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What's That Smell?

Multiple investigations into bribery, kickbacks and abuses of power cement Louisiana's reputation as a political cesspool. Will we ever rid ourselves of the stench?

When folks from outside of the state visit the Louisiana Political Museum and Hall of Fame, they're often befuddled that there would even be such an elaborate shrine for elected officials, consultants and other power brokers in a state known for its corrupt politics. Longtime museum director Carolyn R. Phillips says she explains that politics are "different down here."

Then she moves on to the museum's life-sized mannequins of Huey and Earl Long in the museum's Pea Patch section, at which point visitors typically ask about Huey's assassination or Earl's madhouse love for New Orleans stripper Blaze Starr. Phillips says many are also impressed that Winnfield, the sleepy Winn Parish town that the museum calls home, reared three Louisiana governors, including the Longs and Oscar K. Allen, who died of a brain hemorrhage inside the Old Governor's Mansion at the end of his first term.

More often than not, conversations turn to Louisiana's political hallmark: corruption. The museum honors a bevy of politicians who have dodged the federal justice system, some who are currently under investigation and one who is serving time right now (see the Edwin Washington Edwards exhibit). Phillips does her best to note that Louisiana has made considerable progress. "Years ago, you could buy your way into office, but I tell people that those days are long gone," she says. "Louisiana is a different state today."

Is it?

It's been said that when the rest of the nation zigs, Louisiana zags. Democrats took over Congress last fall right after Louisiana elected two Republicans to statewide offices. A major issue for the Democrats nationally was alleged corruption and cronyism in the Bush Administration. Less than six months later, Congressman Bill Jefferson, a New Orleans Democrat with his own section in the Winnfield hall, faces a 16-count indictment for racketeering, money laundering, bribery and conspiracy to bribe foreign officials. Jefferson is being stiff-armed by Democrats and Republicans alike in Congress -- at a time when his district and the rest of south Louisiana need all the help they can get from Washington.

Meanwhile, a handful of other state and federal investigations, along with scandalized mismanagement of post-hurricane resources, continue to paint Louisiana as a political backwater, if not a cesspool of corruption, cronyism and incompetence. It's not a pretty picture when taken in whole. Consider the following:

- The brother of state Rep. Francis Thompson, a Democrat from Delhi (and a hall-of-famer), was indicted last week for allegedly misusing funds as executive director of Poverty Point Reservoir District in Richland Parish -- a pet project of Rep. Thompson. Michael Thompson, who formerly served as mayor of Delhi, faces up to 20 years in prison, a \$250,000 fine, or both.
- The FBI launched a series of raids this month in connection with the state's much-ballyhooed movie tax credits. According to a whistleblower lawsuit filed by the former head of the Louisiana Music Commission, an economic development official no longer with the state allegedly accepted kickbacks in exchange for favorable treatment on some tax credits. In addition, Republican state Rep. Gary Beard of Baton Rouge was taken to task by The Times-Picayune for seeking film tax credits for work his engineering firm did for a proposed film studio that he controls. The film studio never paid the \$798,250 engineering bill, but instead gave Beard's engineering firm a promissory note and then sought tax credits of approximately \$320,000 for the engineering work -- or 40 percent of the fee. The state denied the tax credits, citing the fact that no money actually changed hands, among other reasons.
- The state's Road Home program, which is responsible for disbursing federal housing money, is now short between \$2.9 billion and \$5 billion of what is needed to complete its mission. ICF International, the company administering the program, has been criticized by Congress for alleged mismanagement, and last week attorneys filed a class action lawsuit against the company in state court in Baton Rouge.
- Subpoenas indicate that Louisiana's fabled Angola State Penitentiary is under investigation, particularly its popular rodeo, as well as the prison's potato chip contracts and massive farm, which was the subject of an award-winning documentary. The details are still sketchy, but former Prison Enterprises director Jim Leslie pleaded guilty last year to witness tampering in a case involving a man who accused long-time Angola warden (and political hall-of-famer) Burl Cain of shaking him down for a \$1,000 donation to the prison chapel fund, based on reports.

- The state Ethics Board is considering a request by state Sen. Robert Adley, a Benton Democrat, to investigate Republican Rep. Mike Powell of Shreveport regarding a \$12,334 contract for a political mailer. Powell suggests he never worked on the mailer, but Shreveport demographer and political consultant Elliott Stonecipher says he has paperwork proving Powell completed the work and manipulated the paper trail to keep his name out of campaign finance reports.
- A series of audits and reviews revealed earlier this year that the Louisiana Citizens Property Insurance Corporation, the state's insurer of last resort, is unable to produce accurate financial data because of software problems -- and hasn't reconciled its bank statements since 2006. The Legislative Auditor also concluded that state officials charged with overseeing Citizens may have broken the law by taking hunting and fishing trips on the agency's dime.

At a time when Louisiana sorely needs an image makeover, the Jefferson scandal, which has gained international media attention, and these developing stories seriously undercut the best efforts of our state's best citizens. Because the scandalous headlines aren't going away anytime soon, Louisiana faces an ongoing, uphill fight to change its widely-held and iconic association with corruption.

With statewide elections just four months away, ethics and corruption should be front-burner issues. Right now, the leading candidate for governor is also the one who embraces ethics reform the loudest -- Republican Congressman Bobby Jindal of Kenner. That's no surprise, says Albert Samuels, a political science professor at Southern University in Baton Rouge.

But Jindal won't be the only candidate for governor presenting a fresh face or promising to give Louisiana an image makeover. Democrat state Sen. Walter Boasso of Arabi, another candidate for governor, led the fight to consolidate local levee boards last year. To varying degrees and in their own ways, each candidate for governor will claim the mantle of reform this year.

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It will be no different in other races. For example, in the race for agriculture commissioner, Republican state Rep. Mike Strain of Abita Springs has dubbed his campaign team the "Army of Reform." Many other like-minded candidates for state and parish offices will be beating the same drum by the time qualifying ends Sept. 6.

Samuels says the ongoing and developing corruption investigations should keep candidates on message. "Especially with term limits in the Legislature, voters will be looking for outside ideas and candidates that aren't tied to the old politicians that failed us, candidates that aren't tainted by scandal," he says. "Running against corruption will be a safe bet for virtually every candidate."

This is not a new trend. Back in 1940, reform candidate Sam Jones of Lake Charles captured the Governor's Mansion during a statewide fit against corruption -- and a momentary lapse by Huey Long's political machine, which had controlled the office for the previous 12 years. Scandalized Gov. Richard Leche, a Long ally, resigned in disgrace in 1939 and went to prison the following year. Then-Lt. Gov. Earl Long succeeded Leche as governor, but was defeated by Jones when he sought a full term as governor in 1940. Jones ushered in good-government legislation and helped form the Public Affairs Research Council, only to see Earl Long recapture the governor's office in 1948. Despite Jones' progress, a new era of cronyism dawned with Long's election.

Jim Brandt, who serves today as president of the Baton Rouge-based Public Affairs Research Council (PAR), a nonprofit that monitors the activities of state government and advises on policy, says Louisiana is at another crossroads this year. As he reviews the list of corruption investigations, he sighs deeply. "This is a pretty dispiriting list. You have problems on the federal level, the state level and even the local level," he says. "There does seem to be a bunch of investigations coinciding right now, but I guess it is yet to be seen if any are connected or brought to justice. And we have pushed ethics reform in the Legislature this session, but there has been resistance."

"Resistance" is putting it mildly. For example, Louisiana lawmakers have taken to full financial disclosure (one of the key ethical reforms proposed this year) like a slow-moving slug approaching a pile of table salt. To be fair, 85 of the 105 House members officially voted for enhanced disclosure, but don't take that as striking a blow for reform. A lot of behind-the-scenes maneuvering occurred before the bill reached the House floor, much of it aimed at diluting the proposal's impact. "At the very least, it's interesting," says Barry Erwin, CEO of the policy think-tank Council for A Better Louisiana. "At the worst, disconcerting."

House Bill 730 by Rep. Michael Jackson, a Baton Rouge Democrat, started out as a simple measure requiring lawmakers to fill out financial disclosure statements. In theory, such a document would uncover conflicts of interest, reveal who is bedding down with special interests and who is making money off their public persona. In its latest form, the bill includes every elected and appointed official in the state, from local clerks and assessors to the state secretary of natural resources.

The House amendments essentially passed the buck to two groups: the Senate, which must deal with changes made by the House, and local elected officials, whom lawmakers can always blame if the bill fails -- assuming local officials oppose a bill they were never intended to be a part of. That assumption may be premature. "I think our membership will consider the changes a bit onerous, but I'm not sure they will direct us to oppose it," says Dan Garrett, general counsel for the Police Jury Association of Louisiana.

This year's push for ethics reform has birthed a public interest group called LA Ethics 1, a coalition of more than 50 Louisiana businesses and chambers of commerce. Stephen Moret, president of the Baton Rouge Area Chamber and mastermind of the campaign, says he wasn't surprised by the House machinations. He says the final week of the session, which must end by June 28, will be "critical" for the proposal, which also has a counterpart in the Senate. "We don't think it's passable in its current form," Moret says, "and I wouldn't be surprised by anything that happens during this session."

LA Ethics 1 will make ethics reform a statewide campaign issue in the fall elections. The group will ask all candidates for legislative and statewide offices to sign a pledge of support for the package of ethics bills, then publicly take to task -- via newspaper ads, emails and other direct messaging to voters back home -- anyone who reneges on the pledge when legislation comes up for a vote next year. Supporters of LA Ethics 1 say that kind of tough-minded follow-through could set the latest reform efforts apart from prior, failed efforts.

Time will tell.

To be sure, Louisiana has made progress since Huey and Earl Long ran the state as their personal fiefdoms, although many would argue that former Gov. Edwin Edwards surpassed the Longs in the course of corrupting Louisiana's foray into casino gambling -- he is serving time in a federal prison in Oakdale for racketeering, bribery and money laundering. At the same time, it always seems to be a case of "two steps forward, one or two steps back" for Louisiana, says Erwin.

While LA Ethics 1 made a strong case this session to strengthen access to public records, make governmental ethics training mandatory, create an independent ethics administrator and require full financial disclosure, the results thus far have been mixed. "I think the politicians just don't get it," Erwin says. "They look at ethics reform as some indictment on them, and they all believe they are good people. They don't think they are bad, and they feel put upon."

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So, will Louisiana ever be able to shed its image as a bastion of corruption? Opinions vary, but crusaders like Brandt, Moret and Erwin contend lawmakers and others merely need to step up, close a few loopholes, increase transparency and generally avoid conflicts of interest. If that happens, they say, word will spread that a new days has dawned in Louisiana -- and that can be used in marketing and economic development initiatives.

"You just do it," Erwin says. "That's how you do it. That is how you move up on the lists."

Meanwhile, as Louisiana continues to beg the federal government for more money to support recovery efforts, the Beltway is paying close attention to the state's circus-like political atmosphere, says Brent Littlefield, a D.C.-based Republican strategist with Political Solutions. Littlefield, who is often interviewed on Fox News, cites a longstanding concern in Washington about corruption in Louisiana - - and he notes that the Jefferson indictment has only made matters worse.

Jefferson's case alone may doom Louisiana's fiscal prospects in Congress, but the other pending matters won't help, either. "That is why there has been great concern, although expressed quietly, over monies sent to Louisiana for the recovery," Littlefield says. "Similar concerns do not seem to exist for other states, like Mississippi, that have received recovery monies for disasters."

Is it fair, though, to judge all Louisiana harshly for the alleged bad acts of a few? What about the notion of "innocent until proven guilty?"

Back at the political Hall of Fame, Phillips sticks to the official line: "We're trying to move past that period of our past," she says, "and people in this state really do want a different reputation for Louisiana."

In Louisiana, as in most places, substantive change comes slowly and often in fits and starts. Changing our reputation will likely take even longer.