Libby's guilty ... Now what?

by The Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star

The trial of I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby was like the fancy, five-star restaurant you walk away from not quite full, wishing you'd ordered the main entree instead of multiple appetizers. In the end, you didn't get what you came for.

Libby, the 56-year-old former chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, was convicted Tuesday on four of five counts of lying under oath and obstructing justice in regards to his role in the leak of an undercover CIA agent's name to the media, in supposed retaliation for her husband's criticism of the White House's reasons for going to war in Iraq. The charges were ancillary to the fundamental crime - who actually outed the CIA's Valerie Plame? - in a case that reached deep into the halls of power of government, media and law.

When the smoke cleared, about the only person still standing tall and proud was special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, who notched his belt one tighter with yet another high-profile conviction.

Ultimately this trial produced more uncomfortable questions than answers, succeeding mostly in pulling back the curtain on how things are done in Washington, D.C. What has been exposed to sunlight is not pretty.

Indeed, doubts have been generated about whether the Bush White House manipulated intelligence to justify the war, and about what lengths it would go to - or depths it would sink to - in order to discredit its critics. Americans can be forgiven for wondering about a leadership that would seem so preoccupied with Joe Wilson - Valerie Plame's husband - while Osama bin Laden remained alive and at large.

Coming off badly was Cheney, over whom "a cloud" has formed, said Fitzgerald in his closing, regarding whether he and others scapegoated Libby. Americans were deprived of his testimony, which would have been especially fascinating under cross-examination by Fitzgerald. This is another embarrassment in a string of them for this White House.

The national media didn't come away unscathed, either, as a parade of celebrity journalists - Tim Russert, Bob Woodward, Robert Novak, etc. - made their way to the witness stand to reveal the all-too-cozy relationship between them and those they cover, and in some cases how eager they are to be pawns for the powerful. Certainly this trial has raised questions about the ability of the press to do its job using confidential sources. Former New York Times reporter Judith Miller went to jail for 85 days for refusing to out Libby; clearly that First Amendment ground is not as solid as many a journalist thought it was.

All in all, Libby seems a bit player in a much grander drama, yet he's the one who will go to jail unless he prevails on appeal or is pardoned by the president. Again, we're not satisfied that we've gotten to the bottom of all this, or that we will anytime soon, while a very real and controversial war rages on.

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