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The Clarion-Ledger

Magnolia State has share of corruption

JERRY MITCHELL • JMITCHELL@CLARIONLEDGER.COM • DECEMBER 29, 2008

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The recent indictment of Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich has resurrected that state's stereotype as the ultimate place for backroom deals, bribes and corruption.



But in the past decade, Mississippi has had nearly twice the per capita rate of public officials convicted than Illinois.

Between 1998 and 2007, Mississippi saw the federal convictions of 212 public officials, causing the state to rank fourth nationally per capita in public corruption cases, trailing only North Dakota, Alaska and Louisiana.

The number of Mississippi's corruption convictions is substantial, but only tells part of the story, said Assistant U.S. Attorney John Dowdy of Jackson, who heads the

criminal division for the Southern District of Mississippi.

"You take into account the number of cases prosecuted by the local district attorneys and the state attorney general, and you see there is a pattern of corruption with all levels of public office, from city to federal," he said.

The Corporate Crime Reporter puts Mississippi in second place in public corruption, just behind Louisiana.

The high rankings don't surprise Dowdy. "I do believe that is a fair representation of the true nature of corruption within public office in this state," he said. "It is a problem, and it has been historically."

Corruption has plagued Mississippi since the beginning, said David Sansing, professor emeritus of history at the University of Mississippi.

The only reason the state isn't ranked higher nationally in corruption is because most people get away with it, he said.

"The possibility of corruption is endemic to our system of government," he said. "We dare people to be crooked, we make it so easy for them. When the people govern, the people are given to take for themselves and cut corners, it's just endemic to our system of government."

What amazes Sansing most is not the amount of corruption but the "millions of honest, hard-working public servants who don't corrupt the system. Our system has endured wars,

CONVICTIONS Top states with convictions of public officials per million residents per year

- 1. North Dakota - 8.3
- 2. Alaska - 7.9
- 3. Louisiana - 7.5
- 4. Mississippi - 7.4
- 5. Montana - 6.4

Source: Department of Justice, Census Bureau, New York Times

CORRUPTION Top 5 states ranked by corruption rate:

- 1. Louisiana - 7.67
- 2. Mississippi - 6.66
- 3. Kentucky - 5.18
- 4. Alabama - 4.76
- 5. Ohio - 4.59

Source: Corporate Crime Reporter, based on U.S. Department of Justice's Public Integrity Section's 2006 report

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depressions and natural disasters. It has endured because millions of public servants do it honestly and do it well. They don't get enough credit."

The fact Mississippi suffers from poverty and a lack of education "exposes our system to even more corruption," he said. "We don't pay our public officials enough money to live. Because we have always had corruption, the smart ones are able to get away with more than they might otherwise."

Because most Mississippians share the same political views "people don't run on issues," he said. "Even now, the politicians in Mississippi who get elected are those with strong dominant personalities like Theodore Bilbo."

The bombastic politician symbolized the corruption that has plagued Mississippi throughout the decades, repeatedly accused of taking bribes but never convicted.

He once announced his candidacy for governor after being released from jail for contempt for refusing to testify in a scandal.

"These strong-willed personalities can sweet-talk their way into public office," Sansing said. "And some of them who get there say, 'Now that I'm here, I can take what I can get.'"

Despite repeated scandals, voters kept re-electing Bilbo to office, first to the state Senate, next as lieutenant governor, then as governor and finally as a U.S. senator. In 1947, fellow senators barred him from taking his U.S. Senate seat after he supposedly took bribes for military contracts.

In the mid-1980s, Mississippi saw its most pervasive sweep of corruption prosecutions with the FBI's Operation Pretense, resulting in the convictions of 43 county supervisors and 11 vendors.

In Pontotoc County, the entire Board of Supervisors had to resign after pleading guilty to corruption charges.

In recent decades, the state has also seen the successful prosecutions of members of the Mississippi Senate, the Highway Commission, the Public Service Commission and the Jackson City Council.

Veteran journalist Bill Minor called then-federal prosecutor James Tucker a true hero for making sure authorities shone the light on the criminal deeds by public officials for three decades.

As a district attorney in southwest Mississippi, Dunn Lampton brought his share of public corruption charges. Seventeen of those public officials were removed from office.

"If the evidence is good, citizens will vote to convict corrupt officials," Lampton said.

When Lampton became U.S. attorney in 2001, "one of the first things he implemented in this office was a policy of zero tolerance for public corruption," Dowdy said. "We have stayed consistent throughout his term, and if a public corruption case was brought to this office, if in fact the evidence was there, we prosecuted it."

To comment on this story, call Jerry Mitchell at (601) 961-7064.



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Corporate Crime Reporter

18 Corporate Crime Reporter 3(1), January 19, 2004

REPORT RANKS STATES FROM MOST CORRUPT TO LEAST CORRUPT

Mississippi is the most corrupt state in the United States, and Nebraska is the least corrupt, according to a first-ever ranking of the states released last week by Corporate Crime Reporter.

According to the report, *Public Corruption in the United States*, the ten most corrupt states in the country are:

Mississippi, North Dakota, Louisiana, Alaska, Illinois, Montana, South Dakota, Kentucky, Florida, and New York.

The ten least corrupt states in the country are:

Nebraska, Oregon, New Hampshire, Iowa, Colorado, Utah, Minnesota, Arizona, Arkansas, and Wisconsin.

The 50 states were ranked by corruption rate -- the number of public corruption convictions in the state over a ten-year period (1993 to 2002) per 100,000 population.

The report is being released at a time when public corruption scandals are breaking out all over the country.

The former Governor of Illinois, George Ryan, has been charged with taking money, gifts and loans in exchange for handing out state contracts to his donors.

In Connecticut, three mayors and the state treasurer are in jail or heading to jail.

And the Governor of Connecticut is under siege in a soap opera of a corruption scandal.

The last three insurance commissioners in Louisiana have gone to jail for corruption.

"We need not just strong economies, but strong political economies -- reporters, citizen groups, prosecutors, judges, religious leaders -- who are willing to speak out about the rampant corruption in our midst," said Russell Mokhiber, editor of Corporate Crime Reporter and author of the report. "Connecticut, for example, has a strong economy and an educated citizenry. But its political economy has historically been weak, with little public debate about the level of corruption around it -- until federal prosecutors at the U.S. Attorney's office in Hartford decided to force the issue out into the open."

Mokhiber called on Attorney General John Ashcroft to stop muzzling his line attorneys at the Public Integrity Section, which is in charge of combating public corruption.

"They want to speak out on the issue, to shed some light, but they are being muzzled in an election year," Mokhiber charged. (See At a Glance, Page 12)

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Corporate Crime Reporter
1209 National Press Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20045
202.737.1680



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January 16, 2004

Mississippi's #1: Corporate Crime Reporter Ranks Most Corrupt State Governments



A new report examined the most corrupt state governments. The top 10? Mississippi, North Dakota, Louisiana, Alaska, Illinois, Montana, South Dakota, Kentucky, Florida and New York. [includes transcript]

As Connecticut Republican Gov. John Rowland face possible impeachment, we are going to take a look today at corruption within state governments.

Corporate Crime Reporter is releasing a report today titled "Public Corruption in the United States." The report ranks the 10 most corrupt states and the 10 least corrupt states.

The report is being released at a time when public corruption scandals are breaking out all over the country. The former Governor of Illinois, George Ryan, has been charged with taking money, gifts and loans in exchange for handing out state contracts to his donors. In Connecticut, three mayors and the state treasurer are in jail or heading to jail. And the Governor is under siege in a soap opera of a corruption scandal.

According to the report, the ten most corrupt states in the country are: Mississippi, North Dakota, Louisiana, Alaska, Illinois, Montana, South Dakota, Kentucky, Florida, and New York.

The ten least corrupt states in the country are: Nebraska, Oregon, New Hampshire, Iowa, Colorado, Utah, Minnesota, Arizona, Arkansas, and Wisconsin.

- **Russell Mokhiber**, editor of the Corporate Crime Reporter.

RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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JUAN GONZALEZ: We're joined by "Corporate Crime Reporter" editor, Russell Mokhiber.

RUSSELL MOKHIBER: Good morning.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Good morning, Russell. Could you tell me what you found. What are the most corrupt states in the union and how did you arrive on it?

RUSSELL MOKHIBER: Well, actually the AP did a story this morning based on the report. The title is, "Image Problem, Louisiana, Not Number One in Corruption Anymore". And that's what we found. You know, the states that have the reputation of being the most corrupt, New Jersey, Louisiana, Illinois, Rhode Island, that's based on reputation, but we got a hold of a document from the Justice Department that has a statistical breakdown of public corruption convictions by state over the last ten years. So, no one has ever actually tried to rank the states to make a determination which is actually the most corrupt, reputation aside. And what we did was, we came up with a corruption rate by looking at the number of convictions over ten years for each state, per 100,000 population. And the most corrupt state in the union, according to our survey, is Mississippi, followed by North Dakota, Louisiana, Alaska and Illinois. New York comes in number ten--the tenth most corrupt.

The cleanest states in the union, the least corrupt, are Nebraska, Oregon, New Hampshire and Iowa, and Colorado. Those are the least corrupt five states. The other least corrupt fives from six through ten are Utah, Minnesota, Arizona, Arkansas, and Wisconsin. But two caveats on this; one is that these were convictions of public officials, state, federal and local in the states over ten years from 1993 to 2002, but not including 2003. The other thing is that--

JUAN GONZALEZ: It would depend in large measure also on how uncorrupt the prosecutors are who are conducting these cases.

RUSSELL MOKHIBER: One of the things the people at the Justice Department tell us is you can have an absolutely corrupt state, state-wide, through and through corrupt, and if there's not a US Attorney who wants to prosecute it, it's not going to show up. For example, in Hartford the whole corruption scandal was exposed by Governor Roland's opponent, Bill Curry, in the last election. But the press didn't pick up on it. And it took a couple of young assistant US Attorneys after the US Attorney in Hartford recused himself to go after the governor. The other thing is in Connecticut you have tens of millions of dollars of graft and illegal contracts and so forth that never create an uproar. What created the uproar was that the governor had a hot tub and cathedral ceilings put in his cottage in Litchfield, Connecticut and told everyone that he actually went and bought the hot tub and he paid for it. He lied to the public. So, you can get away with millions of dollars in corruption, but if you say you went and bought the hot tub and put it in and lie about it, then you are going to be impeached.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Any reaction from the state of Mississippi as to the most corrupt state in the union?

RUSSELL MOKHIBER: No, but we're waiting for Haley Barber and Trent Lott to weigh in. They're not happy. The AP Reporter in Mississippi is doing a story. Bill Curry, who lost twice to Roland after trying to expose the corruption says now that he thinks Connecticut is the most corrupt state in the union, but our survey shows them coming in at 31. So, maybe they're gaining ground. He calls Connecticut, "Louisiana with foliage". But the people in Louisiana are not at all happy. They admit they have a problem. The last three insurance commissioners in Louisiana have gone to jail. The agricultural commissioner is under indictment. They know they have a reputational problem, but they think they, too, have foliage, so they're upset with Curry's analysis. But seriously, one of the problems is, "Why did this happen in Connecticut?" Connecticut has a strong economy but a weak political economy. Politics in Connecticut are not very active. People pay attention to the economy, but not to the politics. One of the problems is we don't discuss public corruption. We discuss it when it blows up, but not as a generic problem. If you type in corruption into like a Google news engine, what comes up are a lot of stories from overseas.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Okay, well Russell, on that note, we thank you for being with us, and we'll keep—

RUSSELL MOKHIBER: The report is on www.corporatecrimereporter.com.

AMY GOODMAN: And you are holding a news conference today.

RUSSELL MOKHIBER: At 10:00 a.m.

AMY GOODMAN: At the National Press Club in Washington. Thanks for being with us. Russell Mokhiber of the "Corporate Crime Reporter."



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