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Armitage's Leak

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By Robert D. Novak

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When Richard Armitage finally acknowledged last week that he was my source three years ago in revealing Valerie Plame Wilson as a CIA employee, the former deputy secretary of state's interviews obscured what he really did. I want to set the record straight based on firsthand knowledge.

First, Armitage did not, as he now indicates, merely pass on something he had heard and that he "thought" might be so. Rather, he identified to me the CIA division where Mrs. Wilson worked and said flatly that she recommended the mission to Niger by her husband, former ambassador Joseph Wilson. Second, Armitage did not slip me this information as idle chitchat, as he now suggests. He made clear that he considered it especially suited for my column.

An accurate depiction of what Armitage actually said deepens the irony of his being my source. He was a foremost internal skeptic of the administration's war policy, and I had long opposed military intervention in Iraq. Zealous foes of George W. Bush transformed me, improbably, into the president's lapdog. But they cannot fit Armitage into the left-wing fantasy of a well-crafted White House conspiracy to destroy Joe and Valerie Wilson. The news that he, and not Karl Rove, was the leaker was devastating for the left.

A peculiar convergence had joined Armitage and me on the same historic path. During his quarter of a century in Washington, I had had no contact with Armitage before our fateful interview. I tried to see him in the first 2 1/2 years of the Bush administration, but he rebuffed me -- summarily and with disdain, I thought.

Then, without explanation, in June 2003, Armitage's office said the deputy secretary would see me. This was two weeks before Joe Wilson outed himself as author of a 2002 report for the CIA debunking Iraqi interest in buying uranium in Africa.

I sat down with Armitage in his State Department office the afternoon of July 8 with tacit rather than explicit ground rules: deep background with nothing said attributed to Armitage or even to an anonymous State Department official. Consequently, I refused to identify Armitage as my leaker until his admission was forced by "Hubris," a new book by reporters Michael Isikoff and David Corn that absolutely identified him.

Late in my hour-long interview with Armitage, I asked why the CIA had sent Wilson -- who lacked intelligence experience, nuclear policy expertise or recent contact with Niger -- on the African mission. He told The Post last week that his answer was: "I don't know, but I think his wife worked out there."

Neither of us took notes, and nobody else was present. But I recalled our conversation that week in writing a column, while Armitage reconstructed it months later for federal prosecutors. He had told me unequivocally that Mrs. Wilson worked in the CIA's Counterproliferation Division and that she had suggested her husband's mission. As for his current implication that he never expected this to be published, he noted that the story of Mrs. Wilson's role fit the style of the old Evans-Novak column -- implying to me that it continued reporting Washington inside information.

Valerie Plame Wilson's name appeared in my column July 14, 2003, but it was not until Oct. 1 that I was contacted about it by Armitage, indirectly. Washington lobbyist Kenneth Duberstein, Armitage's close friend and political adviser, called me to say that the deputy secretary feared he had "inadvertently" (the word Armitage used in last week's interviews) disclosed Mrs. Wilson's identity to me in July and

was considering resignation. (Duberstein's phone call was disclosed in the Isikoff-Corn book, which used Duberstein as a source. They reported that Duberstein was responsible for arranging my unexpected interview with Armitage.)

Duberstein told me Armitage wanted to know whether he was my source. I did not reply because I was sure that Armitage knew he was the source. I believed he contacted me Oct. 1 because of news the weekend of Sept. 27-28 that the Justice Department was investigating the leak. I cannot credit Armitage's current claim that he realized he was the source only when my Oct. 1 column revealed that the official who gave me the information was "no partisan gunslinger."

Armitage's silence for the next 2 1/2 years caused intense pain for his colleagues in government and enabled partisan Democrats in Congress to falsely accuse Rove of being my primary source. When Armitage now says he was mute because of special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald's request, that does not explain his silent three months between his claimed first realization that he was the source and Fitzgerald's appointment on Dec. 30, 2003. Armitage's tardy self-disclosure is tainted because it is deceptive.

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