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This Congress disconnected its ethics long ago

Friday, January 06, 2006

The political stinkbomb that is the Jack Abramoff Scandal exploded in the face of Congress this week. Nothing is new here, though. This disgusting trail leads right back to the Republican majority leadership's decision to effectively gut the U.S. House of Representatives Ethics Committee in order to protect its indicted ex-leader, U.S. Rep. Tom DeLay, R-Texas.

First, though, let's talk about that crook Abramoff. To those who may not be familiar with his name yet -- you will -- he was the kingpin of all Washington, D.C., lobbyists until his fall. Billing them at \$750 an hour, he and his recently convicted sidekick Michael Scanlon also collected millions from clients and redistributed much of that largess to his friends on Capitol Hill in expectation for return favors on the very floor of the United States Congress.

That's the trail federal prosecutors are now actively pursuing in the wake of Abramoff's stunning decision to plead guilty to multiple charges of corruption and bribery in hopes of a more lenient prison term when the time comes to go bye-bye. The lobbyist's capitulation had the effect of flicking on the light switch in a rat-infested cellar. The scurrying of little congressional feet could be heard in the resultant stampede to return now-tainted Abramoff money or belatedly donate it to children's hospitals or like causes, where the ill-begotten cash should have been directed months and years ago -- after Abramoff and his ilk were booted out the doors of representatives' offices.

The sad fact is that most recipients of that cash are Republicans, members of the majority party that has had a lock on power in all three branches of government since 2002. Abramoff was the GOP's main go-to guy for cash-raising from his clients, not only because that's where he was philosophically comfortable, but because only Republicans could get the bills passed -- or stopped -- that Abramoff needed as part of the quid-pro-quo game that he was playing with his pals in Congress.

Fortunately for prosecutors, the disgraced lobbyist was a prolific user of the Internet and various other forms of modern electronic communications equipment that is said to be yielding prodigious amounts of incriminating e-mails and the like for evidence. We hope this windfall will be used against any representative of the people who did Jack Abramoff's bidding in return for a handout. Not all of the loot went into the back pockets of dirty politicians, either; Abramoff, as part of his plea bargain, will have to pay more than \$26 million in tax penalties and restitution to his former clients even though he's claiming poverty. We say, turn him upside down and shake him just to be sure.



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And where has the vaunted U.S. House Ethics Committee been all this time? Good question. It still hasn't found its soul after said item was signed over to the proverbial devil following the sleazy rules changes the GOP bullied into effect last January just to protect Tom DeLay's hide before he was indicted back in Texas. The resulting uproar from outraged Democrats effectively stymied all committee work for many months until House Republicans were forced to reverse themselves in the face of wide-scale embarrassment over the current tsunami of scandals that is still at flood-tide.

The Abramoff case is just the latest blow to majority party rule in Congress, proving once again the old adage that "power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely."