

## The New York Times

---

### *Joseph Wilson, Who Challenged Iraq War Narrative, Dies at 69*

He contradicted a statement in President George W. Bush's State of the Union address. A week later, his wife at the time, Valerie Plame, was outed as a C.I.A. agent.



By **Neil Genzlinger**

Sept. 27, 2019, 1:52 p.m. ET



Former Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson in 2008 with his wife at the time, the former C.I.A. officer Valerie Plame. On Friday, after his death, she called him “an American hero.” Charles Dharapak/Associated Press

Joseph C. Wilson, the long-serving American diplomat whose clash with the administration of President George W. Bush in 2003 led to the unmasking of his wife at the time, Valerie Plame, as a C.I.A. agent, resulting in accusations that the revelation was political payback, died on Friday at his home in Santa Fe, N.M. He was 69.

Ms. Plame said the cause was organ failure.

Mr. Wilson served in numerous posts, many in Africa, in a 23-year diplomatic career that began in 1976. One posting had been to Niger, and in 2002, by then a private citizen, he was asked by the C.I.A. to travel to that country to try to verify reports that Niger had sold a nuclear material, uranium yellowcake, to Iraq in the 1990s. At the time, the Bush administration was building to a crisis point with Iraq and its leader, Saddam Hussein, and among the issues was whether Iraq had or was developing nuclear weapons.

Ambassador Wilson concluded from his trip that the reports of a Niger-Iraq deal were false. After President Bush, in his State of the Union Message in January 2003, said that “the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa,” and then ordered an invasion of Iraq seven weeks later, Mr. Wilson felt the record needed to be corrected.

On July 6, 2003, he wrote an Op-Ed article in The New York Times titled, “What I Didn’t Find in Africa.”

“If my information was deemed inaccurate, I understand (though I would be very interested to know why),” he wrote. “If, however, the information was ignored because it did not fit certain preconceptions about Iraq, then a legitimate argument can be made that we went to war under false pretenses.”

That suggestion did not sit well with Mr. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and others in the administration. A week after the Op-Ed was published, Robert Novak, a syndicated columnist with conservative leanings and Republican connections, wrote a column identifying Ms. Plame as a C.I.A. operative, a startling breach given that her work required secrecy.

An investigation into the leak of Ms. Plame’s identity led to charges against Mr. Cheney’s chief of staff, I. Lewis Libby Jr., not for leaking the information but for lying about his conversations with reporters about Ms. Plame and for obstruction of justice. President Bush commuted his 30-month prison sentence, and last year President Trump gave him a full pardon.

For Mr. Wilson, the decision to write the Op-Ed article was a matter of patriotic duty.

“The path to writing the op-ed piece had been straightforward in my own mind,” he wrote in a 2004 memoir, “The Politics of Truth: Inside the Lies That Put the White House on Trial and Betrayed My Wife’s CIA Identity.” “My government had refused to address the fundamental question of how the lie regarding Saddam’s supposed attempt to purchase African uranium had found its way into the State of the Union address. Time after time during the previous four months, from March to July, administration spokespeople had sloughed off the reality that the president of the United States had sent our country to war in order to defend us against the threat of the ‘mushroom cloud,’ when they knew, as did I, that at least one of the two ‘facts’ underpinning the case was not a fact at all.”

Ms. Plame, in a telephone interview, said he had never regretted the decision.

“He did it because he felt it was his responsibility as a citizen,” she said. “It was not done out of partisan motivation, despite how it was spun.”

“He had the heart of a lion,” she added. “He’s an American hero.”

*A full obituary will follow.*

Neil Genzlinger is a writer for the Obituaries Desk. Previously he was a television, film and theater critic.  
@genznyt • Facebook