

Title:

Politics: The Corruption Curve

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Summary:

In a world where hereditary monarchies are an anachronism, the most absolute power lies in the political sphere whether wielded by a military-backed dictator or by those who have been so repeatedly elected to office that they no longer see themselves as public representatives but as entitled oligarchs of a system they control.

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Article Body:

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." (Lord Acton)

We all like to think of ourselves as kind, honest, and benevolent. In our hearts, we are convinced that should we ever attain personal power, whether through building our own business, rising to the corporate executive office, becoming extraordinarily influential in our area of expertise, or in winning public office, we will continue to be honest and ethical, incorruptible to the end.

The action of wielding power varies greatly with the individual involved and the extent of power obtained. We are all familiar with the petty tyrant at work who rules a tiny business empire with greed and self-indulgence, bullying underlings without any sense of fairness or mercy. We have seen the research scientists who have forged a reputation over a lifetime fall into disgrace through subverting results to support their theories and their sponsors.

As the extent of power increases, we see the Enron and Lincoln Savings brand of tableaux unfold. Not only does that same greed and self-indulgence hold sway, but the concept of being above the law arises and accountability and trust are jettisoned from the boardroom. The more esoteric the lifestyle becomes, the greater the disconnect between the powerful and the rest of the world. Those who lack power are to be cheated, manipulated, and drained of their possessions - surely only just desserts for their failure to rise to the top.

In a world where hereditary monarchies are an anachronism, the most absolute power lies in the political sphere whether wielded by a military-backed dictator or by those who have been so repeatedly elected to office that they no longer see themselves as public representatives but as entitled oligarchs of a system they control.

The presumptuous ambition of one man, Julius Caesar, led to the destruction of a republic that had guided Rome to the heights of civilization. The empire he created held the seeds of its own destruction in its descent into the unrestrained autocracies of a string of less than illustrious rulers who wielded their absolute power with caprice and personal whim.

The framers of the Constitution had a vision of a government where no such unconstrained power could arise because of the checks and balances inherent in the system they devised. No one could be above the law because the rule of law was paramount. The advise and consent required from different branches of government ensured that a multitude of voices and philosophical ideas were involved in any major decision.

But those who drove the development of our constitutional law were giants in their own right. Washington's refusal to accept the title of king, advocated by several of his supporters, signaled his rejection of too much power concentrated in one individual. His peers - Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, Madison, and many more - followed the same course: divide power to ensure that the needs of the many can be met through a myriad of representative voices.

Over the centuries, the checks and balances they built have kept the ship of state afloat. Occasionally listing to port or starboard, the sheer multiplicity of participants in the political process have been repetitively able to pull it back to an upright middle course. Certainly, there have been many dark periods of corruption and incompetence. We face such a darkness now: individuals in office for too long, with too much power within their grasping fingers; too many officials who have forgotten that they are public servants, developing a mindset of entitlement and the conviction that they know, better than anyone else, what is good for the public who, after all, elected them.

Only the rule of law, so carefully crafted more than 200 years ago, can keep them in check. The lawful prosecution of a congressman accepting millions of dollars in bribes, of a congressional leader who used election money as he saw fit rather than as the law required, and administration officials who destroyed a woman's career and jeopardized the lives of covert operatives all over the world, restores balance in a world rife with corruption, greed, and overweening

pride.

Ongoing investigations into the honesty of leaders in evoking the need for military intervention and the rising voice of dissent against financial favors for the rich and powerful at the cost of cutting services to the powerless poor, offer a glimmer of hope that the corruption will be curbed and the hubris of our leaders punctured and exposed.

The embattled defendants cry foul, claiming that the only transgression is the political ambition of their critics. They have moved so far beyond the pale of the common citizen that their own corruption and misdeeds seem entirely ordinary and acceptable to them.

Happily, unlike the impotent rubber-stamp Roman senators, we can face our would-be Caesars without threat of bodily harm and we can cast them out of their cozy nest with the most powerful weapon ever devised: the ballot box.