

When he took office, President Bush told the American people that his White House would be defined by honor and dignity. After the attacks of September 11th, 2001, he told us that he would do everything in his power to keep Americans safe. In the wake of the revelation that Karl Rove, Mr. Bush's Deputy Chief of Staff, revealed the identity of former CIA operative Valerie Plame to a reporter, the strength of the President's word is being tested. If Mr. Bush attempts to cover up what is a gross abuse of power and a vicious, destructive, and near-sighted act of political vengeance, then he will have failed to live up to the promises he has made. The exposure of Valerie Plame was an attack on more than the values which the White House professes to uphold: it was an attack on the security of the United States itself.

When forced to choose between protecting its reputation and protecting Ms. Plame so that she could continue her work, the White House valued its own security first. Plame's husband, Joseph Wilson, had gone to Niger in 2002 to investigate whether Iraq had sought uranium there. He reported that it had not, but his report was ignored, and in his 2003 State of the Union Address, the President told the nation that, "Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." Wilson became increasingly critical of the administration's pre-war intelligence gathering, and for that he was branded an enemy. In a deliberate and unabashed attempt to punish him and to keep him quiet, the identity of his wife was revealed. Ms. Plame's vital work on behalf of the country had apparently become irrelevant, as had her personal safety and the safety of her contacts. Her crucial role in the war on terrorism didn't seem to matter any more, either.

The degree to which Mr. Rove's absurd priorities have endangered America becomes clear once we understand how important Valerie Plame was. She was at the heart of the war on terrorism. At a time when the President has repeatedly called for a strengthening of American human intelligence capabilities, Ms. Plame was a critical human intelligence asset within the CIA. She was an experienced, deep-cover agent who had spent years cultivating an expansive network of relationships designed to root out terrorist cells and plans. She was a clear example of what the intelligence community of the United States needs to improve its effectiveness. Now, thanks to Mr. Rove, both Ms. Plame and the web of assets she helped to establish are no longer operational.

Furthermore, Ms. Plame had built her career around fighting exactly what the President and the highest members of his cabinet argue is the greatest threat to the security of the United States and its allies: the transfer of weapons of mass destruction from states or other sources to terrorist groups. The prevention of such a transfer was the most definitive reason Mr. Bush provided for his decision to invade Iraq. "Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al Qaeda," he said in the same 2003 State of the Union. "Secretly, and without

fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help them develop their own." As an agent, Ms. Plame spent her life working to make sure that this would never happen.

Even if Ms. Plame had not been so critical to U.S. security, exposing her identity is still a federal crime. It is also a despicably irresponsible practice. President Bush's father, George H.W. Bush, understood this. "I have nothing but contempt and anger for those who betray the trust by exposing the name of our sources," the former CIA director told a group of Agency employees in 1999. "They are, in my view, the most insidious of traitors."

In June of 2004, President Bush told reporters that, "if there is a leak out of my administration, I want to know who it is. And if the person has violated the law, the person will be taken care of."

The President must now decide if he will stay true to his word. Does he mean it when he says that keeping Americans safe is his highest priority? Is he truly interested in promoting the elements of our intelligence community that make this goal achievable – elements like the networks Valerie Plame worked so hard to create? Does he really care about running a White House defined by honest conduct and one which is committed to dismissing and prosecuting those who illegally abuse their positions for partisan or personal gain? If so, then he must do everything in his power to ensure that Mr. Rove and all those who worked with him against Ms. Plame are immediately brought to justice. We know what Mr. Rove cares about. The course the President takes in the days ahead will reveal where his loyalties truly lie.