

NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Time for the Vice President to Explain Himself

I owe Patrick Fitzgerald an apology.

Over the last year, I've referred to him nastily a couple of times as "Inspector Javert," after the merciless and inflexible character in Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables." In my last column, I fretted aloud that he might pursue overzealous or technical indictments.

But Mr. Fitzgerald didn't do that. The indictments of Lewis Libby are not for memory lapses or debatable offenses, but for repeatedly telling a fairy tale under oath.

Moreover, Mr. Fitzgerald was wise not to push onto mushier ground. It appears he was tempted to indict Karl Rove, but he's right to refrain unless the evidence against Mr. Rove is similarly strong. If it's a borderline call, as it seems, Mr. Rove should walk.

So where do we go from here?

First, Democrats should wipe the smiles off their faces. This is a hu-

miliation for the entire country, and their glee is unseemly. Moreover, the situation is not that neocons are all crooks, but that one vice-presidential aide must be presumed innocent of trying to cover up conduct that may not have been illegal in the first place.

Second, President Bush needs to clean house. Just as special prosecutors should steer clear of questionable indictments, presidents should avoid questionable characters.

Mr. Rove escaped indictment, but he has been tarred. He apparently passed information about Valerie Wilson to reporters and then conveniently forgot about one of those conversations. He also may have misled the president, and the White House ended up giving false information to the public. It's fine for Mr. Rove to work as a Republican political adviser, but not as White House deputy chief of staff.

Even more important, Vice Presi-

dent Dick Cheney owes the nation an explanation. According to the indictment, he learned from the C.I.A. that Joseph Wilson's wife worked at the agency and told Mr. Libby that on about June 12, 2003. Why?

Mr. Cheney, we need

'a stiff dose of truth.'

There may be innocent explanations. I gather from the indictment and other sources that Mr. Cheney and Mr. Libby were upset in May and June 2003 by a column of mine from May 6, 2003, in which I linked Mr. Cheney to Mr. Wilson's trip to Niger. If Mr. Cheney and Mr. Libby thought

that my column was unfair, or that Mr. Wilson was exaggerating his role, they had every right to ask for a correction or set the record straight.

But they never raised the issue with me — nor, when Mr. Wilson went public, did they make their case publicly. Certainly the solution was not to leak classified information about Mr. Wilson's wife.

Mr. Libby is now accused in effect of lying to protect Mr. Cheney. According to the indictment, Mr. Libby insisted under oath that he had heard about Mrs. Wilson from reporters, when he had actually heard about her from his boss. You can't help wondering if this alleged perjury was purely his own idea and whether Mr. Cheney was aware of it.

Since Mr. Libby is joined at the hip to Mr. Cheney, it's reasonable to ask: What did Mr. Cheney know and when did he know it? Did the vice president have any grasp of the criminal behavior allegedly happening in his

office? We shouldn't assume the worst, but Mr. Cheney needs to give us a full account.

Instead, Mr. Cheney said in a written statement: "Because this is a pending legal proceeding, in fairness to all those involved, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the charges or on any facts relating to the proceeding."

Balderdash. If Mr. Cheney can't address the questions about his conduct, if he can't be forthcoming about the activities in his office that gave rise to the investigation, then he should resign. And if he won't resign, Mr. Bush should demand his resignation.

It's not that there's a lick of evidence that Mr. Cheney is a criminal. There isn't. But the standard of the office should be higher than that: the White House should symbolize integrity, not legalistic refusals to discuss criminal cover-ups. I didn't want technical indictments of White House officials because they inflame parti-

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sanship and impede government; for just the same reason, it's unsavory when a vice president resorts to technical defenses and claims up.

At the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia in August 2000, Mr. Cheney won adoring applause when he suggested that Bill Clinton's deceit had besmirched the White House. Mr. Cheney then pledged that Mr. Bush would be different: "On the first hour of the first day, he will restore decency and integrity to the Oval Office."

Mr. Cheney added of the Democrats: "They will offer more lectures, and legalisms, and carefully worded denials. We offer another way, a better way, and a stiff dose of truth."

You were right, Mr. Cheney, in your insistence that the White House be beyond reproach. Now it's time for you to give the nation "a stiff dose of truth." Otherwise, you sully this country with your own legalisms. □