

Playing Offense on Ethics

Right vs. Wrong

A Third Way Message Memo by Jim Kessler, Vice President for Policy

The Problem: The legislative battle over lobbying reform has allowed conservatives to shift the blame for the mess in Washington to lobbyists, create the illusion of a bipartisan scandal, and to avoid responsibility for their own ethical lapses.

The Strategy: Make the solution to the ethics mess be a change in leaders, not just a change in legislation.

The Message: *It takes two to tango. If you need a new law to tell you that trading cash and vacations for legislative favors is wrong, it's time for you to go.*

One conservative legislator is about to go to jail, the most powerful conservative in Congress has been removed from his post and is under indictment, the Vice President's top aide is being investigated for perjury, a key Bush appointee has resigned over obstructing justice, and the most sordid and far-reaching cash-for-favors corruption investigation of Congress in nearly a century is just getting underway — and the debate is over *the legally acceptable cost of lunch?!*

Of course lobbying reform is necessary, but let's not kid ourselves — if you need a law to tell you that taking a first-class, lobbyist-paid luxury golf package to Scotland is morally wrong, you shouldn't be writing laws in the first place.

We strongly believe that you cannot fix an ethical problem with only a legislative solution. And we are certain that poison pill proposals from conservatives are designed to put progressives "on the wrong side" of lobbying reform. Further, these poison pills will doom any real chance of reform altogether.

But, if this becomes a battle over legislative proposals and why reforms aren't moving in Congress, the morally-corrupt, ethically-bankrupt conservatives will have won.

Our advice is to make the ethics issue an *ethics issue*. We suggest four steps to do so.

Step One: Define the Difference Between Right and Wrong

First, we suggest a strategy of turning the debate quickly back to the main character issue — that of knowing the difference between right and wrong.

I support lobby reform, but you cannot fix an ethical problem with a legislative solution. You need to get rid of the moral cancer.

I don't trust the folks with their hand in the till to write any laws intended to clean up the mess that Washington has become.

My opponent seems confused between what is technically legal and what is morally right. That is why he can't be trusted to write lobbying reform.

Step Two: Define "Sen. Beltway"

Second, we suggest using the ethics mess to show how conservatives have gone Washington and have forgotten local values.

Playing golf on the job is not how we do it here in XYZ. He's forgotten where he's from. He's forgotten who sent him here.

The free lunches, the free vacations, the free drinks, the free golf games have gone to his head. He thinks he's better than us.

He said he was going to change Washington, and Washington changed him.

Step Three: Make It Relevant to Average People

Third, we suggest tying the conservative ethics mess to people's lives back home by, for example, chronicling the huge rise in wasteful special interest pork barrel spending that is directly related to corrupt practices.

Last year, Congress wasted \$53 billion on 14,000 special interest earmarks. That means Congress spent \$53 billion it didn't have on things we don't need and stuff you don't want. That's what those free lunches bought for you.

Under ABC's watch, the number of special interest pork barrel earmarks tripled. That's because he thinks he represents K Street, Washington not Main Street, XYZ.

I don't know why ABC met with out-of-state casino bosses, took money from casino bosses, and supported special interest favors for casino bosses. I do know that the time and effort he took with them was time away from our state and our needs.

Step Four: Have a Plan

Last, we suggest having a plan that centers on change, as well as specific proposals to clean up Washington. The substance of these proposals can be gleaned from any of a number of legislative ideas already in the mix.

ABC has been seduced by Washington elites. It's time to give someone else a try.

What ABC is offering isn't lobbying reform; it's a life preserver to rescue his political career from the filthy swamp of greed, favors, and perks that he's been swimming in.