Is Government Corruption More Common, or Are We Just Better at Finding It?

Some of today's scandals would have gone unseen a couple decades ago.

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Former Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley … extramarital affair with a female staffer …

By Alan Ehrenhalt | Senior

Back when I was a history student, I came across a dispute between two prominent scholars who disagreed about the condition of the streets in colonial Boston. Carl Bridenbaugh wrote that the streets must have been a mess, because letters and news sheets were filled with complaints that no one was sweeping up the growing dirt on public thoroughfares. David Hackett Fischer countered that the streets probably weren't that bad. More likely, he wrote, the Bostonians were overly fussy Puritans -- a bit anal-retentive, to use a term that wasn't very familiar in the 1700s.

It isn't one of the epic debates in American history, but I've remembered it ever since. It has colored my attitude, oddly enough, toward the question of corruption in American public life. Practically every day, the media assaults us with news about scandals and misdeeds among elected officials at all levels of government. Is corruption really worse than ever? Or have we become more attuned to finding it, like the New Englanders who couldn't stop noticing unwashed cobblestones?

Take New Jersey, for example. The past few decades have witnessed an unending series of criminal indictments in the state against mayors, county executives, state legislators and members of Congress. Now, there's no disputing the existence of quite a few bad apples in the Garden State barrel. But it's worth pointing out that New Jersey is home to some of the most sophisticated political reform groups anywhere in America, from New Jersey Citizen Action and the Good Government Coalition to institutes at its universities. To that, one must add a string of prosecutors who have endeavored to build political careers out of putting the state's politicians in prison. Chris Christie was the last one to do that, but he was far from the first.

Perhaps New Jersey is a vile cesspool of public corruption. But perhaps it might be described more accurately as a state with a broad array of public institutions carefully programmed to pounce on anything that looks suspicious. That's not an easy issue to resolve. Still, it's one that seems relevant to the current condition of state politics across the country, as an alarming number of officeholders -- and especially governors -- have found themselves undone by humiliating scandal.

When you make a list of the governors who have gotten themselves in trouble over the past decade (and it's a pretty long list), you begin to notice something surprising. Most of them weren't caught raiding the cookie jar. They were caught up in misdeeds involving sex, or at least inappropriate romantic relationships.

Eliot Spitzer of New York paid clandestine visits to a prostitute in a downtown Washington hotel. Mark Sanford of South Carolina made secret trips to South America to cavort with his mistress. Robert Bentley of Alabama used state funds to conceal an extramarital affair with a female staffer. John Kitzhaber of Oregon handed out state favors to his fiancée's consulting business. Those aren't the only ones, but I'll stop there. (If I wanted to keep going, I could point out that while the vast majority of these perpetrators are governors and male, not all of them are: Former Nashville Mayor Megan Barry resigned in March and pled guilty to theft of public funds after it was revealed that she'd been engaged in an affair with the head of her security detail.)

To be clear, the fact that more of these abuses are coming to light is a good thing. Officials who misuse public funds or otherwise break the law should be held accountable. And many of the most recent scandals involving the #MeToo movement aren't about potentially embarrassing sexual dalliances, but rather about serious harrassment, abuse and -- in the case of allegations against former New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman and Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens, for example -- sexual violence. Rooting those out is undoubtedly for the good.

Still, we're now faced with two nagging questions: Is this sort of corruption worse than it used to be? And is something wrong with the psyche of all these leaders that led them to risk career and reputation on what seem like inexplicable acts of stupidity?

Social psychologists and political scientists have spent much of the past century debating and theorizing over the mental health of people who are drawn to public office. In the 1920s and 1930s, heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis, scholars posited that politicians suffered from an ego deficiency. They were unusually needy people who courted the approval of the public to make up for private feelings of inadequacy. In the more optimistic 1950s, a consensus developed that precisely the opposite was true: Politicians were people with exceptionally healthy egos. Without a strong sense of self-importance, they wouldn't be able to deal with the stresses and insults that a political career necessarily entails.

I spent nearly 20 years watching politicians up close as a reporter covering Congress, and I became convinced that both of these theories were off the mark. Hanging out in the press gallery and in the speaker's lobby adjoining the House chamber, I saw plenty of self-centered egotists who seemed to need the approval of everyone they encountered. I saw others so mild-mannered and diffident that you had to wonder how they ever got into office in the first place. I ended up convinced that there was no such thing as a political personality. The 535 members of Congress reflected pretty much the whole range of personality types that existed in the outside world. I still think that's true.

But what if the crucial issue isn't what sorts of personalities seek public office? What if it's the way political power affects the people who attain it? After all, as Henry Kissinger rather famously said, "power is the ultimate aphrodisiac."

Todd Shackelford, who teaches psychology at Oakland University near Detroit, has been studying issues like this for more than a decade. He believes that power is, in fact, a male aphrodisiac and that men who attain high-ranking office are frequently tempted to play sexual games they never would have played before. He sees this as a fact of evolutionary life whose relevance can be traced all the way from prehistoric caves to the governor's private bedroom. "We shouldn't be surprised," Shackelford told me recently. "It's part of the male evolutionary psyche. When men achieve power, they attempt to turn that into sexual access. They get access to power, and they begin to feel entitled."

Shackelford thinks it's unlikely that sexual misconduct among politicians is much worse than it was a generation ago. It's just being brought into the open in a way that it rarely was before, and it has become more socially unacceptable when it is revealed. "We pin them for it far more than we used to," he says, "because people are less willing to let it slide."

This brings us back to what I will call the Boston streets question: Is it the dirt, or is it our growing awareness of it?

The closer one looks at recent scandals, the more it appears that enhanced public scrutiny explains them better than escalating mischief. Not just public scrutiny -- media scrutiny. It was *Willamette Week*, the alt-weekly in Portland, Ore., that broke the news about Kitzhaber steering government work to his fiancée. Fifty years ago, *Willamette Week* didn't exist. Would the mainstream Portland papers of the 1960s have chased that story down and published it? I'm pretty sure they would not have.

Or take the case of Bentley in Alabama. He was undone by his decision to fire the head of the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, who then leaked details about the governor's affair with a staff member and his use of state resources to conduct and cover it up. The information was leaked to the website AL.com, a consortium of Alabama newspapers and broadcast media. All of those news organizations were in business a generation ago, but would they have gone for the story? I don't think so.

Reporters in the 1960s and 1970s were willing to pursue cases of financial corruption in public office. Sexual misconduct was something else altogether. Either the reporters felt that exposing it was breaking an unwritten code, or they didn't want to jeopardize their access to those in power, or they didn't think the public would want to read about it. Or, perhaps, all three.

One weekend in December 1970, a state car carrying Maryland Gov. Marvin Mandel was in an accident in the dead of night on a rural road nowhere near the capital. Mandel was seriously injured. One person was killed. The governor explained he'd been on "official business" attending a meeting, but the entire state press corps and much of the state's senior workforce knew what the business was: a secret visit to his mistress. Still, not a word about the circumstances of the incident appeared in print or on the air. Only years later, when Mandel's wife charged him with adultery and evicted him from the governor's mansion, did Mandel's illicit relationship become a public issue. Today the juicy details behind the car wreck would have been in the next day's *Washington Post*.

A matter of conjecture, to be sure. But I think there's enough evidence to conclude that we are seeing a combination of new media appetites and new attitudes about sexual misdeeds, not an unprecedented epidemic of misbehavior among elected officials. We have opened Pandora's Box. The contents were in there all along.

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