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Headline Archives

INVESTIGATIONS OF PUBLIC CORRUPTION: Rooting Crookedness Out of Government

03/15/04

OPERATION GREYLORD



Today marks an important anniversary in the annals of public corruption investigations in the U.S.

Twenty years ago today, in a federal courtroom in Chicago, a jury found Harold Conn (top center in photo) guilty on all 4 counts of accepting bribes to be passed on to Cook County judges as payment for fixing tickets. The evidence? He had been caught live on FBI tapes.

This "bagman" had been Deputy Traffic Court Clerk in the Cook County judicial system, and he was the first defendant to be found guilty in a mammoth sting investigation of crooked officials in the Cook County courts.

It was called **OPERATION GREYLORD**, named after the curly wigs worn by British judges. And in the end -- through undercover operations that used honest and very courageous judges and lawyers posing as crooked ones... and with the strong assistance of the Cook County court and local police -- 92 officials had been indicted, including 17 judges, 48 lawyers, 8 policemen, 10 deputy sheriffs, 8 court officials, and 1 state legislator. Nearly all were convicted, most of them pleading guilty (just a few are shown in our photo). It was an important first step to cleaning up the administration of justice in Cook County.

That's really the whole point. Abuse of the public trust cannot and must not be tolerated. Corrupt practices in government strike at the heart of social order and justice. And that's why the FBI has the ticket on investigations of public corruption as a top priority.

How'd that happen? Historically, of course, these cases were considered local matters. A county court clerk taking

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bribes? Let the county handle it.

But in the 1970s, state and local officials asked for help. They didn't have the resources to handle such intense cases, and they valued the authority and credibility that outside investigators brought to the table. By 1976, the Department of Justice had created a Public Integrity Section, and the FBI was tasked with the investigations, focusing on major, systemic corruption in the body politic.

Who's investigated? Public servants: members of Congress and state legislatures; members of the Administration and governors' offices; judges and court staffs; all of law enforcement; all government agencies. Plus everyone who works with government and is willing to pay for "special favors": lobbyists, contractors, consultants, lawyers, U.S. businesses in foreign countries, you name it.

What kind of crimes? Bribery, kickbacks, and fraud. Vote buying, voter intimidation, impersonation. Political coercion. Racketeering and obstruction of justice. Trafficking of illegal drugs.

How serious of a problem is it? Last year the FBI investigated 850 cases; brought in 655 indictments/informations; and got 525 who were either convicted or chose to plead.

Last words: Straight from Teddy Roosevelt: "Unless a man is honest we have no right to keep him in public life, it matters not how brilliant his capacity, it hardly matters how great his power of doing good service on certain lines may be... No man who is corrupt, no man who condones corruption in others, can possibly do his duty by the community."

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