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Tuesday, October 25, 2005

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### Time reporter recounts his role in CIA leak case

By TREVOR MAXWELL, Portland Press Herald Writer

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Two years ago, Matthew Cooper was just another White House reporter, hunting down leads about Iraq and weapons of mass destruction.

Now he plays a role in a federal investigation that could topple some of Washington's biggest names and change the future of American journalism.

"We may find out as soon as the next 48 hours" if any crimes were committed in the CIA leak scandal, Cooper said Monday night. "Or if this is just politics as usual."

The Time magazine reporter spoke about his role in the saga to a crowd of about 200 at Portland High School. The appearance, followed by a panel discussion on power and the media, was sponsored by the NAACP Portland Branch.

Cooper's talk came just days before a federal grand jury is set to wrap up its 22-month investigation of the leak. Special counsel Patrick Fitzgerald has sought to answer the question of who revealed the identity of Valerie Plame, a covert CIA agent.

The affair became public when Joseph Wilson, a former ambassador, disputed President Bush's 2003 State of the Union

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Staff photo by John Ewing  
Matthew Cooper, reporter for Time magazine, speaks Monday night in Portland.

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claim that Iraq was seeking nuclear material in Niger, and charged that the administration had exaggerated the Iraq threat when it went to war. Someone leaked information to syndicated columnist Robert Novak that Plame, Wilson's wife, was an undercover CIA operative. Novak printed her name in a 2003 column, and other journalists published her identity.

Fitzgerald issued subpoenas to several journalists, including Cooper, Tim Russert of NBC News and New York Times reporter Judith Miller.

Cooper was caught up in the affair because of conversations he had with Bush strategist Karl Rove and I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, chief of staff for Vice President Cheney.

"I was calling around to different people," Cooper said of his reporting. He said he spoke to Rove only for a few minutes, and Rove advised him to examine Wilson's credentials.

"It was a two-minute phone call that would change my life, and perhaps change his as well," Cooper said.

When Fitzgerald contacted Cooper, he initially refused to testify. Cooper said he was hesitant at first but made the commitment to spend months in jail if necessary. But at the last minute, Rove gave the journalist permission to speak with Fitzgerald.

"Protecting the confidentiality of our sources is part of the mainstay of what journalists do," Cooper told the crowd on Monday.

"We just wouldn't get the information we do unless people had the degree of certainty" that those promises would be kept, he said. Most states have shield laws that protect the relationship between a journalist and a source, but the federal government doesn't, Cooper said.

Miller, the New York Times reporter, refused to identify her sources in the case. She spent 85 days in jail before compromising with the prosecutor and providing testimony. At first, Times editors stood by Miller, and she was championed as a martyr in the trade press. But over the past few weeks, the Times has criticized Miller's reporting, portraying her as a biased reporter with a history of backing the Bush administration.

The saga has led to a greater push for a federal shield law for journalists. Cooper declined to discuss the impact of the backlash against Miller, or whether she is receiving fair treatment.

Rhonda Carlson, one of the panelists, said she had concerns about whether Miller had acted as a mouthpiece for the administration.

Carlson, a senior researcher for Liberty News TV and a writing teacher at the University of New England, said Cooper makes a better example as a fighter for the First Amendment.

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