

COMMENTARY

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Gnawing at the moral fabric

Whitewater, Madison Guaranty, using state troopers as pimps and shady futures market transactions provide pretty good evidence that the Clintons are both corrupt and hypocritical. Rep. Dan Rostenkowski's post-office scandal and the "Keating Five's" ripoff of the S&Ls are also corrupt. Official corruption should always be condemned, rooted out and punished. But those kinds of corruption have always been with us, and the country is none the worse for wear. Petty corruption, while offensive to trust and decency, will not destroy our liberty and prosperity. Its damage is limited and trivial in the larger scheme of things.

The relatively new and more virulent corruption is where politicians exchange other people's money and liberties for votes. That's the kind of corruption that gets politicians elected year after year after year while eating at the moral fabric of our nation. The deal for their constituents is, "Vote for me, and I will provide you free-

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bies." That's why incumbents have so much power compared to their challengers. Incumbents have a proven record of looting on behalf of their constituents. Examples of the relatively new corruption include welfare to the poor, middle class handouts such as subsidized college education, small business in the forms of subsidies and loan guarantees, and senior citizen handouts like social security and Medicare — not to mention the contemplated mother of handouts: socialized health care.

Politicians cannot create wealth; they only consume, redistribute and destroy wealth. In order to make good on their promises of freebies, they must grab control over the income and wealth of others. They've found that it's OK for us to own property — so long as they monitor its use and control it. That's one reason why privacy means little today. In order to satisfy a politician's insatiable appetite to exchange handouts for votes, the more we must report and get permission. Thomas Jefferson was right when he feared that "an elective despotism was not the government we fought for."

We're confronted with what economists call "the tragedy of the commons," where it pays each of us to dine at the public trough. As such, we've become a nation of thieves. A principled politician has little chance of gaining office. Imagine there's a candidate for the U.S. Senate who believes in strict interpretation of our Constitution and limited government. He refuses to participate in the handout game. His electorate would not vote for him. The reason why is simple. If he refused to take pork and engineer handouts for his constituents, it wouldn't mean lower taxes and greater retention of their earnings. It simply means that pork and handouts his constituents might have gotten go to people in another state.

This statesman senator would be asking his constituents to commit the equivalent of hari-kari. By strict economic calculation, his job is to get in there and try to take everything he can to make his constituents whole. In other words, his constituents feel they've been ripped off through the tax code, and it's his job to get some of it back. Since the middle class shoulders most of the tax burden, we shouldn't be surprised by the magnitude of middle-class handouts.

All of this reminds me of my basic-training sergeant screaming at me during a full field inspection as I explained that my mess kit was missing because it had been stolen. "That's no excuse, soldier! If somebody steals yours, you steal somebody else's." That may be a great way to run an army — but not a society.

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