



Congressional Ethics an Oxymoron?

USA Today seems surprised at the number of ethics cases making headlines recently, referring to the trials being faced by Representatives Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) and Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), noting that the number of such cases “has jumped dramatically in the past year.” In the first six months of 2010, “an independent congressional watchdog began 44 ethics investigations,” while the Office of Congressional Ethics has recommended that the House ethics committee “take action against 13 lawmakers.”



But Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington ([CREW](#)), was much more realistic, saying that “Just because there is a brouhaha about Rangel and Waters ... doesn’t mean the ethics committee is doing a good job. It’s great that they are handling Rangel and Waters, but it doesn’t excuse them for what they haven’t taken up.”

Indeed, looking behind the stories reveals that at least 20 members of the House and two Senators are [currently under investigation](#), according to Sloan, including Reps. Ken Calvert (R-Calif.), John Campbell (R-Calif.), Joseph Crowley (D-N.Y.), Jeb Hensarling (R-Texas), and 16 others. The Senators currently under investigation include John Ensign (R-Nev.) and Bob Menendez (D-N.J.).

Sloan called on Rangel to resign after the Ethics Committee found “substantial reason to believe” that he violated federal law, House rules, or both. She added: “Now the question is whether Rep. Rangel will resign or endure a public trial that promises to be filled with detailed and undoubtedly embarrassing revelations of wrongdoing.” If he decides to tough it out, it will be the first public ethics trial since 2002, when Rep. James Traficant (D-Ohio) was [subsequently ousted](#) for taking bribes, filing false tax returns, and racketeering.

If convicted, Rangel and Waters will have plenty of company among those who are “ethically-challenged,” joining [Democratic fundraiser](#) Hassan Nemazee who raised millions illegally for both the Obama and Clinton campaigns, along with Norman Hsu, another fund-raiser who also pleaded guilty to various charges of fraud.

One of those remarkably less well known but just as guilty is [Edward Mezvinsky](#), a former Democrat Representative from Iowa (1973-1977) who just ended a five-year jail sentence for 31 charges of bank fraud, mail fraud, and wire fraud. His crimes totaled nearly \$10 million, and he continues to owe “substantial restitution” to his victims. Ironically, during his political career Mezvinsky worked for former Rep. Neal Smith in Washington on lobbyist disclosure and ethics bills, and during his first term in Congress he sat on the House Judiciary Committee and voted for the impeachment of President Richard Nixon. Thanks to very muted press coverage about the matter, he is much less well-known as the new father-in-law Chelsea, the recently wedded daughter of Hillary and Bill Clinton.

In [Character, Liberty and Economics](#), Leonard Reed, president of the Foundation for Economic



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on August 16, 2010

Education (FEE), told of his discovery of the connection between morality and freedom. He said “I now believe that nexus is the central issue we must address if our liberties and free economy are to be restored and preserved.” Reed continued:

Activists in the free-market movement in the past 25 years have stressed the need for sound public-policy research and basic economic education. Think tanks and new media have sprung up to provide both. Though important, they are proving to be insufficient to overcome statist trends that are eroding our liberties. Why?

The missing ingredient here is character. In America’s first century, we possessed it in abundance and even though there were no think tanks, very little economic education, and even less policy research, it kept our liberties substantially intact. People generally opposed the expansion of government power not because they read policy studies or earned degrees in economics, but because they placed a high priority on character. Using government to get something at somebody else’s expense, or mortgaging the future for near-term gain, seemed dishonest and cynical to them, if not downright sinful and immoral.

Reed reminds his readers of the differences between politicians and statesmen. “Statesmen don’t seek public office for personal gain or attention.... They stand for a principled vision, nor for what they think citizens will fall for.... When a statesman gets elected, he doesn’t...become a mouthpiece for the permanent bureaucracy or some special interest group that greased his campaign.” He adds,

They don’t try to build empires. Instead, they keep government within its proper bounds and trust in what free and enterprising people can accomplish. Politicians think that they’re smart enough to plan other people’s lives; statesmen are wise enough to understand what utter folly such arrogant attitudes really are. Statesmen, in other words, possess a level of character that an ordinary politician does not.

F. A. Hayek in *Road to Serfdom* said that the primary principle motivating politicians was “that the end justifies the means, which in individualist ethics is regarded as the denial of all morals.... To be a useful assistant in the running of a totalitarian state, therefore, a man must be prepared to break every moral rule he has ever known.” Author Charles Scaliger’s [review](#) of Hayek’s work concluded that “collectivism always leads to tyranny [and] the early indicators of our likely destination abound: a declining standard of living, rising levels of debt and, most ominously, mushrooming government.”

President John Adams counted on the character, integrity, and morality of all Americans to sustain the Republic. Indeed, he said, “Our Constitution was designed only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.”



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