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Commentary

Government and Ethics: Less is More

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In an effort to curb truly unethical behavior, we have created a mountain of laws and regulations that make previously ethical and acceptable actions illegal. Income reporting requirements and limitations on honoraria are just a few examples of regulations designed to prevent or reveal unethical behavior. Violations of these prophylactic regulations now make criminals out of even greater numbers of government officials. In an effort to curb truly unethical behavior we have taken ethical behavior and made it criminal. This confuses everyone and further blurs the standards of right and wrong. Now when we read about a congressman's conviction on 5 counts of ethics violations, we have to wonder if the congressman's actions were unethical in and of themselves or whether he was just guilty of not complying with laws designed to prevent or detect unethical behavior.

The difference between these two types of violations is substantial. A congressman who sells his vote to the highest bidder has clearly acted unethically and ought to suffer certain consequences. He has violated man's law, but more importantly, he has violated eternal moral standards. But a congressman who never takes a bribe and always votes his conscience, who fails to adequately meet certain reporting requirements is guilty of no moral or ethical failing. His guilt is limited to failure to comply with laws designed to prevent something of which he is not guilty.

We have become much like the Pharisees, who in an effort to enforce God's law, added layers of their own law. The result is that the distinction between man's law and God's law became murky and the absolute standards of acceptable behavior were unclear. In like manner, many of our ethics laws make previously acceptable actions illegal and soon we lose our ability to distinguish between true ethical violations and violations of man-made procedures that have no relationship to real wrongdoing.

We are unlikely to gain any ground on government corruption unless we do the following:

1) Improve the ethical standards of the nation

It is unrealistic to think that we can place ethical people in government when the population that they represent is largely unethical. Like it or not, our elected officials are a reflection of our society as a whole. How do we improve the nation's ethics? We must reestablish sound teaching of right and wrong in our homes, schools and churches. Moral relativism has permeated our institutions with the view that there are no absolutes and that right and wrong are situational. These "situation ethics" are the seeds from which government corruption sprouts.

2) Reduce the size and scope of government

There are many ways that smaller government reduces corruption, but

I'll deal with only two of them here. First, a small government is less attractive to the unethical who will find other avenues for their mischief.

There is an old joke that asks, "Why do bank robbers rob banks?" The answer to the question also serves as the punch-line, "Because that's where the money is."

It may not be a very good joke, but it **is** good psychology. The criminally-minded individual is most likely to target locations with high concentrations of cash. In a like fashion, more sophisticated, yet unethical, individuals are going to focus their attention on institutions with high concentrations of cash or power. Modern governments, (whether federal, state, county or municipal) are institutions that wield considerable power and spend significant sums of money.

Second, small governments reduce the temptations to engage in unethical behavior—thus keeping the honest lawmaker honest. Recent news has focused on the role of corporate lobbying in promoting or aiding the corruption of legislators. We should ask, "Why do lobbyists lobby?" There are two primary reasons. They are either trying to get government to give something to their clients or they are trying to get government to leave their clients alone. In either case, the existence of hoards of lobbyists is a sign that government has gone beyond its proper role. Proper government should not be passing out money, subsidies or favors—nor should it pose a threat to industries that would require defensive lobbying. Shrink government to its proper role and virtually all lobbying will disappear.

Conclusion:

We can pass mountains of ethics regulations, but until we abandon moral relativism and reduce the size and scope of government, we will never make a dent in government corruption.

When it comes to government and ethics, less of one produces more of the other.