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A culture of bribery in Congress

The Monitor's View

Almost every US lawmaker takes big money aimed at helping private interests win favorable government action. If they stash the cash for themselves, it's illegal. If they use it to get reelected, keep their job, and help the private interests, it's generally legal.

Either way, money still talks in Washington and the legal/illegal distinction gets easily blurred in all the backroom dealings with private interests until, that is, a brazen case of bribery pops up. Then Washington, if it had any sense, might ask if the laws and rules that regulate campaign donations and lobbyist gifts are tough enough or prosecutors are vigilant enough.

Obviously the laws and prosecutors weren't good enough in the case of Randy "Duke" Cunningham. The California Republican congressman resigned on Monday after admitting he took \$2.4 million in bribes - yes, \$2.4 million - to help steer Pentagon business toward select defense contractors. (Newspapers, not prosecutors, first exposed Mr. Cunningham's unexplained wealth.)

Strangely, his official crimes were committed openly in Congress as he worked like many lawmakers in pushing through specific benefits for private interests or calling government departments to coerce a decision in favor of a well-funded, private interest. The plea agreement stated he steered spending "to the benefit" of defense contractors who bribed him, and those contracts were not "in the best interests of the country."

Cunningham, who wisely and contritely admitted the wrongdoing, will probably serve years in jail. But the question lingers: How many other members of Congress (or presidents) have collected big money from private interests - either as campaign-related donations or as bribes - and then conducted the people's business in shady ways that also weren't "in the best interests of the country"?

And let's not stop there with the obvious rhetorical questions: Why should large amounts of money, either as bribes or as big campaign funds from businesses and unions, be permitted at all, since in too many cases such hefty chunks of change can easily distort a lawmaker's ability to represent the highest interests of the most people?

The Washington Post reported that Rep. Virgil Goode (news, bio, voting record) (R) received more than \$80,000 in campaign donations from the employees of MZM - a defense firm that's an alleged co-conspirator in Cunningham's case - and then was the principal sponsor of a measure helping MZM get a contract in his district. He's since offered to refund the money.

Other recent ethics scandals in Washington, almost all involving Republicans, point to weaknesses in current laws and a need for some sort of public campaign financing. They also highlight Congress's inaction toward further campaign-finance reform and ethics watchdogging - an inaction that seems purposeful: "Members of Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike, have used ethics allegations as a political weapon for years," Common Cause stated after Cunningham's guilty plea.

No wonder dictators laugh at US demands for representative democracy. They can easily point to American democracy's big failing: allowing the well-monied to corrupt lawmakers by dictating government actions - either legally or illegally. •