

Of Scandals and Changes in Governments

By Jim Jess

When corruption is discovered in government, we must understand it for what it is. The taking of bribes and other types of corruption are evidence that evil influences are at work within a government. Without a foundation of sound ethics and patterns of honest behavior, men will continue to have ethical failings and be motivated by these evil influences. Too often when an obvious ethical failure has occurred, the public passion is directed by clever individuals or groups toward altering political or economic systems to address the problem. At times, this may be the answer, but it can just as easily be a mistake. A couple of historical examples will illustrate this point.

In 1913, the Seventeenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified. It changed the original system of electing U.S. senators by state legislatures to our present system of electing senators by popular vote. The Seventeenth Amendment was proposed, in part, because of political corruption. Powerful political bosses in the states were sending their hand-picked "yes men" to the U.S. Senate. Consequently, the argument ran, senators were not representing the people of their states, but rather the interests of the political bosses. So, the supporters of direct election of U.S. senators pushed their amendment through. Interestingly, the state legislatures ratified this amendment, in part, because it would take the heat off of them to select the best individuals to serve in Washington, D.C.

In the early days of our republic, only the most experienced, accomplished statesman were selected by their state legislatures to serve in the U.S. Senate. Gone are the days when the Senate was distinguished by men such as Daniel Webster or Henry Clay. Many senators today have very little public policy experience before going to Washington. It appears that the Seventeenth Amendment has not improved the caliber of individuals serving in the U.S. Senate. You could make a strong argument that, overall, the quality of people in the Senate and the quality of legislation being produced have declined. Furthermore, the states no longer have a voice in the U.S. Senate, since senators are no longer selected by state governments to represent their interests in Washington. Some representation of a state's interests still happens, but the accountability to state political leaders is no longer a part of who U.S. senators are.

The Lincoln Savings and Loan scandal of 1989 implicated five senators, known as the Keating Five, who allegedly intervened on behalf of the failed California thrift. The scandal demonstrated, as other scandals involving senators have, that popularly elected senators are no more immune to scandals and corruption than those appointed under the old system. Furthermore, the U.S. Senate today is a rich man's club, filled with many children of inherited wealth. In far too many cases, those who can afford to run expensive statewide campaigns for the Senate are either the very wealthy or those who have been "bought and paid for" with special interest money.

Perhaps the best solution to the problem in the early 1900s would have been to remove from office those state legislators who continued to send weak, corrupt politicians to the

Senate. But then, as now, the attachment of the people to their members of Congress, or, at times, even to their state legislators, and their habit of returning them to office, is nothing short of amazing. This is because most of the electorate is not looking beyond the slogans and images of the modern political campaign or the party label. Too many ignore the substance of the policies being made or proposed. The public gets caught up in the hype of election campaigns and keeps re-electing far too many of the same unprincipled politicians in each election.

Another example from history, just four years after the Seventeenth Amendment was ratified, points to the folly of change without considering the long-term ramifications. In November 1917, the Bolsheviks were swept into power in Russia in the Russian Revolution, led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. The people ignorantly supported the Bolsheviks, who later renamed themselves the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Many of the common people, weary of the oppression and other ethical shortcomings of the czars and the recently installed Kerensky government, were persuaded that the Bolsheviks would follow through on their promises of land and food for the peasants. They were certainly fooled.

History has weighed communism in the balances and found it wanting. In light of the millions who were slaughtered and oppressed under Soviet communism, the Russian people would have fared much better if they had simply kept the czars.

So, what is the moral of this story? Tinkering with structures of governments or even changing who runs a government may not produce a better life for the common people. We must identify men and women of strong moral principles and sound character—and entrust these individuals to represent the people—to have a government that truly secures liberty and administers the affairs of state in an honest, prudent and responsible manner. This is exactly what the Founders of our republic intended when they established the processes for choosing those who would serve in government of the United States.

The great key for our political system to work is an ethical, engaged and concerned citizenry. Only a body of individuals who truly love freedom and work to secure it will make the necessary efforts to elect good leaders and hold them accountable. Without a body of engaged and conscientious citizens, the most perfect government ever devised will not succeed in protecting the liberties and security of its people.

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