

Political Corruption: Misuse of Government Power

[Thomas Sowell](#)

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The Jack Abramoff scandal has put political corruption front and center in Washington but this particular scandal, or even this particular kind of scandal, barely scratches the surface of corruption in government.

It is not that all members of Congress, or even most members of Congress, are taking outright bribes. Government is corrupted whenever it is diverted from its avowed purpose and directed toward some other goal, especially goals that conflict with its purpose.

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There are still more trillions of dollars being promised in Social Security pensions and Medicare payments, for which there is not enough money in the till. It is like writing checks without enough money in the bank to redeem them.

Present members of Congress win votes by promising such goodies.

That leaves it up to future members of Congress to figure out how to welsh on those promises, which could not be met without jacking up tax rates to unprecedented levels.

Even that probably wouldn't provide enough money, since confiscatory tax rates confiscate the incentives needed to keep the economy going. An alternative political ploy would be to pay people the amount of money that was promised but in dollars so inflated

that they won't buy anything close to what dollars bought when they were paid into the Social Security system.

Getting millions of people to rely on pensions that are not going to be there is corrupting government on a scale that makes bribing a few Congressmen look like minor league stuff.

Misuse of the powers of government is widespread at every level of government.

Confiscating homes for which people have worked and sacrificed for a lifetime, in order to turn the property over to someone else who is expected to pay more taxes, is a corruption of the power of eminent domain, which was put there to enable government to do things like build a dam or highway to benefit everyone.

In Burbank, California, the local politicians forced Home Depot to build a little shelter in which illegal aliens can wait to be picked up for work as day laborers -- for other people. The power to grant or withhold building permits was another power meant to be exercised for the public good, not to impose arbitrary extortions. But that kind of corruption is common in many communities.

What can be done about such corruption?

Some people think we need higher standards of behavior among public officials and/or stricter scrutiny by voters. Both would of course be wonderful, if they happened. But what are we to do in the meantime -- say, the next few centuries or the next millennium?

Anyone familiar with ancient history knows that people have been the way they are for thousands of years. Do not look for a change in human nature in 2006.

What we can change are the incentives and constraints.

At the heart of much government corruption is one simple thing: Re-election. It takes big bucks to run a political campaign and all that most politicians have to sell is the power of government that they control.

That is what they do sell in various ways to various special interests.

Term limits try to deal with the problem of re-election but the fatal weakness of term limits is the "s" at the end of the word "limits." So long as there are multiple terms, the first term is going to be spent trying to get re-elected to a second term -- instead of devoting that time to serving the public interest.

What really needs to be done is to put a limit of one term in one office and a waiting period of several years before being elected or appointed to another office in government. In other words, make political careers impossible.

Can people who are not career politicians run the government?

People who were not career politicians created the government and the Constitution of the United States of America.

It was one of the most incredible achievements in history. Who among our career politicians today would be capable of such a feat?



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Thomas Sowell has published a large volume of writing. His dozen books, as well as numerous articles and essays, cover a wide range of topics, from classic economic theory to judicial activism, from civil rights to choosing the right college.

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