

Indifferent To House Ethics

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It has become a serious problem at the higher levels of government: public officials refusing to police themselves. In the House of Representatives for the past five years an "understanding" has existed between the two parties that no member will ask the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct to embark on an investigation into another member's conduct. This agreement may have had its time and place: In the mid 1990s, complaints to the ethics committee were rampant and often were made to score political points. But the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction.

The House holds its members to a lower ethical standard than any other part of federal government. In the executive branch, government officials who discover misconduct are obliged by law to report it. In the judicial branch, any citizen can lodge a complaint against a federal judge and be assured an investigation. In the legislative branch, not only senators but regular citizens may file complaints with the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. The House of Representatives stands alone in allowing a conspiracy of silence to cover up the unethical, and perhaps even illegal, conduct of its members, be they Democrats or Republicans.

The House ethics committee has not undertaken an investigation in more than six years. In fact, only two ethics charges have been filed at all in that period, the most recent being one sent to the committee by Bob Barr (R-Ga.) against Gary Condit (D-Calif.) for obstructing a police investigation into the death of Chandra Levy. The committee took no action. (Both men are now out of Congress.)

The Post recently reported on a matter in which documents -- real physical evidence -- suggest that House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, Rep. W.J. "Billy" Tauzin (R-La.) and Rep. Joe Barton (R-Tex.) solicited campaign donations in return for their assistance with an amendment to the energy bill that would have saved Kansas-based Westar Energy Inc. billions of dollars. And what is the House doing about this possible offense? Nothing. No member has filed a complaint with the ethics committee and no one else can, unless a House member agrees to forward the complaint.

If members of Congress will not police themselves, who will police them? Certainly not the current attorney general, for whom allegations of political corruption -- unless aimed at a well-known Democrat such as presidential candidate John Edwards -- are largely irrelevant. The ethics committee was created for the purpose of curbing abuses by members of Congress who skirt the law. Westar is only the most recent incident that merits investigation.

The House majority whip, Rep. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.), attempted to insert a provision benefiting Philip Morris into the Homeland Security Bill. Blunt has received substantial campaign donations from Philip Morris, his son works for Philip Morris and his "close personal friend" Abigail Perlman is a lobbyist for Philip Morris. Doesn't his action on a legislative provision benefiting Philip Morris but having absolutely no relevance to the Homeland Security legislation merit some scrutiny? And why didn't any member of Congress request an investigation of Jim Moran (D-Va.) when he accepted a \$450,000 loan from MBNA Corp. and then pushed for legislation sought by that company?

The public has the right to hold members of Congress to high ethical standards. It is ironic that the House, supposedly the most accountable branch of government, is now effectively the least accountable.

PUBLISHED CORRECTIONS: The July 29 op-ed piece by Melanie Sloan incorrectly stated that the "House ethics committee has not undertaken an investigation in more than six years." The committee has conducted several investigations of members of Congress in that period. (Published 8/6/03)

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