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At the White House, the spin doctor is ill

While indictment fever gripped the Washington press corps, the president's spin doctor was incapacitated. An ailing Karl Rove could not help the Republican search for a media cure. With temperature rising, the political physician was in no position to cure himself or anyone else.

Now, a media siege is underway at the White House. A dramatic convergence of legal proceedings and presidential politics has forced the Bush administration into a fundamentally defensive crouch.

A year ago, when President Bush hailed him as the political strategist who made a second term possible, Rove was the toast of Washington. Now — even though he hasn't been indicted — it seems he's toast.

In Washington, where nothing succeeds like political success, an election victory is widely seen as proof of justification. Strip away the razzle-dazzle, and you're left with a rather simple precept: Whatever works.

And, for almost five years, the Rove media operation worked. From maximal exploitation of 9/11 for political gain to the "Swift Boating" of John Kerry, the presidential spin machinery wrapped George W. Bush in the flag and threw plenty of mud at opponents.

This is a classic real-life tale of personal and global overreach. Riding high with power and media clout, those at Washington's pinnacle saw no reason to be bound by political niceties or reality-based policies. If you want to fix the wagon of a critic who has the temerity to expose the falsity of a claim about Iraq seeking enriched uranium, let the knives fly behind a screen of source confidentiality. If you want to invade Iraq, just keep insisting that weapons of mass destruction in that country are beyond any reasonable doubt.

These days some very negative coverage for Karl Rove and I. Lewis Libby, the vice president's (now former) chief of staff, is coming from many of the same journalists who avoided publicly criticizing them while they ran amok behind the scenes. But, to the self-fulfilling political cliche that "perception is reality," add this caveat: Sometimes the ultimate smart guys end up outsmarting themselves.

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In this real-time Shakespearean drama, Rove and Libby are more than bit players — but they're certainly not the lead characters. Serving the GOP's top two elected officials, Rove and Libby are no rogue elephants.

News stories and commentaries should begin to explore this scandal with questions about George W. Bush and Dick Cheney that echo the Watergate era: What did they know and when did they know it? Was there a coordinated coverup — and, if so, how high did it go?

Media coverage of the White House will be at least a little more adversarial in the months ahead. Yet we shouldn't expect the president's PR aides to become less evasive. Karl Rove did not invent audacious media spin, and there's no reason to believe that the sidelining of Rove augurs well for candor from the White House.

The "outing" of Valerie Plame as a CIA agent was an attempt to damage her husband, former ambassador Joe Wilson, after he challenged the validity of the administration's pre-invasion claims about WMDs in Iraq. The smokescreen effort to hide the source of the leak occurred in the context of a series of deceptions related to the war.

Future media coverage of this huge story will be meaningful to the extent that news outlets look beyond the individuals in this scandal and consider the historic chain of events that allowed the president to spin the country into war. If the reporting treats the leak of Plame's name as an isolated incident, the frame for the media picture will be confining. But if the journalistic scope includes the sequence of events that led to the leak, the coverage has the potential to be illuminating.

The war in Iraq is a horrific consequence of President Bush's determination to launch an invasion. That determination repeatedly led to false claims about Iraq — claims that Bush insisted were certainties. Now, media coverage should clearly explain how the scandal engulfing the White House has its origins in a propaganda campaign for war.

Norman Solomon is the author of the new book "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com