had in fact sought uranium in Niger in 1998 — the President had spoken accurately.

Nonetheless, the Plame scandal ricocheted throughout the government. The Bush administration's pro-democracy, pro-Israel foreign policies were ferociously opposed by most of the U.S. national-security bureaucracy, and especially the CIA. Inflamed by the Plame allegations, CIA officials acted almost as part of the Kerry campaign organization through campaign 2004. Since Kerry's defeat, CIA betrayals of administration secrets have helped clinch one Pulitzer Prize for The New York Times and another for the Washington Post.

Yet somehow Fitzmas never came.

And then last week, Newsweek excerpted a new book co-authored by the magazine's Michael Isikoff and arch-conspiracy theorist David Corn that reveals that the Plame leak sprang not from Rove or Cheney, but from Armitage — and that Patrick Fitzgerald has known this truth for close to three years.

Armitage was never an administration hawk. Indeed, he and his close friend Colin Powell loathed the so-called neocon cabal as fervently as David

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Corn
himself. Armitage identified Plame to Novak not to settle scores, but
out of
a weak-minded delight in gossip.

Armitage, a former Marine, often questioned the physical courage of
civilians who disagreed with him. But after the scandal exploded, and
even
as his administration colleagues and the President to whom he owed
loyalty
were exposed to enormous legal jeopardy by his actions, he kept silent
to
protect himself.

It's a shameful story. But the shame does not fall quite where the
media
promoters of the story hoped it would. Which may explain why newspapers
such
as The New York Times and left-wing blogs which once relished every
last
twist and turn of the saga have suddenly gone as silent about it as
Armitage
himself.

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