

January 9, 2006     The essence of Government is power; and power, lodged as it must be in human hands, will ever be liable to abuse.

James Madison The Washington political scandals dominating the news in recent weeks may be disheartening, but they cannot be considered surprising. We live in a time when the U.S. government is the largest and most powerful state in the history of the world. Today's federal government consists of fifteen huge departments, hundreds of agencies, thousands of programs, and millions of employees. It spends 2.4 trillion dollars in a single year. The possibilities for corruption in such an immense and unaccountable institution are endless. Americans understandably expect ethical conduct from their elected officials in Washington. But the whole system is so out of control that it's simply unrealistic to place faith in each and every government official in a position to sell influence. The larger the federal government becomes, the more it controls who wins and who loses in our society. The temptation for lobbyists to buy votes-- and the temptation for politicians to sell them-- is enormous. Indicting one crop of politicians and bringing in another is only a temporary solution. The only effective way to address corruption is to change the system itself, by radically downsizing the power of the federal government in the first place. Take away the politicians' power and you take away the very currency of corruption. Undoubtedly the recent revelations will ignite new calls for campaign finance reform. However, we must recognize that that campaign finance laws place restrictions only on individuals, not politicians. Politicians will continue to tax and spend, meaning they will continue to punish some productive Americans while rewarding others with federal largesse. The same vested special interests will not go away, and the same influence peddling will happen every day on Capitol Hill. The reason is very simple: when the federal government redistributes trillions of dollars from some Americans to others, countless special interests inevitably will fight for the money. The rise in corruption in Washington simply mirrors the rise in federal spending. The fundamental problem is not with campaigns or politicians primarily, but rather with popular support for the steady shift from a relatively limited, constitutional federal government to the huge leviathan of today. We need to get money out of government. Only then will money not be important in politics. It's time to reconsider exactly what we want the federal government to be in our society. So long as it remains the largest and most powerful institution in the nation, it will remain endlessly susceptible to corruption.