

## KeyOpinion

# The Gang of Four

**Richard L. Hershatter**  
Contributing Columnist

*Which came first — the chickens or the eggs?  
The experts do not know.  
In either case, the question simply begs,  
And makes the problems grow.*

Much has been written and spoken in recent weeks concerning the strident arguments advanced by four members of the Planning and Zoning Board in the matter of rezoning Moore's Stone Crab Restaurant at the north end of the key.

The sentiments expressed have emanated at various times from spokesmen wearing the hat of P & Z Board members and, at other times from official written pronouncements of the Public Interest Committee (PIC), and sometimes from both simultaneously from the mouths of the same spokesmen wearing different hats.

If readers are tired of hearing about the controversy, rest assured, this writer is equally weary of writing about it.

The problem, however, continues as long as the four individuals involved insist on publicly prejudging a matter long before it even comes before their Board and persist in trying to throw every roadblock imaginable to prevent the petitioner from even appearing before them.

Thus Sandy Gilbert, who at the time was both PIC President and P & Z Board Chairman, implored the Town Commission to require Moore to obtain 700 signatures simply to get permission to go to a referendum on the issue.

The Commissioners promptly refused, and at the referendum the voters wisely granted the requisite permission for Mr. Moore to present his petition to the P & Z Board.

Although Moore has as yet taken no further action, Board members Symanski and Gilbert at the very next session publicly berated all those who alerted the voters as to what was happening and claimed that opponents were misinformed, ignorant and evidently members of some sort of axis of evil.

Further, one or more of the four have gone over the head of this writer and filed complaints with the editor of this newspaper and with a fellow columnist who once upon a time was a town commissioner.

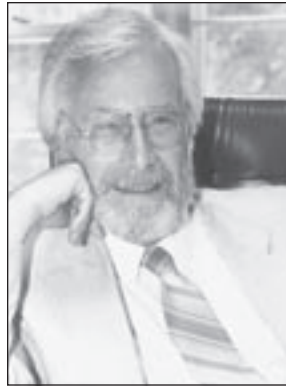
One of the more pernicious accusations was that we were trying to undermine PIC.

The fact is that PIC is an organization which historically has done much good for the Town of Longboat Key. This writer is a dues-paying member, who so far has neither been drummed out of the corps, nor impeached.

The position of this column is that Gilbert, Symanski, Hackett and Brown the younger have misused their positions as leaders of PIC — have, in fact, hijacked the organization and galloped madly off in all directions with it.

Moreover, in occupying the twin positions of PIC Directors and P & Z Board members, they have shown themselves to be highly opinionated and drunk with power.

In an attempted justification of their position, Mr. Symanski makes the claim that the ultimate decision rests with the Town Commission, and the P & Z Board merely acts in an "advisory" capacity, which gives his group the right to sound off and attempt to influence



the public before the applicant has even submitted a petition to P & Z.

His theory is that they are merely acting in a legislative, not a quasi-judicial capacity, and that gives them the right to pre-judge and vent their prejudices at will, based on the fact that only the Town Commission is authorized to change the Town's Comprehensive Plan.

It is obvious that Mr. Symanski, in spite of his claimed past experience, has never been involved in the formulation of a Town Comprehensive Plan.

In a prior incarnation in a northern state, this writer represented planning & zoning boards in three separate municipalities, all of which were shoreline towns similar in size and make-up to Longboat Key. One of the communities involved created from scratch and put into effect a town-wide comprehensive plan. A second town conducted an extensive review and reformulation (without an expensive "visioning process,") of an already existing comprehensive plan.

Although zoning ordinances differ from state to state, the one element common to all such procedures is that, unless the planning authority is working from scratch in a completely empty desert, it must take into account conditions in place, as they actually exist. Otherwise, a plan simply creates unwanted non-conforming uses.

Connecticut's Supreme Court, for example, long ago held that in adopting a Comprehensive Plan, "such regulations shall be made with reasonable consideration as to the character of the district and its peculiar suitability for particular uses and with a view to conserving the value of buildings and encouraging the most appropriate use of land throughout such municipality." (emphasis supplied.)

What Mr. Symanski's arguments fail to recognize is that both Moore's restaurant and the neighboring Mar

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# Congregation of Vipers

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Some of the national press, in their greed to increase the number of viewers or savage a politician they don't like, are willing to distort the news and create scandals where none exist. The appalling irresponsibility of these people, highlighted by the ferocious peril of these hours, is the measure of their loss of aim, purpose, integrity and common sense. It is also a measure of the degradation of debate on public policy now being conducted in the United States.

Last Friday morning found a MSNBC news bunny agog with emotion. Her brow was furrowed; her expression was intense and worried as she told us the Bush administration had leaked classified information for the express purpose of demonizing Charles Wilson and, by inference his wife, Valerie Plame. She added that Bush now faces the biggest scandal in the history of his administration. Stay tuned! The listener could not help but say, "Wow! Bush lied about uranium in Africa and was in on the leak that allegedly revealed Valerie Plume's covert CIA status."

The Bush administration had, in fact, revealed that classified information about Iraqi attempts to purchase uranium in Africa came from British intelligence. The White House first released this information in 2003 in answer to Wilson's op-ed piece in the New York Times, "What I Didn't Find in Africa." Wilson wrote, "Based on my experience with the administration in the months leading up to the war, I have little choice but to conclude that some of the intelligence related to Iraq's nuclear weapons program was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat." He wrote that he based his conclusion on what he learned during his trip to Africa on behalf of the CIA; namely, that there had never been an attempt by Iraq to buy uranium from Niger. He then alleged that the Bush administration had been briefed on his trip but had ignored the evidence.

There are three problems with the MSNBC story and other reports of that day. A great deal of what a President reveals during any briefing was likely classified before release. The difference between providing declassified information to the public when it's a matter of public

debate and unauthorized persons leaking classified information that involves sensitive national intelligence. One may criticize the judgment of the President as to whether the declassification and release was appropriate but it is not a leak. The White House first released this information in 2003 to answer Wilson's op-ed piece in the New York Times. This information was classified before the President released it, but no one raised any questions about its release. Because, despite protestations to the contrary today, the press knew the President had a right to release the information.

The second problem was when the press stated the purpose of the "leak" was to discredit Joseph Wilson. Great heavens, they weren't trying to discredit Wilson, just his story. Indeed, there is no more need to discredit Wilson personally then there is to discredit a skunk by noting its bad smell. A skunk proves the bad smell allegation every time it sprays. Wilson proves to be, at worst, a liar or, at best, merely mistaken with the allegations he makes about his African investigation.

The third problem, and most misleading part of the story, is including the name of Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, a covert CIA agent, in the story. This leads one to believe the new information proves the President was a participant in outing Valerie Plame. Even the redoubtable Don Imus, Imus in the Morning on MSNBC, fell victim to this misconception last Friday morning and expressed some surprise and, as usual, irritation at being misled.

This is pretty serious stuff. But most, if not all, of Wilson's allegations are false. He is mistaken. No, let's be frank; it is hard to escape the conclusion that he lied. Truth is, not much of what Wilson has said publicly has survived scrutiny, at least according to the Washington Post. In a July 2004 story, the Washington Post reported that, "Wilson's assertions . . . both about what he found in Niger and what the Bush administration did with the



information . . . were undermined yesterday in a bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee report." The Post reported Wilson misled the committee about how he was picked for the job. "Wilson was specifically recommended for the mission by his wife, a CIA employee, contrary to what he has said publicly." It appears that Wilson, contrary to his New York Times op-ed piece, actually bolstered the claims made by the President in the State of the Union address. The Washington Post further reported, "And contrary to Wilson's assertions and even the government's previous statements, the CIA did not tell the White House it had qualms about the reliability of the Africa intelligence that made its way into 16 fateful words in President Bush's January 2003 State of the Union address. Even the BBC had to contradict Wilson. The BBC reported, "The Prime Minister of Niger, Harna Hamadou, has confirmed that Iraq tried to buy uranium but its offer had been rejected."

Wilson questioned documents he allegedly examined while in Niger. He couldn't get that right either. The Senate panel, according to The Washington Post asked how the former ambassador could have come to the conclusion that the dates were wrong and the names were wrong when he had never seen the CIA reports and had no knowledge of what names and dates were in the reports. Wilson then, according to the story, "... told the panel he may have been confused and may have 'misspoken' to reporters." What is worse, the documents Wilson talked about, and had allegedly examined while in Niger, were not in U.S. hands until eight months after Wilson made his trip to Niger.

Almost alone, the Washington Post sailed against the hysterical wind generated by lesser media lights. The Post editorial on Sunday, April 9 stated, "President Bush was right to approve the declassification of parts of a national intelligence estimate about Iraq three years ago in order to make clear why he believed Saddam was seeking nuclear weapons. Presidents are authorized to declassify sensitive material, and the public benefits when they do." So much for the mother of all scandals.

George Stephanopolis of ABC, unlike the Washington Post, wasn't willing to let go of a possible scandal. He

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