

The End Of Influence

By Michael Waldman

THERE are shivers running through official Washington, and it's not just the January cold. The plea bargain by the lobbyist Jack Abramoff threatens to ensnare key lawmakers in scandal and potential legal troubles, including some Congressional leaders. The case, with its luxury skyboxes, politicians shilling for gambling interests and lobbyists stealing from Indian tribes, symbolizes Washington's extreme cash-for-policy culture. But what can we do to ensure that, when the dust clears, things won't just go back to politics as usual?

In the long struggle to strengthen democracy, reform sometimes follows scandal, but not always. Often appalling corruption has produced a yawn rather than a shriek. True progress comes only from rare "reform moments," when accumulated public outrage combines with potent policy changes.

In the late 1800's, everybody knew that campaigns were financed by patronage appointees, but it took the assassination of President James A. Garfield in 1881 by a spurned job-seeker to spur civil service reform.

At the beginning of the last century, the rise of corporations bred new corruption, tainting even President Theodore Roosevelt. After it was revealed that Roosevelt had received large donations from the insurance industry in 1904, he felt his honor had been besmirched. "Sooner or later, unless there is a readjustment, there will come a riotous, wicked, murderous day of atonement," he told a reporter, and eventually he won passage of the first federal law banning corporate campaign gifts.

A 1906 muckraking article in *Cosmopolitan* magazine called "The Treason of the Senate" exposed how corrupt state legislatures controlled the senators they appointed and sent to Washington. Public outcry was so fierce and sustained that the Constitution was amended in 1913 to provide direct election of senators.

Another great wave of reform came in the 1970's. After Watergate, Congress established public financing and voluntary spending limits for presidential races. It even imposed spending limits on legislative contests, though that provision was struck down by the Supreme Court. Scandal begat reform locally, too. New York City's landmark public financing system, under which candidates receive matching public funds, was enacted not because of vague good-government sentiments but in response to the 1980's scandals that led to party leaders being imprisoned and a former Queens Borough president, Donald Manes, committing suicide.

Unfortunately, just as often scandals lead merely to cynicism and fatigue, from Teapot Dome in the 1920's to the Abscam criminal convictions of Congressmen in the 1970's. The savings and loan collapse of the 1980's produced the memorable image of the Keating Five senators testifying in shame before Congress. A new president, Bill Clinton, whom I served as a political reform adviser, proposed reform. But House Democratic leaders soon got what Lincoln diagnosed in his generals as "the slows." I will never feel more frustrated than I did standing in the Senate antechamber as reform was filibustered to death.

History shows how
we can end the
pay-for-policy cycle.

Intriguingly, the most recent campaign finance law passed without the spur of a specific scandal. Yes, the public was aware of the rising role of soft money, and stories of big donors staying in the Lincoln Bedroom got wide attention. But the bipartisan campaign reform act introduced by Senators Russell Feingold and John McCain passed only after six years of patient organizing.

So, can the Abramoff mess become a true tipping point? It depends on the boldness of the reform proposals. Yes, measures to tighten disclosure for lobbyists, like those proposed by Senator McCain and Representative Marty Meehan, are no doubt needed. But voters should insist on a stronger system to transform campaign finance at the same time.

For example, last year Connecticut passed a full public-financing system for legislative and statewide elections after a series of scandals, including one that forced the resignation of Gov. John Rowland and his guilty plea to a conspiracy charge.

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Another approach would be a matching funds system for Congressional races similar to New York City's system.

Just as important, the public must be persuaded that change will truly bring accountability. Reform must not be presented simply as a matter of political hygiene, but as a way to bolster voters' voices in the legislative process. Mr. Abramoff was central to the Republicans' so-called K Street Project, in which the Congressional majority sought to create a political machine tying Republican politicians to business lobbyists. A century ago muckrakers educated the public about such networks; perhaps today's bloggers can

play a similar role.

Finally, the reform moment will arrive when politicians, in their own self-interest, press for change. There are hopeful signs. Democrats, finally shedding their incumbent mindsets after a decade in the minority, have now made political reform a central plank. Republicans are far more implicated in the current scandal, which may give their rank and file new reasons to turn to Senator McCain for leadership.

Jack Abramoff's football stadium skybox may never become a symbol as potent as the parking garage where the cinematic Deep Throat whispered, "Follow the money." But even a jaded public can reach a tipping point. As the scandal unfolds, let's hope it leads not just to lurid headlines but lasting change. □

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