

July 4, 2007 Wednesday 12:05 PM GMT

Libby's story underscores the unpardonable nature of Washington politics

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SECTION: INTERNATIONAL NEWS

LENGTH: 797 words

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

The hypocrisy is unpardonable. President George W. Bush's decision to commute the sentence of a convicted liar brought out the worst in both parties and politics.

In keeping I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby out of jail, Bush defied his promise to hold wrongdoers accountable and undercut his 2000 campaign pledge to "restore honor and dignity" to the White House. And it might be a cynical first step toward issuing a full pardon at the conclusion of his term.

Democrats responded as if they don't live in glass houses, decrying corruption, favoritism and a lack of justice.

"This commutation sends the clear signal that in this administration, cronyism and ideology trump competence and justice," said Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, a leading candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination.

It was a brazen statement from a woman entangled in many Clinton White House scandals, including the final one: On his last day in office, President Clinton granted 140 pardons and 36 commutations, many of them controversial.

One of those pardoned was Marc Rich, who had fled the country after being indicted for tax evasion and whose wife had donated more than \$1 million (euro740,000) to Democratic causes.

Clinton's half brother, Roger, also received a pardon, for distributing cocaine, and lobbied the White House on behalf of others.

Hillary Clinton's brother, Hugh Rodham, was paid tens of thousands of dollars in his successful bid to win pardons for a businessman under investigation for money laundering and a commutation for a convicted drug trafficker.

It's hard to fathom that those pardons had absolutely nothing to do with cronyism or ideology, but Hillary Clinton defended them. She drew a distinction between her husband's pardons and Bush's commutation.

In an interview with The Associated Press, the senator said Bill Clinton's pardons were simply a routine exercise in the use of the pardon power, and none was aimed at protecting the Clinton presidency or legacy. "This," she said of the Libby commutation, "was clearly an effort to protect the White House."

Indeed, there is ample evidence that Libby's actions were fueled by animosity throughout the White House toward opponents of the president's push to war against Iraq.

But Hillary Clinton will have a hard time convincing most voters that her brother-in-law would have gotten a pardon in 2001 had his name been Smith. Or that Rich's pardon plea would have reached the president's desk had he not been a rich Mr. Rich.

The hypocrisy does not stop there.

Bush vowed at the start of the investigation to fire anybody involved in the leak of a CIA agent's identity, but one of the leakers, adviser Karl Rove, still works at the White House. Libby was allowed to keep his job until he was indicted for lying about his role.

The president said Libby's sentence was excessive. But the 2 1/2 years handed Libby was much like the sentences given others convicted in obstruction cases. Three of every four people convicted for obstruction of justice in federal court were sent to prison, for an average term of more than five years.

Want more hypocrisy? Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney praised the commutation for Libby, quite a departure for a guy who brags that he was the first Massachusetts governor to deny every request for a pardon or commutation. Romney even refused a pardon for an Iraq war veteran who, at age 13, was convicted of assault for shooting another boy in the arm with a BB gun.

What about all the Republican politicians who defied public sentiment and insisted that President Bill Clinton be impeached for lying under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky? Many of them now minimize Libby's perjury.

What about all those Democrats who thought public shame was punishment enough for Clinton lying under oath, basically the position adopted today by Libby's supporters? Many of those Democrats now think Libby should go to jail for his perjury.

"There appears to be rank hypocrisy at work here on both sides of the political spectrum," said Joe Gaylord, a Republican Party consultant who worked for House Speaker Newt Gingrich during impeachment. "It causes Americans to shake their heads in disgust at the political system."

The Libby case followed the same pattern of hype and hypocrisy established during Clinton's impeachment scandal. It is as if we're all sentenced to relive the same sad scene:

A powerful man lies or otherwise does wrong.

He gets caught.

His enemies overreach in the name of justice.

His friends minimize the crime in pursuit of self-interest.

And the powerful man hires a lawyer.

Marc Rich had a high-priced attorney for his battles with the justice system. His name was Scooter Libby.

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

LOAD-DATE: July 5, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newswire

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