

By Jim Morris

The United States government is often quick to denounce corruption and promote American-style democracy in other countries. Recent events in Washington, however, have shown that the U.S. has its own work to do to clean up its government. The list of public officials who have admitted to or are accused of accepting bribes or otherwise abusing their positions is long. Here are just a few of the unseemly developments during the first half of 2006:

- In January, former lobbyist Jack Abramoff – closely linked to onetime House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas – pleaded guilty to fraud, tax evasion and conspiracy to bribe public officials on behalf of Indian tribes and other clients. He was sentenced to five years and 10 months in prison in March. DeLay, under indictment himself for alleged involvement in campaign money laundering, resigned from Congress in June.
- In March, former congressman Randy “Duke” Cunningham, R-Calif., was sentenced to eight years and four months in prison for accepting \$2.4 million in bribes from defense contractors in exchange for government business.
- In April, Rep. Alan Mollohan, D-W. Va., abandoned his seat on the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct – commonly known as the ethics committee – amid allegations that he improperly directed government funds to foundations in his state, to his own financial benefit. Mollohan has denied wrongdoing.
- In May, Vernon Jackson, chief executive officer of iGate Inc., a Kentucky-based telecommunications firm, pleaded guilty to paying \$400,000 in bribes to Rep. William Jefferson, D-La., in exchange for Jefferson’s help with deals in Africa. The FBI said it found \$90,000 of the money in a freezer in Jefferson’s home. As of early September, the congressman had yet to be formally charged with any crime. Jackson was sentenced to seven years and three months in prison.
- Also in May, Neil Volz, a former aide to Rep. Bob Ney, R-Ohio, and an erstwhile Abramoff associate, testified in federal court that he was given free meals, tickets to sporting events and other gifts by lobbyists when he was working for the congressman. In return, Volz said, “I gave preferential treatment to my lobbying buddies.” In September, Ney – implicated in the Abramoff scandal – agreed to plead guilty to corruption charges. He could receive a prison term of up to 10 years and a fine of up to \$500,000.

The opprobrium was not limited to Congress. It extended to the states as well: After a six-month federal trial, the former Republican Governor of Illinois, George Ryan, was convicted in April of taking money, gifts and free travel in exchange for government contracts, and sentenced in September to 6 ½ years in prison. And the executive branch of the federal government is not without its own problems. For example, in a report released in June, the Senate Indian Affairs Committee raised questions about contacts between Abramoff and former deputy Interior Secretary J. Steven Griles.

Back in January, it appeared that the cascade of malfeasance from Capitol Hill would prompt significant reform. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., suggested a ban on privately funded travel for lawmakers and their staffs, in a tacit acknowledgement that some “fact-finding missions” are really high-dollar vacations, sponsored by corporations and others with business before Congress. The idea never gained momentum, perhaps because both Republicans and Democrats make wide use of these trips.

Lobbying and ethics reform bills in the House and the Senate proposed, among other things, a ban on gifts, and full, online disclosure of lobbyist fundraising activities. These, too, went nowhere.

“It has been a striking year,” said Mary Boyle, a spokeswoman for the watchdog group Common Cause. The litany of indictments and convictions, Boyle said, has been a predictable outcome of the “pay-to-play culture” fostered by DeLay and his

brethren, who concocted the “K Street Project” – a largely successful attempt to pack lobbying firms with Republicans. This created “a unique environment, even by Washington standards” that allowed lobbyists to become more intimately involved in the legislative process, she said.

The upshot has been one scandal after another. But there have been no substantive attempts to fix the underlying problems, notably the rising costs of what appear to be perpetual campaigns and the impotence of the House and Senate ethics committees.

Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, sees “no prospect for lobbying reform. They [members of Congress] really don’t want it.”

But Sloan, a former federal prosecutor, isn’t sure that new restrictions are the answer, anyway. “Creating new rules is completely useless if you don’t enforce the ones you have,” she said, noting that the ethics committees “are completely moribund.”

Sloan and others have suggested that an independent Office of Public Integrity, along the lines of an inspector general in the executive branch, be created to do the dirty work the ethics committees are unable or unwilling to do themselves: Pass judgment on the propriety of privately sponsored trips, lobbyists’ behavior and other sensitive matters.

The odds of that happening, she quickly added, are “absolutely nil.”

If there was a glimmer of light during the dark days of 2005-06, Sloan said, it was the fact that some miscreants were actually getting caught. Prosecutors stepped in, she said, when it became obvious that Congress wasn’t going to police itself.

Tom Fitton, president of the conservative-leaning Judicial Watch, noticed the same phenomenon. Within the past year or so, Fitton said, the Department of Justice has shown a willingness to prosecute public corruption cases it once might have avoided.

This, he believes, is a very good thing. “The best possible reform is throwing politicians in jail,” Fitton said. “That will do the most to keep them honest.”

However, Craig Holman, , the campaign finance lobbyist for the advocacy group founded by former Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader, argued that legislative remedies are needed. He said he is hopeful that they will be embraced by the next Congress.

Holman noted that the 2006 reform measures failed by small margins in most cases. He’s convinced that the removal of a dozen or so “anti-reform incumbents” from Congress would allow key elements of those measures – including the establishment of an Office of Public Integrity and strict limits on privately funded travel – to be pushed through.

A noteworthy piece of legislation, designed to clean up what some believe to be an increasingly venal system of electing presidents, already has been introduced by Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis. The bill would greatly increase public funding of presidential campaigns, with the aim of eliminating or reducing the advantage held by candidates who raise vast amounts of private money (and are, therefore, beholden to their big contributors). Public Citizen found that the two candidates in 2004, George W. Bush and John Kerry, raised \$262 million and \$248 million, respectively, from private sources.

In early September, a separate bill was being drafted to boost public funding of congressional campaigns. Like candidates for the White House, members of Congress are awash in private money. Public Citizen recently reported that lobbyists and their political action committees had contributed at least \$103 million to lawmakers since 1998. "Such enormous sums buy commensurate access, shutting most Americans out of the process and skewing legislation and budget allocation," the group's president, Joan Claybrook, said in a press statement.

The president of Common Cause, Chellie Pingree, told the House Committee on Government Reform in February that the metastasizing scandals had "greatly frayed" Americans' faith in their government. "The spectacle of executive branch officials and members of Congress betraying their duty to serve the public interest increases public cynicism and threatens to erode further citizen participation in our democracy," Pingree testified.

At the time she gave her statement, support for meaningful change was at its zenith. Jack Abramoff had just entered his guilty plea and promised to cooperate with investigators, providing names of members of Congress and aides he had sought to influence. Craig Holman's phone was "ringing off the hook," he said, as lawmakers solicited feedback on reform legislation.

"Suddenly, this reform movement just took off on its own," Holman said. "I was exceedingly optimistic at the beginning of this year."

As the months went by, however, "all these calls for huge, sweeping reforms . . . just faded away," Holman said wistfully. It was almost as if the Abramoff affair had never happened.