

The TPM Interview With Ambassador Joseph Wilson

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(Ambassador Joseph Wilson served in the US Foreign Service from 1976 to 1998. Among various assignments during that period he served as Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Baghdad from 1988-1991; acting Ambassador to Iraq during Operation Desert Shield; Ambassador to Gabon; and Director for African Affairs at the National Security Council from 1997-1998. On July 6th of this year he wrote an [OpEd column](#) in the New York Times in which he described a trip he made to Niger in the spring of 2002 to investigate claims that the country had agreed to sell uranium to Iraq. This week he [commented](#) on the latest developments in Iraq in San Jose Mercury News.)

TPM sat down with Wilson on Tuesday, September 16th in Washington, DC

TPM: It is September 16th and it seems in the last couple months in Iraq we've basically gone through--quickly gone through--three phases, as near as I can tell. We had a period where there were fairly constant guerilla attacks, and then things escalated with a series of major bombings, and then the administration--first in sort of fits and starts and then in two or three major moves--did this reconfiguring of their policy. The president came forward with his budget request and the new overture towards the United Nations, and we're still trying to negotiate some sort of new arrangement with the international community. So, setting aside why we're in Iraq, how we go there, whether we should have gone in in the first place, where are we now? Where do you see our position right now?

WILSON: Well, I think we're fucked. I think the--we should have learned from the bombing of the United Nations building that there was all sorts of anti--not just American but anti-international presence--pressure building within Iraq. And I think we should have reacted rather quickly to that by attempting to truly embrace the United Nations in the sense of internationalization. A crime against the United Nations should have been perceived as a crime against us all, and we should have been much more aggressive in ensuring that we did everything we could to help the United Nations through that period. And that would have meant really trying to draw them into something that, as I said the other day, would help us change "latitudes and attitudes" in Iraq (to quote Jimmy Buffett). And by that I mean what

you need to do is, you need to aggressively persuade Iraqis that what we--the rest of the world, not the United States, the rest of the world--are doing is attempting to assist it through this difficult period and assist it in reconstructing itself in a new, modern, post-Saddam Iraq.

We didn't do that in a positive way. We made all the right noises about de Mello's death and the deaths of the United Nations people, and then we made some noises about how this is an opportunity for the international community to realize its interests are at stake as well. I think we should have been much more aggressive in embracing this crime against all of us, because at the end of the day the United Nations bureaucracy is nothing more or nothing less than the will of its membership--and we are the predominant member of the United Nations. We should not have shied away from that. I think that the bombing of the ayatollah in Najaf was the real clarion call to us and the rest of the world as to how dire a situation we find ourselves in. I say that because it was very clearly an attempt to draw the Shi'a off the sidelines. Now, the Shi'a populate the south between Baghdad and Kuwait--in other words, the route that we are going to have to take one of these days when we leave Iraq.

The Shi'a have been content with what I consider to be a tactical ceasefire, tactical truce with the United States. They've been content with that so long as they're able to consolidate their control, political control over the villages in the south and the towns in the south, and so long as the Americans were killing Sunni on their behalf. That means that if you were Sunni, that they eventually would have to kill--if in fact there's a war between the Shi'a and the Sunni. Now the bombing of Najaf made very clear that the Sunni were not going to go along willingly, either by being killed by Americans or by not resisting what they think is going to be a Shi'a push for power.

TPM: Now do you come at this with a clear sense--or a clear assumption--about who was behind that bombing? I mean, it may be from the Sunni side, but there's this whole debate about, are these Baathists remnants? Are they some sort of al Qaida?

WILSON: You can call them what you want. Whether you use Rumsfeld's term, 'dead enders', you can call them remnants of the Baath party, you can call them Sunni extremists--it doesn't make any difference who actually did it. What makes a difference in all this is who people believe did it. And people believe that Sunni elements did and at the end of the day the dead enders and the Baathis are largely Sunni. And when Saddam is found and killed, and when the dead enders are rounded up and done away with, you will still have the Sunni who will be dedicated to defending themselves against what they fear is going to be a Shi'a attempt to exact retribution on them for the hundred years that they've been oppressed by Sunni-dominated governments. So it doesn't--in the Arab world, something like this, it matters less who did it and much more the perception of who did it on the part of those who were the victims of the crime. Let me just say the car-bombing in Najaf almost brought the Shi'a off the sidelines. They would--I suspect they're still looking for ways to avenge this particular death or these deaths. If they come off the sideline and either clamor for a more rapid transfer of power to Iraqis (because they think they will benefit by a transfer of power) or by beginning to run operations against the Sunni, we will find ourselves either in a situation where Shi'a civil disturbances and civil unrest are making it difficult for us to control the south, and/or we'll be in the middle of a civil war which would make our own occupation of Iraq infinitely more difficult.

TPM: And so it seems like in your sense of what's happening here--obviously there's this debate in the U.S., you know, people controlled by Saddam, you know, kind of Arab nationalists, al Qaida, etc.--but you see it more through this prism of the historic antagonism between Shi'a and Sunni in Iraq and that's really the fundamental issue? And these other ones are maybe less important than that?

WILSON: Yeah, I think you have to see it the context within which we're working, which is largely a society in which allegiances and loyalties are family/clan/tribe-dependent and the enemy of my brother is my enemy. My brother's--well, you know, it goes basically from family out. If you're a friend of my family--it's family, clan, tribe, and then the broader group. I don't think that the--and then you have within that, you have, of course, you have this whole phenomenon of the Shi'a south which is populated--they're very well organized, they have achieved--in Iran they have achieved political power. In Iraq they clearly seek it whether the Iraqi post-Saddam government ends up being a theocracy or not I think is probably up for debate. I'm not at all persuaded that the Iraqi Shi'a are theocrats in the same way that Khomeini and the Iranian Shi'a are, but nonetheless I think that they do see the need to have like-minded people in political positions throughout the country.

TPM: Now you said before that after the UN bombing was the turning point--or I guess we've had a series of turning points and then the bombing in Najaf. Now after the UN bombing, we made sort of a--what a lot of people saw as a half-hearted return to the UN and try to get a resolution but didn't really put much more on the table. Now we're in negotiations, basically with the French and the Russians as the key sort of brokers of a possible new resolution. Concretely, after the UN bombing, after the Najaf bombing, what should we have done? You know, what things should we have done that we did not do? I mean obviously, as you said, we said the right things, but what sort of substantive changes should we have offered to make? What concretely should we have done and what should we be doing now that we're possibly not doing?

WILSON: Well I think even before the bombing of the UN building and the Najaf mosque we should have been actively pursuing a new set of resolutions which would have shared the burden and shared the risk for this reconstruction effort with the international community writ large. Rather than kind of lording it over these countries that did not participate in the war, that the war was far easier than anybody anticipated, we should have understood early on that making the peace was going to be as difficult as it's proven to be. I've always said that we needed to look at it as businessmen always look at high-risk business investments. The oil business is a great example, although you have to sort of think of it separate from oil in Iraq. But typically, before you had good science to help you through the seismic studies, the trick in oil was not so much the reward that everybody would gain if you found oil, but spreading the risk in such a way that nobody lost too much if you came up with a dry hole or a series of dry holes.

It was a question of managing the risk, and we did not manage the risk of this enterprise very well in a strategic sense. We've alienated the international community, we've made it very clear that if you weren't going to play with us before you couldn't play in this afterwards, and I think that was precisely the wrong thing to do. Concretely, I think that we had to have as our first principal objective--after having taken Baghdad--making a good first impression. In

other words, establishing firmly in the minds of the Iraqis that this was in fact a liberation/reconstruction activity and not an occupation activity.

Now there were a number of ways of doing that. First and foremost, our first military priority after having secured the weapons of mass destruction sites (which apparently we did not do very well either) would have been to ensure the security and safety of the principal population centers, so that Iraqis could feel comfortable walking around day or night, in their communities and on their streets and in their parks, without fear of being attacked, without fear of car jackings, without fear of kidnappings, without fear of rapes and other violence forced upon them. That was essentially a policing operation. That is a classic operation for us to have invited the international community to come in and participate in.

We don't do national policing. We do state policing, we have a national investigatory agency, the FBI, but we don't do national policing and we particularly don't do it in the way that it probably needed to be done in the aftermath of the Second Gulf War. The Europeans do. The French have a national Gendarmerie, the Italians have the Carabinieri, the Spanish have the Guardia Civil. They do national policing; they train to military standards; they follow a military-style doctrine; they have military-style discipline. It is an organization that is for all intents and purposes paramilitary, but it has policing functions. They would have been perfect for that. When I was political adviser to CINCEUR [Commander in Chief, United States European Command], we did the Bosnia intervention. One of the things we did early on from our European command headquarters was go around and talk to these countries about how they could use their national policing force as an adjunct to our own military presence--understanding that it was the role of the military to win the battle, put in the interposition force, in the case of Iraq fight the insurgency--but you probably had better type forces, in terms of what their training was, in terms of what their understanding of their mission was, in terms of what their resources and capabilities and armaments were, for a policing-style operation.

Secondly, in addition to making the Iraqis feel safe early on, we needed to devote all our attention to providing them with their basic human needs. That includes such things as water, electricity, sanitation, medical supplies--all those sorts of things. I was struck, for example, when we tried to make a visual of the first relief trucks going into southern Iraq. We tried to create some p.r. victory out of that. And what we found, if you recall, we had maybe two or three trucks full of fresh water and the distribution of the supplies degenerated into a riot, essentially. The lesson we should have learned from that was that if you know you're going to have three truckloads worth of demand for the product that you're delivering, send six trucks so that people do not riot--so that they really do feel comfortable. So keeping people safe, making them feel comfortable. On the latter score--bringing the humanitarian supplies--one of the things we did in the Bosnia operation was, as soon as we understood that we were going to begin planning for it, the then-Commander in Chief of U.S. Armed Forces, George Joulwan traveled--I went with him--down to Geneva--

TPM: And you had a formal role during this operation?

WILSON: I was political advisor to George Joulwan, the commander in chief.

TPM: And that's commander in chief?

WILSON: U.S. Armed Forces Europe. And we were the lead military organization in that operation. We owned the 20,000 American troops that participated in the operation until they got down to Bosnia, when they became part of a NATO operation which was under the command of General Joulwan in his NATO hat--it's a little complicated for people who don't have the business to understand. George and I went down to--General Joulwan and I--went down to Geneva and we spoke with the UN Humanitarian organizations early on and we set up a liaison office so that we could marry up, to the best--to the largest extent possible, the civilian and military cultures that would be involved in this. And George used to brief this. He used to have a slide--two slides--one that was a big "M" little "c" and the other which was a big "C" little "m." Now the point he tried to make with that was when you do these sort of operations you go in big military--the military takes care of all the tasks that it can take care of so long as the situation is insecure. But the military also works very closely with a small civilian component for the humanitarian relief activities that the civilian component can deliver more efficiently than the military can and for which the civilian component is in fact organized to do.

As the situation becomes more secure and the civilian component can operate in relative security, you grow the civilian component as you're shrinking the military component. So some of those tasks that the military is taking in the first place are shifted over to the civilian. In this case we didn't have that setup with the NGO community. We went in and there was no way to hand it off. And so neither did we secure the territory but nor did we have a plan in place for after it was secure to hand off the responsibility to the civilians for those nonessential military tasks.

And so it's no surprise that we've got far more on our plate than we can currently handle. What's it going to take in the future? I think it's a mistake to say that we don't need any more troops in there. I think that if we ever hope to provide some of the immediate human needs we're going to need new forces, because we're going to need forces that can protect the civilians we have to put in place to do the job. We cannot subcontract that security element at this stage in the operation. We need our troops to fight the insurgency. We need other troops to protect those who will be--we call them static posts, for example. Protect the power plants while we're in there getting them up and running protect the water treatment plants while we're there up and running, protect the people who are doing that job--those civilians who we call upon to do that job.

TPM: Two questions, I think, are--sort of belied questions for us now--are, on the one hand, various members of the international community want us to cede some measure of political control of the operation and in some articulations of that demand, request, whatever that means turning it over to UN Security Council or ceding a measure of sovereignty to the Iraqis themselves. Now a related question is, as we are going back to the international community now--which at least largely means going back to the Security Council--how much do these other countries want to--to put it bluntly--humiliate us a bit? One can understand out of human nature there might be some desire for that. So as we navigate this course, as we figure out what's best for us in terms of our troop commitments, our money, an eventual good outcome, how do we figure those two questions?

WILSON: Well first of all I think it's a mistake to set this up as an us-versus-them equation and I've seen that lately on some of the talk shows and somebody tried--Lester Holt tried that

on me yesterday. Basically what we need to set this up as, how do we succeed in the objective that we have set for ourselves. Now it's the U.S. that has set that objective and has carried out the first part of the objective. It has now called upon others to come in and participate in the sharing of the burden and the sharing of the risk. In other words, we have--it is a limited bail out scenario that we're looking for. We're looking for other outside investors to help us in this. Now just as any other business transaction, you want people to come in and invest in your vision, you're going to have to adapt so it's consistent with their vision of the outcome. And I think that those negotiations need to take place in an atmosphere that is devoid of what we saw last winter and early last spring, where you had various people making disparaging remarks about others who were less enthusiastic about participating in this war than we were. So I would--I think it's more important to set the objective. My own sense on the objective is that it is unrealistic to give so much responsibility and autonomy to the Iraqis so early that that autonomy and responsibility outruns the systems that are in place and able to deal with it.

TPM: And that seems to be sort of part of what Powell's saying--I guess it's in Geneva at this recent meeting.

WILSON: Yeah, I think Powell is right. I mean at the end of the day democracy--if you want it to be enduring--it is not something that is sort of imposed from on high. It is something that is quite literally built, brick by brick, and at each level of society you understand what the parameters are of political discourse and political debate. And if you don't have that firm, solid understanding, then you run the very real risk that it collapses. Democracies are not judged by presidential elections, although we have a tendency to see that. It is an indicator, it is not the only indicator or even the best indicator of democratic development.

Certainly the first presidential election is not any indicator at all. It is only when the tradition begins to set and when governments and political parties themselves understand the limits to which they can attempt to subvert the process--the democratic process--that's in place. And all individuals and all parties will attempt to game the system--that's part of what democracy is all about. So it's important that we have some patience on this. The other thing that seems to me that's important--and I remember doing this when I used to do Africa as political adviser at CINCEUR and also when we did Bosnia--it's important to have small victories. Small victories build trust. So even without an overarching strategic agreement on whether you turn power over three months from, now six months from now, 12 months from now, we need to find those areas with our fellow investors in this enterprise that we can work on together--if for no other reason than to build trust among ourselves as to where we're going.

Now I think it's very clear--first of all, it's a canard to think that somehow we're going to give up command and control of the military part of this occupation. We will always have the vast majority of the troops. They will either be under some sort of UN or NATO mandate with a UN sort of umbrella, or they will be kind of a UN-type operation, but nonetheless it will look very much like the Chapter 7 international force headed by a U.S. military commander--

TPM: And for our listeners, what is a Chapter 7?

WILSON: Chapter 7 allows us to go in and root out insurgency. Basically it allows you to bring violence to bear as necessary, in order to ensure the security in situations. It's a little bit

more robust and more aggressive a presence. The Bosnia operation was essentially the UN subcontracting NATO to do the operations. So you get a UN resolution that allows this military coalition to go and do what it has to do. The First Gulf War was a good example of that as well.

But it is also reasonable to assume--so you take the military part aside, we will always control that--but it is also reasonable to want and to accept that others have their own views as to how you proceed on the civilian reconstruction. And it's also reasonable for us to be humble enough to understand that we don't have a monopoly on wisdom in this and that our specific interests--which arouse the suspicions of others anyway--may have to give way to a broader consensus, and that includes who makes up kind of the governing advisory council.

Ahmed Chalabi is not going to be everybody's favorite--he's not even everybody's favorite within the U.S. government. There is a lot of baggage that comes with him--because of his past, because of relationships he has with certain people within the U.S. government and close to the U.S. government--all that needs to be factored in. We just need to be prepared to cede authority and cede responsibility in areas that are not of strategic importance to us. And in areas where others actually bring experience and expertise to bear. We should not be afraid to do that. It's also a canard to think that it's illegitimate for others to view this situation from their own national security perspective, and that the national security or foreign policy perspective is somehow going to be different from ours.

Iraq has a much different history with Russia; it has a much different history with France and with Germany, and with other European countries than it does with us. We need to understand what those histories are; we need to celebrate the diversity of those interests and figure out how those diverse interests can be brought to bear to ensure that you have an Iraq in the future that is the vibrant democracy that the president has articulated as his vision for it.

TPM: Now, as I understand the position that the French brought to--I guess this meeting was in Geneva last week--which was basically a quite rapid hand over of sovereignty to the governing council. Now it sounds like you're saying that you don't think that that's a good approach. Am I right about that? At least that specific approach.

WILSON: I think that the one thing you want to avoid is giving too much authority and too much responsibility too soon. Because you run the risk of more primal urges that are otherwise not acted out within certain parameters that have been established. You have to establish the parameters first. That takes time. That takes a whole series of confidence-building measures between and amongst the parties available. Now I do think that this whole thing can be finessed, because I do think that there is lots of reason to accelerate the provision of some autonomy at certain levels within the government--whether that's local level--I mean there is no reason for Paul Bremer to be responsible for the garbage pickup in Hilla, for example.

So there are certain things that ought to be devolved at the local level, if for no other reason than that facilitates the understanding of what local and municipal government responsibilities are. I don't know what's driven the French position, but again I go back to what I said earlier: I think it's a mistake to try and set this debate up as a U.S.-versus-France

and to sort of characterize--just because everybody has been rubbed raw by the debate that took place at the UN last fall or last winter. We need to figure out how we can bridge those differences--preferably behind closed doors--and how we can achieve small successes, small victories, plant our flag, plant their flag, and move on to achieve a bigger victory. The large victory will be a consequence of a number of small victories and that will be internationally as well as on the ground.

TPM: Let's shift gears here a bit. A week or so ago--I guess it was about 10 days ago now--the president spoke to the public and asked for this substantial new outlay of money: \$87 billion for operations in Iraq--Iraq and Afghanistan, but mainly in Iraq and mainly for military, for the costs of the occupation and fighting the insurgency and so forth. The pitch he made to the public was that Iraq is now--I think his phrase--"the central front in the war on terrorism" and this is a battle that, even if the costs are very steep, we can't afford to lose. Now clearly at some level this has become a front in the war on terrorism, if only because we are fighting, at least to some degree, elements of either al Qaida or jihadists who've come in from other countries, etc. What do you make of the way the president is presenting this now? How did we get to this point?

WILSON: Well first of all, with respect to his speech, I mean I--it's been a long time coming. Ken Pollack, who wrote *The Threatening Storm*, argued that if we were going to go forward on this that the president had to do--that there had to be four preconditions met before we launched into this war that he argued was necessary actually to regime change. That was a great book. I agreed with--I thought that it formed a terrific basis from which to debate the issue. I concluded differently the approach from Ken. But nonetheless Ken in his book makes it very clear that before you embark on this the president needed to do four things. He needed to make much more progress in the war on terrorism than he in fact had, i.e., Afghanistan, Taliban, al Qaida there in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Two, he had to be much more assertive and aggressive in working the Palestinian-Israeli problem from which the administration has been largely AWOL until the publication of the roadmap and appears to be AWOL again.

Three, the president had to level with the American people as to how long we were going to be there in the aftermath of the military victory, which was not done. You had everything from Wolfowitz saying 'don't know'--but probably not more than 40,000 by the end of the year, to "We'll be cheered as liberators"--this was the vice president's great comment.

And four, you had to level with the people as to how much this was going to cost. All that was out there as recommendations, and I remember talking to Ken and hearing him lament that the title and the thesis of his book had been taken by those who were arguing for the war without due consideration given to the cautions that he put in his book and things that needed to be met--conditions that needed to be met--before we did the war.

I think he was absolutely right on that. More to the point on the president's speech, I think his appeal to the international community to come and assist us was sort of the limited bailout as opposed to a limited hang-out scenario that he offered. I think he was really asking for the international community to have faith that we knew what we were doing, after we had clearly demonstrated by our policy up to now that we didn't. My own sense--and I have not talked to

European diplomats about this--but my own sense is that Europeans are going to be ... People who provide money, potential investors are going to be reluctant to put money up when you see that this is the same management team that's put us into this mess in the first place.

I think that the president would be far more credible in the international community if he would stop being so damned loyal to those of his advisors who have proven time and time again that they have been less than totally loyal to him and to his vision--including the vision, by the way, of a flowering democracy in Iraq. I mean this goes far beyond the sixteen words. But the president at AEI said, "We will have a flowering democracy in Iraq," and yet the reconstruction effort so far has been so badly managed that it's almost guaranteed that we won't unless it is drastically changed.

TPM: Let me pick up on this business metaphor. What--when the white house came out with this number of \$87 billion, when you looked down at their fact sheet, they were projecting that we would need a further reconstruction funds of \$55, \$75 billion, far apart from the \$87 billion. And I think that they expect the great share of this, if not all of this, to come from the international community. Now, let's assume that the president does all of the things that you're saying. That's a huge number. That's a big sum of money. Are we even in the ballpark, to think that under the best circumstances, that the international community--in whatever sense we mean that term--is going to come up with that amount of money for this?

WILSON: My understanding is that the most optimistic expectation is that this Madrid pledging conference would yield no more than \$8 billion.

TPM: This is what they call a "donor conference"?

WILSON: A donor roundtable. My understanding from people who follow this objectively, not partisans, but people who follow this objectively and much more closely than I do, is that they'll be lucky to get \$1 billion. Now out of the investment--

TPM: So is the \$8 billion just what we're hoping for?

WILSON: That's the hope--\$8 billion out of, what are we talking about, \$75 billion? I don't know what the reconstruction part of that is, but we'll be lucky to get \$1 billion. And every time you go back to these pledging conferences, it becomes more and more difficult to get people to ante up. So I think that we have to assume that we'll be funding the vast majority of this. Where you get some assistance is the extent to which you're able to subcontract out some of these activities because governments will subsidize their corporate investments so if you could get in addition to what they'll pledge to the central fund, you can get them to begin to figure out ways--either through the international development banks or through their own development projects--ways of underwriting the costs associated with their companies getting contracts for the reconstruction. Most of the reconstruction is going to be private-sector.

TPM: And this is that very big question, who gets these very lucrative contracts to rebuild the place? Whether it's American companies, French companies, European companies, etc.--who gets a slice of that money?

WILSON: Well, you know, American law is such that--you know, and I think that most national law is such that--you always favor companies from your country for government contracts which are being funded by money from your country's taxpayers, essentially. So there's nothing really unusual in that, necessarily. The way it breaks down is that once the contractor has the contract, the contractor can essentially subcontract with whomever that subcontractor wants. Now I think that in this case, they put in some benchmarks as to how much American participation they want, how much Iraqi participation they want, in the distribution of these contracts.

TPM: One other question before we move on to some other ways in which you've been involved in this larger story. More and more, in recent weeks, there's this concept of why we're there, what we're doing there, why it's important for us to be fighting in Iraq right now, which is basically, we're taking the fight to our enemies, better we fight them in Fallujah than in Washington, D.C. or New York City. Now, a lot of people say, that's an irrelevant--it's a meaningless logic. We could be fighting them there, and they'll blow up a bomb here, and they could do that just as easily. And some people call this the "flypaper" thesis or concept. What do you make of that?

WILSON: (Laughter) Look--I think that it was right and appropriate for us to mount this attack on Afghanistan, and on the Taliban, and on al Qaida. It was covered by UN resolution or UN clause 47, self-defense clause for the UN charter. It was covered by the Patriot Act that gave the president the authority and the responsibility to go after those who had perpetrated--those terrorists with a global reach who had perpetrated these attacks on us.

In the run-up to the Gulf War, this administration could not even persuade itself that the threat posed by Iraq's links to international terrorists with a global reach were such that we were prepared to go to war citing Article 47 or citing the Patriot Act. In other words, they couldn't convince themselves that the international terrorism threat posed by Iraq was such that we could unilaterally take the war, hence, we fell back on weapons of mass destruction and UN resolutions that had been defied, and then ultimately, on the need to liberate the Iraqi people from a horrible tyrant.

I think, and I've argued this, that for all intents and purposes, we have created a self-fulfilling prophecy. We have created this battleground in Iraq into which jihadists and perhaps al Qaida and like-minded Arabs and other Muslims are flowing. And we have presented them with 130,000 potential targets, there on the ground, in the battlefield that is Iraq. But more to the point, I think, "shock and awe," which, from our perspective, kind of looks like a Fourth of July fireworks display, from the perspective of those who are watching al Jazeera and other international outlets, was the humiliation of a major Arab capital, at the seat of Islam for several centuries, and a foreign assault and invasion of an Arab and Muslim country. And this from a people who remember the expulsion of Arabs from Spain in 1492 far better than we remember the last election or the last Super Bowl.

The problem I have with the logic, is that fighting this battle, we are creating for ourselves, I think, a much larger potential war. We have taken a population of maybe tens of thousands of terrorists, as the president himself defined the al Qaida threat, coupled with their, say, use a factor of ten-to-one or even a hundred-to-one sympathizers, and you end up with a population of in the millions, perhaps, of terrorists and sympathizers. And we've blown that into, perhaps

hundreds of millions, and you distill that down, and a factor of that becomes the actual terrorists. So I think that we have a much bigger potential terrorist threat. It will play out to a certain extent on the battlefield of Iraq. You will end up, much like you did in Afghanistan, with a bunch of battle-hardened jihadists--some of whom will form the next al Qaida.

TPM: Now, when you're talking about Afghanistan, you're talking about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

WILSON: Yeah. And in addition to that, you will have a population of up to a billion people who, for whom the view of the United States is forever changed. Now, historically, the view in that part of the world of America and the United States has been ambivalent. There has been, on the one hand, sort of grudging respect and desire to emulate what we have and too, there's been I think a very real, real sense in the Arab world of the United States as that "city on the hill" that Reagan always said it was. Which gave Arabs a real personal identification with us. Now, I remember Arabs telling me, "Now I feel that I have the right to criticize you, whatever you do, because for me, your country is everything, is perfection, and when it doesn't meet my personal view of what perfection should be, then I feel like I have to criticize. Also, I feel like I can criticize you when I can't criticize my own government because if I do I get into much more trouble ..." So, there's been these ambivalent feelings you have, this grudging respect for who we are, this absolute hatred of our policies towards Israel. But that's only been part of the larger picture: resentment of us because of us because of our position towards Israel and the Palestinians. Envy, jealousy, all that, I fear, as a consequence of "shock and awe," as viewed from their perspective, will coalesce into just white-hot hatred of just everything we are and everything we stand for. The distinction, already, is being blurred between the U.S. government and American citizens, and that poses a much larger problem over the immediate to long-term. Now, I think that we can still solve it ...

TPM: Now, you were Deputy Chief of Mission in Baghdad, and that's the number-two position in an embassy, basically the deputy ambassador in colloquial terms, before the First Gulf War, and after the ambassador left, in the several month lead-up to the Gulf War, you were the senior American diplomat in Iraq--I guess the last American diplomat to meet with Saddam Hussein, at least, that we know of. (I don't know if there have been some secret contacts we're not aware of, or you know, over the last decade.) But the way that most of the public came to identify you with this story is about something different. This trip that you took to Niger in the Spring of 2002.

WILSON: Mr. Yellow Cake.

TPM: Exactly. So this is--and obviously, this was all the news, was about this, and, so people know at least certain of the outlines about that story. Now, just two days ago, Vice President Cheney was again asked about this on *Meet the Press*--and I have the transcript here--and Russert asked him, you know, did you read this report, etc, and the VP said, "No, I don't know Joe Wilson, I've never met Joe Wilson."

He went on, discussed his rendition of events, and then he said, "Joe Wilson, I don't know who sent Joe Wilson, he never submitted a report that I ever saw when he came back," etc. Now people can find this transcript online. Now, as I understand it, you never said that the

vice president per se sent you on this trip, or that you in person made a report. Let me just throw this open to you: How do you respond to what he said on *Meet the Press* a couple days ago?

WILSON: Well, I guess substantively speaking, the way I would respond is that, first of all, it marked the first time that the vice president himself acknowledged that he had asked the question at the CIA briefing, which is personal confirmation of the second part of the opinion piece that I wrote for *The New York Times*, the first part being that there was a report which said that this could really not have happened. The first part had been acknowledged by the White House within a day, day and a half of my article having appeared, when the White House said those sixteen words didn't rise to the level of conclusion in the State of the Union Address. The vice president now acknowledges that he asked the question.

TPM: And that means that he basically started the chain of events that got the CIA to send you on this trip.

WILSON: That's right, that's correct. And the argument that I repeatedly made was that if you are senior enough to ask a question of the CIA briefer or any other briefer of the U.S. government--it just happened to be the CIA because the CIA was the recipient of this bit of information that came over the transom, then you are senior enough to get a very specific response. And, irrespective of what the vice president had to say yesterday, which--he said the briefing got back to him a couple of days later and said that there was nothing more to this. If that system works that way now, that's a marked departure from the way that it worked when I was at the National Security Council.

Typically, what happens, is that the president or vice president will raise the question. The briefer, who doesn't have the detail at his hand (he is not a weapons of mass destruction or counter-proliferation or an African specialist) will take that back, that becomes a tasker to the system. The system then decides how best to answer the question that has been posed by a senior official in the U.S. government. It is not to go back and tell the vice president two days later, "We have nothing more on that." That is not an effective response. In this particular case, the system--that is to say, the operating level of the CIA--decided first of all, to invite me, perhaps others, I don't know, to talk about uranium in Niger. Why me? Because I knew a lot about the business, because I knew a lot about the personalities--

TPM: The business being uranium business?

WILSON: The uranium business in Niger. I knew all of the personalities who would have been involved in this sort of interaction, because I had been at the White House during the time when the transaction purportedly took place. And I had done a lot with them--

TPM: And when you say the White House, you mean the NSC?

WILSON: The NSC. I was the senior director for Africa at the NSC during a period of time that was marked by convulsions of Niger's politics, including a *coup d'etat*, and, shortly after I left the White House, the assassination of the then-president who had had a subsequent coup, to which brought someone else to power. So I dealt with these guys. In the course of a

briefing--and it's not unusual to have people who have field experience to come in and brief the intelligence community, the analysts.

The analysts like it because they're able to test their theses and bounce their ideas off of people who have field experience. The analytical community is typically made up of people who are researchers. They see a lot of bits of information, including this report of a sale of uranium. A lot of that information is just bogus on the face of it. It is their responsibility to try and take from these millions of bits of information what is important and paint, essentially, a picture of the situation of the facts on the ground. They need the input of people who know how the ground operates to do that. So, this was not unusual.

During the course of briefing them, talking to them about them, they'd brief me on the nature of the report, they also said that it was the office of the vice president that had raised the question. And, at the end of the briefing, they said would you be prepared to go out there to update our information based on this. So I said yes, and then we subsequently discussed--and again, the people I was talking to, there were about a dozen people that I was talking to who represented, I think, the intelligence communities, the cadre, sort of, who followed this, followed uranium, followed Africa, knew about Africa, knew about Iraq. It wasn't just CIA people. There were also State Department people who were also out there at this meeting.

TPM: This is at Langley?

WILSON: This is at Langley. They asked me if I would be prepared to go out. I said sure, but they need to understand a couple of things. One, I don't do clandestine. I'm not a trained operative. I can do discreet, but it meant essentially that I had to go over and check with the State Department, check with the ambassador. I don't have a very low profile in West Africa, because I was--I'd been the senior director for Africa at the National Security Council, and because during my tenure we had taken the president of the United States to Africa, which was considered by Africans to be a visit of historic importance throughout the continent, even in those countries he didn't visit. Because I speak very good French, I was often interviewed by French-speaking African magazines, so I was well-known in Africa. In fact, I could not travel to a country like Niger, as was demonstrated when I went on this trip. By the time I got to the hotel--just in the time it took for me to get from the airport to the hotel--there were already a couple of people at the hotel whom I knew, or who knew me, and who wanted to say hello to me. Wanted to talk to me about this, that, or another thing.

So, it was impossible for me to be low-profile on something like this. And I also, you know, wanted to ensure that the ambassador agreed that I'd come forward and whatnot. So, they said get back to me if you want me to go, they did, they said, why don't you go. Why don't you go and do this. We'll pay your way. I didn't sign--I wouldn't take money from them to do this. This is the kind of thing that one does as one can for one's country when one's country asks. It's not unprecedented and it's not even that unusual. I've seen in my overseas postings any number of times, people come through bearing messages or doing things discreetly on behalf of the government.

TPM: When this became a big issue this summer--and it got a lot of press reportage--obviously different political players had interests in spinning what happened there in very different ways. In some retellings of it, in the way some people describe the trip, you

basically went over there and said, "Have you guys been selling Iraq any uranium?" and they said no, and that was good enough for you.

WILSON: That unfortunately--I think that there was a period there when they had just hadn't marshaled the facts on this. There was Ari Fleischer who said, that, well, he went over there and obtained the denials of the government and wouldn't any government deny this? I did not obtain the denials of the government, in fact, as I pointed out after Ari said that. What I did is I went over and I looked in some detail at how the uranium business operates. Who makes up the consortium? When do they meet to discuss production schedules? How often do they need to revise production schedules? Who makes the decisions on who gets what out of the production that's done every year? Who operates the mine? Who is the operating partner? In other words, who actually has their hands on the product from the time it comes out of the mine to the time it's delivered to the ultimate customer. I looked into the fact that the mine has been a money-losing proposition since the mid '80s when the market collapsed with the introduction of Canadian uranium into the international market. The decision on the part of the consortium partners to keep the mine open satisfied their own requirements--

TPM: Who are those partners? Who are those nationalities?

WILSON: They're the French, the Japanese, the Germans, and the Spanish, as well as the Nigeriens. Nigeriens don't have a nuclear industry. They have not taken a draw in product since the mid '80s at least, since the collapse of the uranium market. That doesn't mean that they wouldn't some time in the future. But in order for that to be profitable, there would have to be a hefty profit placed on the sale of uranium. So I looked into the business side of it. And then I looked into the government bureaucracy side, specifically with those officials who had been in government at the time this document was purportedly signed. And it was much less a question of obtaining their denials, and much more a question of how would a government make a decision that would generate this report of a memorandum of agreement.

TPM: And, just to be clear, at this time, you hadn't seen these documents that turned out to be forgeries?

WILSON: No, I hadn't. I had just been briefed on a memorandum of agreement covering the sale. Now, my understanding is that there are all sorts of other documents that have since come to light and Andrea Mitchell showed me some documents which I had not seen and frankly, I did not have my glasses, so I didn't even get a chance to read them, and I have not seen them since. The uranium participation in this consortium is done through a parastatal, which means that the Niger government owns the corporate identity that is a member of the consortium.

Therefore, if there is going to be a sale, the government itself would have to make a decision to authorize the parastatal to act on the government's behalf in this matter. That would require a cabinet-level meeting. And since this purported sale was between two sovereign governments, the minister of foreign affairs would have to be involved. Since this involved the sale of uranium, the minister of mines would have to be involved. Since it involved the government totally, the prime minister would be involved, speaking on behalf of the government in signing any particular document.

It was also entirely possible, although I don't recall, that the president would also have to put his signature on a document as the supreme authority in the Niger regime. If this were to take place, it would be minuted in a council of ministers meeting, and it would be gazetted. Very much like--printed in their equivalent of the Federal Digest. And this is all very much as the French do it. It would be very difficult for a legitimate transaction undertaken by the government of Niger with the government of Iraq to be secret. Not impossible--and it's sort of worth trying to ask yourself whether or not the president, a coup leader, could do a side deal outside the context of the government, for his own account, or for the military.

TPM: Because you had said, there was a great deal of instability in this country in the late nineties.

WILSON: Well, that's right, and just because you had had the military coups, you had certain government behaviors that might have been skewed by the fact that you had a junta there. The problem with that--and I looked at that--the problem with that is that you still had to figure out a way to actually get the tonnage out of the mines and get it into barrels, and get it shipped several thousand miles across the Sahel, and down to the port, get it placed on ships, and get it sent, without anybody else knowing. And all that, would have involved the consortium. At a minimum, it would have involved the managing operating partner, which is Cogema, which is the French uranium company.

TPM: So basically the point, just to clarify this, that sort of the operation--I mean, this is, it's in Niger, it is under their umbrella, but the operational control of this consortium--which is the whole industry--is, in essence, in foreign hands?

WILSON: The operating partner is a French uranium company. The decision-making structure that covers production levels is made by the consortium. Niger is one of several partners within that consortium. And there are actually two mines and two consortia--two consortiums. The operating partner for each of the mines is the French uranium company. And the whole thing is set up in such a way that certain taxes paid that go into the treasury, the ministry of finance, there are export permits that are required--the whole thing is bureaucratically rather heavy to ensure some semblance of transparency. And it was all put together in the context of sort of the French system of doing this. But my point being that even if the two governments had decided they wanted to do a clandestine transfer of uranium from one country to the other then it would be very difficult to effect without an awful lot of people knowing. Now--

TPM: Particularly the French ...

WILSON: Particularly the French. Of course, the French are going to know every step of the way. This was a French colony. The French had been part of every step of their development over the last 100 years. Even after decolonization in 1960 they were omnipresent. They were the operating partner in the consortium. And whatever you may think of the French, the French have a--nuclear energy is an important component of the French electrical power grid. They need uranium, they need to have a steady source of supply. They need to make sure that they're irreproachable in that, so they can continue to have a steady supply of uranium without running afoul of the IAEA or other international organizations.

TPM: Now, as you've described your report--and a number of administration figures latched onto this one comment--and my recollection is that in speaking to one of the former government ministers, this person discussed that there was an earlier time when there seemed to be a feeler from the Iraqis about restarting trade relations. And since this country doesn't have a lot of prized goods for international trade, that this may have been a feeler about a potential uranium sale. Now, I believe that Condi Rice and perhaps even Paul Wolfowitz mentioned this, and they took this to mean, "Look, even Joe Wilson says the Iraqis tried to get back in with Niger, and even possibly about uranium."

WILSON: I think it's important--and hopefully we'll get a chance to talk about the debate in the run-up to the war, the position I took on that--but I think that it's important to understand that having been in Iraq and having worked through the Gulf War with these guys--and I date the Gulf War from the invasion of Kuwait--I think that it's important not to lose sight that the first battle was the battle for Kuwait. Desert Storm was essentially the counterattack. Saddam would have loved for us to have all believed that the Gulf War was essentially the American attack to drive him from Kuwait, but the Gulf War was essentially when he invaded Kuwait--that's what precipitated the counterattack. Anyway, I've spent enough time there not to be so naive as to believe that the Iraqis were interested in Niger for its millet, sorghum production. The Iraqis had sent an emissary there, a guy by the name of Wisam al Zahawi, a fellow that I actually knew pretty well. American-educated, he was ambassador to the Vatican, he had been one of the under secretaries at the ministry of Foreign Affairs when I was in Baghdad, he had a long and distinguished career as a diplomat. He was also a world-class opera singer. He was at the end of his career. I'm quite sure that one of the reasons they sent him to Rome was so that he could avail himself of Italian opera as his last assignment. He was sent down there to Niger--

TPM: When was this? Roughly?

WILSON: It was either '98 or '99. Our former ambassador who was in place at that time told me that the embassy had fully reported that visit. That report was reported by the government in the press. There was nothing clandestine about his visit, nothing untoward. The people that I talked to in the government at that time, said that uranium had not yet come up in discussions, although they acknowledged that perhaps uranium would have been one of the things that would have interested Iraq in a future relationship--all of which is reasonable, none of which constitutes the explicit attempt by Iraq to purchase uranium at that time. There was one other report. One of my interlocutors said that on the fringes of an international conference he was attending, he was approached by a Niger businessman who asked him to meet with an Iraqi delegation. He said that because of alarm bells going off in his mind about UN sanctions and everything else, he declined to take the meeting, and then, rather pensively, he looked up--and sort of plumbing the depths of his mind--

TPM: This when he's talking to you?

WILSON: This is when he was talking to me. He said, "Gee, maybe he would have wanted to talk about uranium." Now, I reported all of that because it seemed to me that I'd been asked to report on everything I'd found out, and that this was just sort of one of these other little tidbits. It never constituted in my mind--it was even thinner gruel than what I had found out about how the process could work. The fact that there was a meeting or a visit in which

uranium was not discussed does not translate into purchased a significant quantities of uranium. The fact that there was a meeting that was not taken, that was not held, but had it been held, one of the participants opines that perhaps uranium might have been one of the things that this guy might have wanted to discuss, does not suggest uranium sales or significant quantities of uranium from Niger to Iraq. So, those were both--I thought those were both really red herrings. Again, it comes down to, the question was, Could Iraq purchase significant quantities--a quantity, 500 tons--of uranium from Niger without anybody knowing about it? Was it feasible? I came back and said, the business side of it says no and the government side of it says, because people told me--not because people told me but because this is the way that the procedure is--the government side suggests that, if there was going to be a memorandum of sale, that document would have to have the Minister of Mines, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Prime Minister's signature on it. If that document did not have those signatures, then that document could not be authentic.

TPM: So this is--that's the report you bring back, you report to the CIA.

WILSON: Yeah, I report it. Look, before I left, when I went out there, I saw the ambassador before I did anything. First of all, I went over to see the State Department to make sure it was OK with them. Make sure that the ambassador was informed, the ambassador agreed. I went out there, I talked to the ambassador, and he said, "Look. I've heard this report, I thought that I had debunked it already, I've already talked to the President and with the government." And I said, "That's fine, my value added is I can talk to people who I know better than you know because they were in government, they were out of government before you got here. I can talk to the old government." I did it, I came back, I reported to her, she said--I said, "Well, this essentially confirms what you knew," and I also reported to somebody else on the mission staff, and then submitted--should have submitted--a separate report, or at least would have been aware of it.

TPM: That would have gone through the State Department channels, as opposed to--

WILSON: Everything that--everything in Niger goes through the State Department channels. Nonetheless, it gets bifurcated when it gets back, it goes to the--whoever the agency is who asked for the information. I returned. Within an hour of my setting down at Dulles, I was having Chinese food with the reports officer of the CIA, and I was giving him an oral briefing. I did not--I brought back notes, I did not bring back a complete report, because at the end of the day, reports officers are paid to turn briefings such as the one I'm giving you into something that's comprehensible for their particular consumer. That is the way it is done. That is the way it's always done. It also was done within an hour of my arriving back in Washington, DC, because I was leaving, actually, on a business trip the next day, and I did not have all my life to devote to this pro-bono activity.

TPM: From that point on, your firsthand knowledge of sort of where this channeled up through the ranks ends, if I understand right--

WILSON: That's true--

TPM: And you're going on your understanding of basically how the U.S. government and the nexus of the intelligence community and the executive branch works, and that tells you that

since Cheney was the one who asked for the report, the report would have come back to him in some fashion or another.

WILSON: That's correct.

TPM: He may well not have known that you--

WILSON: He wouldn't have known. He would not have known that it was me. There's where there would be--

TPM: So, it's probably accurate, that assuming that this report made its way back to the vice president, that he wouldn't have know that it was you.

WILSON: No. In fact, on the contrary. The way that these things are done, particularly when it comes to U.S. citizens, is you're not identified by name. These reports essentially will give you a grade as to whether or not you're a credible reporter, and by extension, will give the report a grade. And, you know, I have some reason to believe that the grade that was given both to my credibility as well as to the report was something other than a "junk bond" grade. And, you know, it's important to remember that in addition to my report, you also had the ambassador's own report, and then you had--

TPM: The U.S. ambassador to Niger?

WILSON: The U.S. ambassador to Niger, and then you had a four-star Marine Corps general. Now, those two reports may have been in the same report because they may have been when she was taking him around on meetings, but nonetheless, these two very senior officials in our system of government of representation both were comfortable that this report of sales just simply could not have taken place. Those reports were also in files. So mine was not the only report. So when they say it was inconclusive because, you know, there was this meeting that did or did not take place at which uranium was not discussed but maybe they might have wanted to discuss uranium sometime in the future--they used that as an argument that my report was not conclusive. Well, in actual fact, there were at least two, and quite possibly three, separate reports, all of which said that this could not have taken place, this was not on. Despite that, in U.S. government files, the one report that they kept harping back to, the one that sort of allowed them to then cite, insist upon citing, the British white paper, was a report that didn't even pass muster with an Italian weekly tabloid, that never showed any hesitation about putting even bare breasts between its covers.

TPM: But on this narrow question of--and this comes up in the vice president's interview with Tim Russert--the narrow question, he's probably telling the truth when he says that he had no reason to know of *your* involvement with--

WILSON: Absolutely.

TPM: At the time. Before--obviously now he knows, but at the time.

WILSON: Absolutely, sure.

TPM: OK. Now, go forward a few weeks from when this all broke out, and another incident comes up. And, I'll sort of work from published accounts since I know that your ability to talk about this other controversy is circumscribed by--well, I'll just get into it. According to--Robert Novak published a column, where he said that two senior administration officials had told him that your wife works for the CIA, works under non-official cover--which basically, in sort of colloquial terms, means that she's an undercover agent--and that her relationship with you was, in some sense, what got you the job to go to Niger.

Now, there's a couple issues here. One is whether that had anything to do with why you went to Niger. The other question--to many, the more significant one--is that it is illegal for government officials to out, as it were, people working undercover for the CIA. And according to just the black-letter words of what Novak published, two senior administration officials did just that. Now, for people who work in Washington, that phrase "senior Administration official" isn't a vague term. That's a pretty small population of people. Now, this got a lot of attention. It sort of swirled around in the press. Now, I know that precisely because who works undercover for the CIA and who doesn't can't be talked about by people who know who people are, you can't--you have to sort of couch these things in hypotheticals. But, you have discussed publicly contacts that you have had with, I guess, the CIA and FBI about their potentially looking into how Novak came to have this information. What can you--do you know, is there an investigation ongoing? What do you know about that?

WILSON: First of all, the Novak allegation is very interesting. If I recall the article correctly, he flatly asserts my wife is a CIA operative. And then he quotes senior administration officials as saying that she was somehow responsible for sending me out there. Now, I think I mentioned to you earlier the context in which my trip was initially discussed, and I will tell you that at the meetings it was discussed, and at the meeting where it was proposed that I go out there, there was nobody at that meeting that I knew. There were a couple of people who came up and introduced themselves and said to me that they had been at other briefings I had given in the past on other issues, but I could not name any of them. I couldn't tell you who they are today--would pass them on the streets without recognizing them. So that's really--the decision-making process involved nobody that I knew.

The idea that--first of all, irrespective of whether my wife is or is not what Novak alleged, therefore, there was no personal involvement. I think it's important to understand about this allegation, a couple of things. One: when they're talking about "senior administration officials", they're talking about the White House. The CIA does not "out" its own. It just doesn't do that. Secondly, I think that it's important to understand that if, in fact, she is what was alleged, then it is a violation of the Intelligence Agents Identification Act of 1982, which is a felony, and the process of investigating it goes through, I believe, the CIA and then to Justice and to the FBI, and that's if she is, in fact, what they said.

If she's not, it's a real inconvenience for her to have to answer all these questions. For the purposes of the trip out there--irrespective of whether she is or she isn't--the decisions on the trip were made by people I didn't know, as I told you earlier. For those who would assert that somehow she was involved in this, it just defies logic. At the time, she was the mother of two-year-old twins. Therefore, sort of sending her husband off on an eight-day trip leaves her with full responsibility for taking care of two screaming two-year-olds without help, and anybody who is a parent would understand what that means. Anybody who is a mother would

understand it even far better. Secondly, I mean, the notion somehow that this was some nepotism, that I was being sent on an eight-day, all-expense-paid--no salary, mind you--trip to the Sahara Desert. This is not Nassau we're talking about. This is not the Bahamas. It wasn't Maui. This was the Sahara Desert. And then, the only other thing that I can think of is the assertion that she wanted me out of the way for eight days because she, you know, had a lover or something, which is, you don't take lovers when you have two-year-old kids at home. So, there's no logic in it.

The Novak article itself, it does nothing to advance the story. The Novak article, I thought, was kind of a wash anyway. It just didn't make a lot of sense. But I would say this about it to those who sort of leaked this. And, I suspect that it was people who just didn't really understand how the process works. But, notwithstanding that, the fact is that this is an administration that came to office on a--

TPM: Now, when you say that, you mean the people who talked to Novak didn't understand sort of the legal seriousness of disclosing this information?

WILSON: Yeah. If the information is true. It could have been just a complete canard. Assuming for the sake of this that it's true, that they just simply didn't perhaps understand--I'll give them the benefit of the doubt that they just didn't understand the seriousness with which this sort of thing is viewed. I say that because, at the end of the day, after it was pointed out to them, you've heard nothing more from them on it.

Now, irrespective, it's certainly for an administration that came to office promising to restore honor and dignity to the White House. The idea of involving my wife in this little spat that they're having with me because I was the bearer of bad tidings was neither honorable or dignified, quite apart from whether it was legal or illegal. It was really a low-life, slimeball thing to do. And again, as I say, it added nothing to the story.

TPM: Now let me ask you--because in a number of press reports this has been discussed--that I guess it's a month ago now. Jay Inslee, who's a congressman from Seattle or thereabouts, had a town hall forum with constituents. And he invited you out there and there was a big turnout and obviously the discussion were about all the questions related to Iraq--the uranium, the WMD, how it happened, all this kind of stuff. And this question of the Novak article came up. Now there's been sort of chatter in this town about "seems to be the White House" and that people can hypothesize who might be involved there. Now in one of the questions you were asked about this let me--I'll just read the quote, when you're talking about the potential investigations--

WILSON: Actually Amy Goodman cited the quote on Democracy Now--what I--so I don't need to hear the answer--

TPM: OK, well you mentioned the name of Karl Rove.

WILSON: Yeah, and Karl Rove, when I said that, is sort of a metaphor for the White House political operation. And I--what I was saying in that was that I would do everything I could not to impede the investigation and try and help advance the investigation. Because after all, if there was somebody to--that was guilty of violation of a crime--it would be better to have

them--and then I quoted Rove's name as a kind of a metaphor for the White House--"frog-marched out of the White House in handcuffs" rather than just a sort of sterile exchange of he-said she-said newspaper articles and attacks.

But I've had a number of respected journalists tell me that White House sources were the ones who were telling them that the real story here is not the 16 words, it's Wilson and his wife. Now this was after the Novak article, which was a good two weeks after the White House acknowledged that the 16 words didn't rise to the stature of being included in the State of the Union Address. So I don't understand the White House backfire that they tried to light on this. They acknowledged it--it took them a while to come to grips with it, but they did acknowledge that it didn't rise to the stature of the State of the Union. But they should have moved on rather than try and drag my family into this unfairly. [Crosstalk] But I do think that the reason they did--and I've said this quite publicly--is that they thought that by coming after me they would discourage others from coming forward. The point that they tried to make is that there are consequences if you dare to step forward. And there were any number of analysts who were speaking to the press about the pressure they felt when Cheney went over there. Now I have no way of judging whether that was real or imagined pressure, but you know if they were prepared to say it to the press anonymously they might well have been prepared to come up and say it to their congressman more publicly. Congress was saying, "We welcome people coming up." Not just Democrats, but also Republicans. John Warner said on a number of occasions--this was clearly a shot across the bow at these guys. This was a message to them, "Should you decide to come forward, you too could be looking at this."

TPM: And your comments at that meeting were based on things you've heard from journalists who've come to you and said, "We were hearing this from people at the White House."

WILSON: Right, sure. A journalist will call me and they will seek a comment on something. And in order to seek a comment or a reaction, they have to tell me what they're basing it on. So I can't react to something unless I know what the initial act was, so there have been attempts to elicit comments from me by saying, "White House sources have told me that..."

TPM: And some of these said White House sources were the ones who mentioned--who made this accusation that your wife was ...

WILSON: Yeah, the one quote is, "White House sources insist the real story here is not the 16 words, it's Wilson and his wife." The real question here is how did such a whopper get in the president's State of the Union Address. And you can--the vice president the other day went back to the British white paper--"technically accurate because we cited the British white paper." We spend billions of dollars on intelligence. Intelligence is not a matter of accepting blindly what a third country tells you. Intelligence is a matter of taking pieces of information and testing them against other pieces of information you have in the hopes that you come up with something resembling facts on the ground.

The British have said "We had specific intelligence we could not share with the White House because it came from a third-party source and we were prohibited from doing so by protocols of our agreement with the third country." So we were then taking on faith a third-party piece of intelligence--and we didn't know the contents of it, the substance of it that was relayed to us by the British. And yet we spend billions of dollars on intelligence every year. And so

technically accurate or not, are we going to subcontract our intelligence function to the British? I don't think so.

TPM: Before we move on to the lead-up--the positions you took in the lead-up to the war--just to sew this last point up. What you know about this is based on what journalists have told you in conversations asking comment from you and point to White House sources. But that's as far as you know in terms of how this whole thing got started.

WILSON: Yeah. The Novak piece, which sort of cites senior administration sources. Actually, I actually, after I--and these are highly respectable journalists, these are guys who are at the top of their profession. This is not Hedda Hopper, these are serious political journalists--but I did take advantage of a conversation with another journalist on another subject to sort of go over with him what ethical grounding of respectable journalists and the extent to which they would dissemble or not dissemble in order to get a reaction--whether or not they would bait you by lying about who the sources was. And I understand that it is strictly against the journalistic practice--ethics practice. And so I have no reason to doubt that. But I'll tell you quite frankly that the political office of the White House has not called me up to tell me that they were going to smear me or they were going to attack my family. In fact, I've not had a call from the White House in a couple years.

TPM: You're no longer in good graces?

WILSON: Well I regret, actually, that the administration did not actively seek the views of those of us who'd actually spent time there in the run-up to the debate

TPM: Now, "time there" being in Iraq.

WILSON: Yeah, that those of us who had some sense of what the on-the-ground truth was. But that was their decision. They decided they knew better.

TPM: So, obviously when this first issue came up--the whole uranium story and then this kind of followed from that, this story about your wife--advocates of the president have portrayed you as basically someone who is an opponent of the president and an opponent of the war trying to keep up that opposition through a different guise with both of these different things. I guess that my first question would be--just generally, just as there is in the Army and the Foreign Service, there is the tradition of an apolitical stance, but people have politics--how would you, just in general, describe your own politics?

WILSON: Well, I guess the most interesting comment that's been made about me recently was when I walked into a meeting of Democrats, I was introduced as "The Bush I political appointee who's done the most damage to the Bush II administration." There is nothing I am prouder of in my career than having been George Bush Senior's, charge d'affairs in Baghdad, and having been part of the team that put together the coalition that led to Sadaam's defeat and expulsion from Kuwait. I'm equally proud of having served as Bill Clinton's senior director for African affairs, and having had the opportunity to take the president to Africa for eleven days, in what was an historic trip. So my career achievements have spanned administrations.

TPM: Am I right that you left the Foreign Service and then later took the job at the Clinton NSC?

WILSON: No, no, no--I was still--

TPM: OK.

WILSON: My own personal politics, I suppose, the best way to characterize them is that there have been very few times in my adult life that I have voted for a winner in a presidential election.

[Laughter]

TPM: OK, well, that gives people a certain lay of the land.

WILSON: And I will say that, the older I get, the less conservative that I become, in my view. That I do think that government has a distinct role to play to level the playing field. I do believe that the Declaration of Independence creates essentially a meritocracy, and that it is the government's responsibility to ensure that all of its citizens have an opportunity to advance on merit. Where that puts you in the political spectrum is anybody's guess, but I am against the abolition of the estate tax.

[Laughter]

TPM: Well, let's go back to --

WILSON: I'm certainly not, I believe that the Republican party has been betrayed. Its core values have been betrayed by this coalition of cultural conservatives and neoconservatives that now run the party, and I think that what you see happening is a quintessential Republican-Republican problem that only the Republicans can solve, and they will either solve it while they're in office or eventually, they will be thrown out of office, and they can solve it there.

TPM: Okay. Let's go back to about a year and a half ago, a little before the time that you made this trip to Niger. And this was the point--

WILSON: Actually, after.

TPM: Well, I may have my--my addition's never been great. Let's say, January 2002. This was the point when war with Iraq was still a good ways off, but you could see it on the horizon. The predicate was being laid on various counts, and obviously, in this country, we had a debate--if you can call it that--that went roughly a year. How would you--what was your position? How would you describe your position?

WILSON: Well, I first articulated my position, quasi-publicly, at a conference hosted by the American Turkish Council. And I co-chaired a session with the former deputy commander in chief of the Turkish Armed Forces--the Turkish General Staff--Cevik Bir, who was an old friend of mine who had served in Somalia under the UN flag and with whom I'd worked a lot

on Operation Provide Comfort and Operation Northern Watch. And in my opening remarks--and my remarks came after Richard Perle's keynote address that opened the conference, so he spoke in the morning, I spoke to this group--

TPM: Was this in Washington?

WILSON: This is in Washington. And I said, at that time, that I thought that those who had listened to Richard Perle in the morning, before they provided him with their full, unqualified support, ought to consider the possibility that a year from now, if we went in the direction that we were going, the land to the south of Turkey might well be a chemical, biological and nuclear wasteland. I always thought--and that was the first time I spoke out on it. I then refined my thoughts in a series of conversations on CNN and Fox and a series of other places. And I wrote an article later in the summer in which I tried to articulate a position which was that disarmament was a good objective. It was a legitimate national security objective and concern. And the problem was, that the enforcement mechanism for the UN security Council resolution covering disarmament was broken. In other words, the inspection regime--the policing operation--had fallen apart. The solution to this was to summon again the international will, to go back at disarmament in an aggressive way. And that in order to ensure that you got Saddam's attention and compliance, that you were going to have to approach the issue from a position of strength. In other words, that you were going to have to make it very, very clear to Saddam that you were prepared to use force in order to disarm him consistent with the UN Security Council resolution. And in order for that threat of force to be credible, you actually had to be prepared to use it. So it was what I would have called sort of "muscular disarmament."

But the one thing I always cautioned about was, that you did not want to back him into such a corner that there was no face-saving way to get out, because in that corner, he would lash out. And the things that I suggested he might do, were all the things he did in the first Gulf War--but including using every weapon in his arsenal. I said that based on what Tariq Aziz had told me when I was in Baghdad in 1989, and what Saddam Hussein himself had suggested in meetings that I had with him in August of 1990, that they were prepared to use every weapon in their arsenal.

So, I suggested that the way it ought to be put to him was much the way that Jim Baker put it to Tariq Aziz in his letter, delivered to the Geneva meeting in 1990. That is, "You will disarm, or we will disarm you. Should you resist our efforts to disarm you, either by attacking our forces--using weapons of mass destruction--or by attacking any neighbor in the region, that, then, is what triggers our destroying your regime."

Now, when Jim Baker said that to Tariq Aziz, they were talking about use of nuclear weapons against our troops when we were expelling them from Kuwait. That was the red line to him: you use weapons of mass destruction against our troops, we'll come all the way to Baghdad. Otherwise, we're going to expel you from Kuwait, whether you go peacefully or not.

TPM: Now, let me ask you a question as I guess it's four or five months now after the fall of the regime, and to date, no evidence of weapons of mass destruction have been found. You know, as the standard phrase goes, "Maybe it'll turn up" but it's looking less and less likely

that our fundamental appraisal was right, that there was at least chemical--at least a kind of an ongoing chemical and biological capacity. Now, there's this whole debate in this country about whether the administration hyped the evidence or deceived the public. It certainly seems to me that there was a very broad consensus in this city, at least, that he, that Saddam Hussein, maintained some sort of biological, chemical and biological capacity, certainly might've been working on nuclear weapons, but very few people thought that he had gotten out of the chemical weapons business. What did you think before the war and how did that inform your--

WILSON: I always thought that he had chemical weapons because we knew that he'd obviously used them, we knew that he had an appetite for them. There was no reason to suspect that he wasn't continuing to manufacture chemical weapons as best he could. We knew that he had biological precursors; the question was always whether he had perfected the way of weaponizing the precursors--in other words, turning smallpox into a real weapon. And we were all surprised when, in 1995, we found out after Hussein Kamel's defection that his nuclear program was as far and vast as it was.

So all of those, I thought, were absolutely legitimate. Saddam Hussein had not complied, to the satisfaction of the international community, with 687, it was important to get his compliance. I thought it was important to establish beyond the compliance, long-term monitoring, just because it was clear that just as long as his regime was in power, you had a government that was prepared, not just to build weapons of mass destruction but also to use them--he had demonstrated that.

The fact that we haven't found weapons of mass destruction is surprising to me, based on that, but that doesn't negate the necessity of having a robust disarmament campaign against him. Now, for all the reasons that everybody's articulated, the problem that I always had, was the multiplicity of objectives that ended up being raised to get us over the top in getting public opinion for the war, which sort of served to confuse everybody and to perhaps mask the real reason we did this. And, more to the point, the necessity or the assumption that by taking the--what I considered to be the highest-risk, lowest-reward policy option as your best way of getting at disarmament, and/or preventing the transfer of weapons of mass destruction from Saddam to an international terrorist organization. Invasion, conquest, occupation, always seemed to me to be not the smartest way that we should go after the disarmament objective.

TPM: Given--let's fast-forward to late 2002, when we were in this kind of final skirmish, really, with our allies in Europe. We got into this back-and-forth with the Turks, it--a lot of people in this country, and I think that their assumption was largely vindicated--that sort of, the fix was in, that we didn't want this to end in a way short of the regime being taken out. To the extent that the administration made the judgment that we couldn't--that our national security interests were simply not compatible with his staying in power, how would you evaluate how they went about it? I mean, obviously, we didn't end up getting a large coalition. We fought the war in ways that now seem to have made it more difficult to win the peace. What about this question of how the diplomacy was handled?

WILSON: Well, I think that we short-circuited the international community, but I think that it was more than just the timing of it, more than just rushing up there trying to get a second

resolution and not doing it. It was also through the multiplicity of objectives. One of the things that we found in the first Gulf War was that if you wished to do this multilaterally, you had to have objectives to which everybody could sign up. Otherwise, everybody would find reasons not to sign up, leaving you alone. So that meant that you had to narrow your objectives to something that was sustainable, both in the context of the coalition you're trying to build, and also in the context of international law and the UN Charter. And the genius of the first Gulf War was that everyone understood this as part of what the then-President Bush called the New World Order, which would be that over the next twenty or thirty years that we would have a lot of these small wars, which we would want to resolve through international coalitions and with the legal imprimatur of the United Nations.

This administration turned all of that on its head. They went with the multiplicity of objectives, none of which were in and of themselves necessarily sustainable, otherwise, they would not have gone with the other ones. And, as a consequence, they ended up doing it essentially with the British. And, you know, they can talk about their thirty-six other countries, but Tonga, frankly, does not count, when you talk about this. So, it was, for all intents and purposes, a unilateral activity. I think that the consequences of this have been enormous. I think that, first and foremost, you have seen that support for, and affection for the United States that we saw the outpouring of on September 12, 2001--that's all gone away. I cannot imagine what the newspapers' headlines would look like again after--if we got hit again by a massive terrorist attack, but I doubt seriously that you would see a lot of headlines saying, "We are all Americans now," as you did after September 11. Brzezinski, I think, has put it just right when he says that at a time when our military power's at its zenith, we find our political and moral authority at its lowest ebb ever.

Moreover, I think that, to a large extent, we've taken the whole doctrine of collective security, and we've turned it on its head. When you get Richard Perle gloating in newspaper articles that he writes in *The Guardian* that one of the side benefits of this is the death-knell of the United Nations, and yet, the only thing that they have to put on the table to replace it is Tommy Franks' Central Command--where we've seen already, less than a hundred days or a hundred days after the end of major combat operations, we've seen that Tommy Franks and CENTCOM cannot play the role of Globalcop. So, we've seen the limits to which we can actually replace the doctrine of collective security with aggressive unilateralism or illiberal imperialism--what Max Boot calls jodhpurs and pith helmet imperialism--which I frankly think is what you should call it.

If I could put a name on this, it would be the jodhpur and pith helmet imperialism. Thirdly, I think that from a strict perspective of the war on terrorism, we have created this new front by having attacked Iraq. This is not a front that was there, that we had to go into. It became the front because we made it the front. It is not, first and foremost, a terrorism battle. It is, first and foremost, a battle against an insurgency, nascent to be sure. And it is an insurgency that will draw in jihadists. Just like the Spanish Civil war drew in Ernest Hemingway and others, but first and foremost, it is an insurgency. But, more to the point, in the aftermath of 'Shock and Awe', which was viewed by a population of 1.2 billion through the eyes of Al-Jazeera as a humiliation, you have expanded the community of potential terrorists. I don't think that benefits us going forward in the war on terrorism, which is another legitimate national security objective, but one which cannot be won by fighting it as if you were playing Whack-a-Mole.

Other than that, I have no strong opinions.

End of Interview ...