

## **“IS THERE A CULTURE OF CORRUPTION IN WASHINGTON TODAY?”**

Last weekend, the House GOP leadership and members held their annual retreat out on the Eastern shore and the headline in the Washington Times was “GOP Gets Quick Course in Ethics – Refresher is Part of 3-Day Retreat to Regroup”. The code words here in the headline are:

- (1) “Ethics”
- (2) “Regroup”.

The reason for all this is, of course, that the Democrats in '06 are making ‘ethics’ a centerpiece issue in the November elections... They call it the “culture of corruption” ... and, indeed, are hoping that there may be a “historical payback’ in 2006.

It was in the early 1990’s, when the Democrats controlled Congress. Republicans argued that the Democrat leadership was “arrogant and corrupt and abused their power”. Today, 10 years or so later, it is the Democrats who are claiming arrogance, corruption, and abuse of power.

To step back a second, it was Abraham Lincoln who once said: “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

And, it was the populist, Earl Long, Governor of Louisiana, who once said that “reform was about turning the fat hogs out...and letting the lean hogs in.”

So, the “culture of corruption” is more than just “lobby reform” – it is about the inherent corruption of Big Government itself – which makes rent-seekers sometimes even of the most virtuous of our citizens. And, this is nothing new to us Americans. A recent national survey, taken by RT Strategies just 2 ½ weeks ago, asked:

**Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?:**

**“Charges of corruption by some members of Congress against other members is just politics and nothing new.”**

**66% agreed**

**31% disagreed**

**And, within those numbers, 37% strongly agreed while only 18% strongly disagreed...also a 2:1 ratio.**

This problem greatly concerned our Founding Fathers, 200 years ago, in the quarrelsome debate over the proposed Constitution. The Federalists were concerned more with the “politics of liberty”, while the Anti-Federalists were worried about “social virtue”. By that, they meant the will and capacity to put the public interest over the private...and “corruption” like they saw in old England was their principal worry.

This worry still concerns modern day Europeans – Gallup routinely measures opinions in the 25 European Union nations among the original EU members (15) and the new members (10). In 2003, they asked, from a list of problems, **“Which worried you the most... ’corruption in government’... was mentioned”:**

**78% by the new EU member countries**

**55% by the original EU member countries.**

The U.S.A. should be no less worried, as well.

Jefferson, of course, believed that an urban society would eventually be the foe to virtue and the enemy of restraint. The Anti-Federalists, who feared a bigger government, predicted that once the euphoria of revolution wore off, both the people and their leaders would fall prey to venality and corruption.

To prevent this, the Anti-Federalists insisted on a Bill of Rights be incorporated in the body of the Constitution “complete with a statement of ethical principles”...reluctantly, the Federalists, under pressure, did this, but only in the form of “amendments” to reduce them from being an ethical treatise! As an aside, it is unfortunate that the 1994 Revolution that brought the GOP to power in Washington D.C, which was propelled by the “Contract with America” document, did not have, in addition to reforms, an “ethical treatise” coupled to it.

The Federalists argued that the Constitution itself could prevent corruption and preserve the Union by their insistence upon: (1) separation of powers, and, (2) checks and balances...and, Madison furthermore said, “I go on this republican principle – that the people will have virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom...is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation.”

Thus, virtue (i.e., placing the public interest over the private) was indeed a presupposition of the Constitution...but, it did not appear in the document itself – because it was presumed to be rooted in the very nature of man.

As one sage said recently, “If moral behavior were simply ‘following the rules’, we could program a computer to be moral.”

This problem has been wrestled with long before computers – the practical thrust of much of the stoic philosophers in both Greek and Roman times, some 2000 years ago, had to do with “political influence”. It was Seneca, who wrote in his book entitled, On Favors, who warned that imperfect human beings who rely on material and emotional conveyances would be insensitive to Roman moral decorum...and he said it was the “choice of vehicle” of gift giving that was the concern.

He seized on “demeanor and appearance” as crucial to how we project our good intentions, respect, and deference...in a word, “outer conduct must match inner virtue.”...he said, “one should do everything to avoid the appearance of having had to think whether to do it”...that “the look and feel of virtue matters...it indicates attitude, even if that attitude is at times feigned.” Seneca said it best, “No one should give ‘winter clothes at midsummer...or...books to a country bumpkin...or...hunting nets to a man of letters.’”

Thus, 2000 years later, far from the Roman Republic, in the Republic of the United States of America, we have a Republican “super-lobbyist” who has admitted to: (1) treating Congressmen to all expense paid junkets, (2) free dinners at his lavish restaurant, (3) jobs for spouses, (4) skybox seats at sports events, and much more...it has been described as “ illegally plying lawmakers with a smorgasbord of gifts.”...And, to add to the problem at hand, this week, former GOP Governor John Rowland of Connecticut was released after 10 months in jail for a conviction for accepting over \$100,000 in gifts and vacations from people doing business with the state...and the Duke Cunningham sad story is now awaiting trial. As Lincoln said, “...to test a man’s character, give him power.”

David Brooks, writing in the NY Times earlier in January said, “I don’t know what’s more pathetic, Jack Abranoff’s sleeze, or GOP paralysis in the face of it...all that Republicans can do is promise to return his money and remind everyone that some Democrats are involved in the scandal, too.” And, he went on to say, “If Republicans want to emerge from this affair with their self-respect or electoral prospects intact, they need to get in front of it with a comprehensive reform offensive...such as, getting a grip on budget ‘earmarks’...they are an invitation to corruption.” And, this is easily understood when you discover that in 2006, there is an estimated 30,000 registered lobbyists in Washington D.C. and another 30,000 legislative staffers on Capital Hill...no wonder that congressional oversight procedures can be so easily corrupted.

The First Amendment does indeed protect lobbying by allowing citizens “to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” and that should not be abridged by election year reform measures...but virtue, i.e. placing the public interest over the private, should also be part of the American decorum. Lord Chesterton once said, “To have the right to do a thing...is not the same as to be right in doing it.”

So, where are we today? GOP National Chairman, Ken Mehlman, said last weekend at the GOP House Retreat, that Democrats are failing to capitalize on Republican ethics issues – and that ideology will provide a “cushion” in the ’06 term elections. To some extent, he is right, as this recent national poll cited earlier seems to say to us:

**“If Democrats controlled the White House and Congress today, do you think there would be more or less corruption in Washington?”**

**Less corruption...37%**

**More/about the same...52%.**

Furthermore:

**“When you hear about charges of corruption in Washington today, which do you think is more to blame?”**

**The GOP in Congress/White House...14%**

**All politicians in Washington.....73%**

And, in the national polling by the PEW Foundation:

**“Do you think recent reports of lobbyists bribing members of Congress are isolated incidents of corruption or do you think this kind of behavior is common in Congress?”**

**Common behavior...81%**

**Isolated incidents....11%**

**What is disturbing is that over one-third of this 81% in a follow-up question believe that members are indeed “trading specific votes for money”...while the majority believe members are “just more likely to listen.”**

You can see why the Democrats are having a difficult time with “brand imaging” the “culture of corruption” theme ... prioritizing themselves around partisanship, rather than reformist recommendations...no wonder, with leadership like this, we find opinion polling by the PEW organization on the following:

**“In your view, does the Republican Party or the Democratic Party have better political leaders?”**

**GOP.....41%**

**Democrats...37%.**

However, “not so fast”, we might say to Ken Melhman. The Democrats are holding a consistent +10% lead in the Congressional generic ballot question as measured by dozens of national polls; the Democrats hold a +13% lead when voters were asked which political party could do a better job of “reforming government in Washington” (42%, to only 29%)...and, it should be noted, that this is significantly different from July of 1994,

when it was 40% to 40%...and, a recent Washington Post/ABC poll revealed that ethics and virtue have fallen considerably:

**“Do you think the overall level of ethics and honesty in the federal government has risen, fallen, or stayed the same with Bush as president?”**

**Fallen.....43%**

**Risen.....18%**

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**Net..... -25%**

**Ten years or so ago**, just before the revolution of 1994 which brought the GOP to power, this same question was very much different:

**Fallen.....24%**

**Risen.....17%**

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**Net.....-7%**

Moreover, in my own RT Strategies poll in late January, adults were asked whether elections mattered anymore:

**“Do you agree or disagree that election results have little or no influence on government decisions in Washington?”**

**Disagreed.....57%**

**Agreed.....41%.**



The last information demonstrates that the voters may be cynically predisposed to politics today, but they still believe that their vote counts and can still “send a message” to their representatives with a vengeance, if it need be. The mid term elections of 1974 and 1994 prove this point.

History tells us that most midterm elections are decided on “pocket book” and “local issues”, not presidential job approval, and, most economic indicators point to a successful 2006. However, adults continue to seem pessimistic about their future; for example, almost 60% think the U.S. is “headed in the wrong direction” today and additionally, a more recent measurement should be troubling for GOP strategists:

**“Generally speaking, when it comes to the major issues facing the United States today, do you feel the White House is”**

**Doing better than expected.....4%**

**About as well as expected.....36%**

**Falling short of expectations.....58%.**

I will finalize my remarks only to remind you that the Republican Party has been in power on Capitol Hill now for about 12 years and has stayed in power by winning every single close election that was possible – and, in a 50-50 nation, it only takes about a 1 or 2% increase in Democratic party turnout or a 1 or 2% decrease in GOP turnout, most likely from “voter fatigue” as happened in 1974, to literally turn this country upside down.

Unless the Republican Party remains the Thomas Jefferson type of “outside party of reform” battling “Big Urban Government” and all its corruptive influences, the Democrat Party will find a way to take control again of our country – much to the dismay of Jefferson, Seneca, and Reagan. As David Brooks in his article concluded, “back in the dim recess of my mind, I remember a party that thought of itself as a reform, or even a revolutionary movement. That party used to be known as the Republican Party. I wonder if it still exists?”

Thank you.

Lecture delivered to the Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison Trust

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