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Robin M. Martin,

Editor and Publisher

Robert M. McKinney,

Editor and Publisher, 1949-2001

William W. Waters,
Editorial Page Editor

Robert Dean,
Managing Editor

202 E. Marcy St. • Santa Fe, N.M. 87501

Lawmakers, strike blow for your reputations

Corruption and campaign finance stroll hand in hand across America — but by the time they get to New Mexico, they're arm in arm: In our state, politicians convicted of bribery, or run out of office over conflicts of interest become downright plaintive about punishments most of us consider too light, whining to all who'll listen: darn it, it's how things are done here ...

As we're reminded in the introduction to the latest proposal from Think New Mexico, that high-achieving public-policy research institution, crookedness was so rampant here in the 19th century that hardly anyone in Washington wanted to make us a state once we'd become U.S. territory. Corruption being an equal-opportunity ailment, the concern wasn't so much about Santa Anna's former subjects as the *gabacho* carpetbaggers ushered into Santa Fe by Manifest Destiny.

During the 98 years of statehood reluctantly granted, bribery remains big business. But a certain form of it has evolved — and, to our shame, it's legal: Campaign contributions, with *quid pro quo* to be collected from our state's taxpayers by way of the winning candidate.

Pay to play. Pay for play. Pay big bucks into the right person's war chest, and become a player when state contracts are handed out. So what if you're not as qualified as your fellow bidders are? So what if your bid amounts to a rip-off? So what if you can't even be counted on to provide the goods or services you said you would? Your contributions to this legislator or that executive are qualification enough. As for taxpayers too often left in the lurch, well, tough ...

And the defense psychosis goes further: Ack'shly, the (name the officeholder) and I are longtime buddies (at least since he announced for office and looked unbeatable); so my contribution was based solely on my high esteem for him/her. And the money I made off the state deals? Well, that's solely owing to *he/she* high esteem for *me* ...

Ya basta — and if that has a homonymous sound, it isn't just coincidental: Enough, say the bipartisan board-members of Think; the embarrassment, and the thievery, have got to stop.

The group figures these scandalous times aren't to be confronted namby-pamby fashion: Instead of the usual dollar limits and bows to the rights of *ricos* to purchase the politician of their choice, there's got to be a law against lobbyists and contractors making any campaign contributions — especially the “bundled” kind that circumvent dollar limits and sweep politicians off their feet.

What? Outlaw lobbyist contributions? Why that's heresy! It's unfair. It's unconstitutional!

It may be heretical — but what's unfair is today's preferential treatment of special interests. As for this idea's constitutionality, it's been tested, and passed: The U.S. Supreme Court, even as it recognized campaign contributions as a form of speech protected by the First Amendment, held that limits are constitutional where they serve the governmental interest in preventing corruption or the *appearance* of corruption.

Since then, a federal judge upholding Connecticut's ban on contributions by lobbyists or their families said that state's legislature “had a constitutional, sufficiently important interest in combating actual and perceived corruption by eliminating contributions from individuals with the means and motive to exercise undue influence over elected officials.” In other words, the state was crying for honesty.

That same judge struck down Connecticut's public-financing law — and Think New Mexico isn't going that direction. Instead, the group is asking Gov. Bill Richardson and the New Mexico Legislature to turn lobbyists, contractors and special interests seeking major government subsidies or tax breaks into non-payers, thus limited players. It would apply to state and local politicians as well.

Cynics would give such a bill the proverbial snowball's chance — and ordinarily, we'd agree. But considering some of the more recent cases of corruption, senators or representatives rejecting it would be highly suspect; and when the next session ends, they'll all be up for re-election.

So maybe they *can* be shamed into the kind of no-nonsense reform New Mexico needs ...