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When Benjamin Franklin left Paris in 1785 after several years representing American interests in France, Louis XVI gave him a gorgeous parting gift. It was a portrait of King Louis, surrounded by 408 diamonds “of a beautiful water” set in two wreathed rows around the picture, and held in a golden case of a kind sometimes called a snuff box. The snuff box and portrait were worth as much as five times the value of other gifts given to diplomats. One historian has called it the “most precious treasure in [Franklin’s] entire estate.” It depicted the king with powdered hair and red cheeks, wearing white lace around his throat, two gold chains on his shoulders, and a blue robe with gold fleurs-de-lis. (Teachout, Z. [. (2016). *Corruption in America: From Benjamin Franklin’s snuff box citizens united*. Boston: Harvard University Press.)

What’s the big deal about a snuff box, you might ask? The architects of our democracy embarked upon a challenging premise: to construct a new self-governing republic, built upon the best of European ideals while departing from old-world constraints and corrosive influences. While the diplomatic tradition of gift exchange was deeply embedded in European culture, in the new republic gifts were considered threats to American democracy. There was a deep fear of the project of America losing its newfound integrity and falling prey to the old-world influences, and a willingness to actively guard against them even if it meant offending foreign powers or losing diplomatic position. A diamond encrusted snuff box, and any other gift of jewels, smacked of the out-of-touch luxury of the monarchy, from which the new republic intended to depart.

So Congress put Franklin’s snuff box to the test against the Articles of Confederation, which forbid any “person holding any office of profit or trust under the United States” from accepting [“any present, emolument, office, or title of any kind whatever, from any king, prince, or foreign State.”](#) Congress deemed the gift acceptable and with President Jefferson’s blessing, Franklin was allowed to keep his snuff box, but not without a stern



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warning to future generations against the corrosive nature of luxury. Franklin included the following line in his [will](#):

The King of France's Picture set with Four hundred and eight Diamonds, I give to my Daughter, Sarah Bache, requesting however that she would not form any of those Diamonds into Ornaments either for herself or Daughters and thereby introduce or countenance the expensive, vain and useless Fashion of wearing Jewels in this Country. (Sparks, Jared. *The Works of Benjamin Franklin: Vol. 1* p. 601 "Franklin's Will.")

In 1787, the Constitutional Convention was dedicated to the exploration of the meanings of corruption and how to appropriately prevent it. The issue illuminated the fault lines of the American democratic project. Corruption was described in terms of disease—a cancer that compromised the democratic body from within itself. At that Constitutional Convention, Franklin gave a rousing speech on the issue of [salaries](#), speaking directly to his critics:

Sir, there are two passions which have a powerful influence on the affairs of men. These are ambition and avarice; the love of power, and the love of money. Separately each of these has great force in prompting men to action; but when united in view of the same object, they have in many minds the most violent effects. Place before the eyes of such men, a post of honour that shall be at the same time a place of profit, and they will move heaven and earth to obtain it. (Franklin, B. (n.d.). *From Benjamin Franklin: Convention Speech on Salaries (unpublished)*. Speech presented at Constitutional Convention.)

At the time of our nation's founding, philosophy and Christian religion offered two separate but intertwining streams of theories about the meaning of corruption and human nature. How do you construct a self-governing society which places the the public interest over the individual self-interest? Rationalist philosophers like John Locke, a British Unitarian, argued that humans are oriented towards a natural state of virtue, but can be swayed by



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“education, custom, fashion, or common opinion” (John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*). Locke’s underlying Christian orientation favored a definition of virtue focused on the level of the individual. Personal sin placed the love of wealth and power before God.

Beloved by Jefferson, the French philosopher Montesquieu comes the closest in casting a collective vision of virtue. Montesquieu acknowledged that human beings were both self-interested and public interested, and believed that virtue was not to be defined as personal, but rather as the love of the common good, as embodied in nation and government. In his book *Spirit of Laws*, quoted often by Jefferson:

Such love requires a constant preference of public to private interest, it is the source of all private virtues; for they are nothing more than this very preference itself. This love is peculiar to democracies. In these alone the government is entrusted to private citizens. Now a government is like everything else: to preserve it we must love it. Everything therefore depends on establishing this love in a republic. A love of the republic in a democracy is a love of the democracy; as the latter is that of equality. (Montesquieu *Spirit of Laws*, Book IV 1758)

Montesquieu also prophetically commented that “love is more likely to spring from the “common people” and most likely to be eroded by the wealthy. “It is very rarely that corruption commences with the common people compared to those who we call gentlemen,” Montesquieu said. He also felt the common people have a “stronger attachment to the established laws and customs.”

What our founders struggled with, as we do today, is how to design and monitor a government setting democratic ideals of equality and public good above human nature’s proclivity towards self-interest. Such government must hold individuals accountable for their



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personal moral behavior while rooting out systems which promote temptation and self-serving behavior. Such were the early debates about gift giving. The founders were sophisticated in their understanding that religion could not hold a primary sway over moral and political affairs, and that religion was simply one way of understanding human fallibility.

Today, we similarly crave a principled understanding of personal and collective moral responsibility to help us make sense of our current political landscape. For the past thirty years, UCLA law professor Daniel Hayes Lowenstein has been the leading scholar on political corruption and bribery. His broad definition of corruption “identifies as immoral or criminal a subset of transactions and relationships within a set that, generally speaking, is fundamentally beneficial to mankind, both functionally and intrinsically (Lowenstein, “For God, Country, or for Me,” *California Law Review* 74, 1986). Scholars like Lowenstein and Zephyr Teachout have noted the progressive limiting of federal definitions of corruption, and the proliferation of actions in the family of corruption as a result. The 2010 Supreme Court ruling on *Citizens United* effectively narrowed the definition of corruption to require an organized “deal” between the gift giver and the receiver. It has now become common practice that the wealthiest exert their interests and are awarded positions of power and legislative influence through the no-strings-attached “gift giving” financial contributions. With the requirement of an explicit quid pro quo deal stating that power is being exchanged for the gift, the practice of informally exchanging wealth for influence becomes a fully acceptable form of bribery. Take the current college admissions scandal as an interesting case. It’s no surprise that people seek every educational advantage for their children at any cost. Being a mother of an infant and the graduate of a private elite university, I already have a preview of the landscape of the choices ahead for my daughter. Daniel Golden’s 2006 book [*The Price of Admission*](#) chronicles how the wealthiest Americans have created a backdoor to get their kids into college through large donations to private institutions. Ironically, Golden highlighted Jared Kushner’s undeserved entrance into Harvard after his parents’ \$2.5 million donation. But the latest case is something slightly different—an explicit quid pro quo scheme which



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created a side door for wealthy parents to fake athletic and academic achievement. This case of bribery shows the vulnerability of our academic institutions, which we entrust to uphold the values and traditions of democratic life.

The choir beautifully performed Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodaly's piece *Jesus and the Traders*. The story is told in all four of the Gospels, which gives us a clue about its importance. It's set at the time of the Passover festival, when thousands of everyday people had traveled to Jerusalem to make a pilgrimage to the Temple. In the book of Matthew, the text says:

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." (Matthew 21: 12-13 NRSV)

This story, jokingly called Jesus' "Temple Tantrum," is told at the Easter season of Holy Week, showing Jesus' bold and prophetic actions towards the end of his ministry, cited as the incident which prompted his arrest and crucifixion. From the text, we can surmise that Jesus was upset about the commercial activity taking place in the sacred space of the Temple. But why exactly? There are many interpretations, but the one most relevant for us today is a story about corruption in the public square. In their book [The Last Week](#), John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg argue that the "Temple Tantrum" was Jesus' symbolic action to reclaim the moral center of the Temple for the public good. The vendors who had taken up residence in the Temple were taking advantage of the common people on pilgrimage, selling sacrificial animals like doves at inflated prices, orchestrated by the priestly authorities who received a cut for permitting their sales. The High Priests had pledged their allegiance to the foreign powers of the Roman Empire rather than to the common citizens. Jesus' call to "cleanse" the temple signaled to the Jewish authorities that a complete overhaul of practices was required to return to the Temple to a space of integrity. This was an extremely dangerous act which cost Jesus his life and ministry.



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In Jesus' time, the Temple was the public seat of power, representing the highest ideals of morality and governance. I think about our American temples of democratic life with a small "t".... our universities and our halls of government. What would be required for a cleansing of the temples of our democratic life? It's hard to imagine a Jesus-type figure storming Harvard's admissions office or the halls of congress. Like that rigorous debate about Franklin's snuff box, could we imagine a kind of cleansing like our founders imagined, a calling of our public institutions to the our highest democratic ideals? What if it is our democratic ideals which are our beloved American diamonds, our family jewels to be treasured and preserved? If so, such heirlooms must be safeguarded and enshrined, never bought or traded for wealth, influence or power. To close, I remember the words of Montesquieu, favorite of our founders:

"A government is like everything else: to preserve it we must love it. Everything therefore depends on establishing this love."

Amen.