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Public corruption is a big deal

I didn't want to write my December column about public corruption, but after much thought, I felt I needed to. Maybe the holidays are a good time to reflect upon our fiber as a republic, a republic that should be representative of the common good.

Not long ago, a citizen asked me about all of the publicity regarding the allegations leveled at Congressman Bob Ney. The fellow in essence said, "Is it really a big deal? Don't they all do it?"

The citizen's question raises an important point about the perceptions and tolerance of the American people.

Have we arrived a point in our history where we accept unchecked corruption in our government? A government that Lincoln said must be "of, by and for the people" has become a government not driven by common Americans, but driven by the lobbying interests who have unlimited financial resources to wine, dine and pay for foreign trips for a Congress that is addicted to money.

To show the magnitude of the problem, think about this: the lobbyist (Michael Scanlon) who pleaded guilty to attempting to bribe Mr. Ney with gifts, entertainment and travel has agreed to pay \$19 million in restitution for his actions; yes, that's \$19,000,000, more than most of us will make in a lifetime or two, or three.

The restitution will be used to pay back American Indian tribes that Scanlon bilked on gambling-related issues. Imagine lobbyist Michael Scanlon, who is only in his mid-thirties, has the capacity to agree to \$19 million in restitution!

Whose interest are members of Congress representing? Who is the Michael Scanlon who lobbies for the average citizen who can't write big checks to members of Congress? Who is throwing big money around in D.C. and Columbus for the little guy? Who is the health care lobbyist who is sponsoring golf junkets abroad to encourage Congress to help millions of Americans who go without health insurance every day? Who is the high-paid lobbyist who is fighting the utility companies on behalf of the families who can't afford to pay their gas bills this winter?

It's time for all of us, not just politicians but citizens alike, to refocus on the importance of ethics. As citizens we need to start rejecting the idea that corruption in government is common.

Public corruption is a cancer that is eating away at our republic. Public corruption is a big deal, and those of us in politics should remember that when we accept the public trust, we accept a profound duty to serve the common good.

The threshold for corruption should not be based on whether you were duped or even if you broke the law, the threshold should be your conscience.

The fox is watching the chicken coop in both D.C. and Columbus when it comes to strengthening the ethics laws and fixing our corrupt system of campaign finance. Only when the people say "enough is enough" will Congress and the Ohio Legislature fix a corrupt and self-serving system that leaves the "average Joe" out in the cold.

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