



January 4, 2008

From the Desk of Judicial Watch President Tom Fitton:

Democrats Broken Promises on Congressional Ethics Reform



In case you hadn't noticed, it's campaign season again and, per usual, the candidates are doling out the campaign promises. But what about all of those promises made during the last election? Specifically, what happened to the major ethics reform House Speaker Pelosi vowed to provide in the first days of her reign on the Hill?

Well, just before Christmas, we finally got our answer. That's when Massachusetts Democratic Congressman Michael Capuano released a report by the Special Task Force on Ethics Enforcement, which he chaired, outlining a strategy to address congressional corruption.

As you may recall, I was a participant in these ethics reform discussions, [testifying](#) before Capuano's task force last year. From the beginning, I was concerned that by the time ethics reform proposals made it through the congressional vetting process they would be so watered down as to be useless. As it turns out, I was right to be worried. Initially, my understanding was the Cong. Capuano had proposed some significant reforms. Evidently, it looks to me that the good reforms were not much liked by his party's leadership and have been watered down.

The good news is that the task force does recommend the creation of a quasi-independent panel (called the Office of Congressional Ethics) to consider ethics complaints. Members of the office are to be appointed by congressional leadership and are to conduct a "preliminary review" of any ethics issue within 30 business days (or five legislative days, whichever is longer), and then decide whether or not to refer the complaint to the House Ethics Committee for review and potential action. But that's where the good news ends.

First, after the panel completes its "preliminary review" and decides not to act, it is under no obligation to inform the public or the media of the results of its investigation. In other words, appointees of Congress can simply sweep the matter under the rug and no one will be the wiser. How can there be accountability with this glaring lack of transparency?

Second, the task force recommends that the new ethics panel include former members of Congress, many of whom helped create the culture of corruption on Capitol Hill in the first place! You can bet ex-congressmen would have little incentive to hold their fellow congressional club members accountable for their transgressions.

Most importantly, the new task force recommendations deny citizens and outside groups the opportunity to file ethics complaints. (The task force did consider allowing complaints by outside groups, but only if these groups disclosed the names of all their donors, which is, of course, a non-starter.)

The willingness to allow outside complaints has always been, in my view, the true test of how committed the Democrats were to meaningful ethics reform. If members (and political appointees) of Congress are still in complete control of the ethics enforcement process, with no outside participation, how is this different than the deficient system we now have in place? (To be fair to the Democrats, Republicans continue to have zero interest in serious ethics enforcement.)

Democrats have had more than a year to make good on their promise of significant ethics reform. What they have given us instead are some minor reforms that will do little to restore voters' confidence in Congress. What we need is serious reform. (See, for instance, JW's list of the ["Ten Most Wanted" Corrupt Politicians](#) from last week...)

It is not too late to fix the mess, as any changes would have to be voted on by the House. If you're concerned about ethics in the House of Representatives, contact your congressman and let him know what you think about these latest developments.

Tough Questions for Iowa's Winners (and Losers)

Mike Huckabee came from nowhere to win the Iowa caucuses. Congratulations to him. But now things could get tough for the new front-runner. Candidates languishing at the bottom of the polls, as Huckabee did throughout most of the campaign, tend to avoid the tough questions. Will Americans now take a more thorough look at Huckabee's record on ethics? The reporting to date raises a host of issues:

- [Politico.com](#) and others have reported that Mike Huckabee has had 14 ethics complaints filed against him, yielding 5 admonitions and \$1,000 in fines from the Arkansas Ethics Commission. Instead of cooperating with the Arkansas Ethics Commission, Huckabee twice filed lawsuits to shut it down.
- On a number of occasions, Huckabee failed to report cash payments he made to himself. For example, according to [The Associated Press](#), Huckabee received, but failed to report, "\$43,150 from his 1994 lieutenant governor's campaign for use of his personal airplane, \$14,000 Janet Huckabee received from his 1992 U.S. Senate campaign, and \$23,500 from a tax-exempt organization he incorporated with others in 1994, but whose funding source isn't known..."
- According to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Huckabee "depleted the governor's office emergency fund in the final weeks of his administration in part to pay for the destruction of computer hard drives in his office."
- According to a recent article in [National Review](#), Huckabee had a penchant for accepting gifts while serving in public office. "A \$200 stadium blanket, \$250 in dental care, a \$600 chainsaw, and a \$3,700 pair of cowboy boots were among 300 gratuities Huckabee accepted totaling \$130,000. Like the Clintons loading their moving van with White House antiques, Huckabee tried to claim for himself some \$70,000 in furniture donated to the governor's mansion."

On the Democratic side, Barack Obama secured a victory over John Edwards and Hillary Clinton. I've written quite a bit about Obama's ethical lapses in previous issues of the *Weekly Update*, including his suspicious land deal with indicted political fundraiser [Antoin "Tony" Rezko](#), and his alleged [influence peddling](#) involving campaign contributors. One would hope, now that Obama has become more viable as a national candidate, that more attention is paid to these stories.

With respect to Hillary, she is far from being knocked out of this race. She's still at the top of the national polls, and has a tremendous campaign war chest from which to draw. Hillary is in this for the long haul.

And, of course, no one has done more to hold Hillary Clinton accountable for her criminal and ethically bankrupt record than Judicial Watch. Click [here](#) to check out our publication, "Ten (plus) Unanswered Questions for Hillary Clinton." She deserves scrutiny whether or not she's running for the Oval Office.

Judicial Watch neither supports nor opposes candidates. We are interested, however, in making sure that politicians, no matter their party or ideology, are held to account for any ethical or legal transgressions – especially those seeking the highest office in the land.

Until next week...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Fitton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Tom" and the last name "Fitton" clearly distinguishable.

Thomas Fitton
President

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