

Media Scandal-Mongering Needs to Stop

Written by Rich Miller

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I'm getting pretty tired of all the news stories about political corruption these days. Every time we turn around, another media outlet is screaming for a new federal investigation. It's become the thing to do in media circles, an attempt to mount an indicted trophy head or two on newsroom walls as a display of accomplishment and importance.

The problem is, some of these media outlets are calling the cops on people who have done little more than spit on the sidewalk.

For instance, back in 1999, a couple of guys set up a completely legit computer-consulting firm that now employs 50 people and has 20 clients, including the City Colleges of Chicago.

By all accounts, the company has done its job well with the City Colleges system, and it has been rewarded for its performance with \$17 million in contracts.

At one point, though, Senate Democratic Leader Emil Jones earmarked \$4.5 million in state funds to City Colleges for computer-related projects, \$300,000 of which wound up going to the consulting firm in question, which also happens to be run by two relatives of the legislative leader.

In other words, the company received less than 7 percent of the Jones money, which was, in turn, less than 2 percent of all money the company has earned from the college system over the years.

Yet, somehow, this became a front-page *Chicago Tribune* news story packed with scandal-laced adjectives.

It's their paper and they can run it any way they want, but how far do we want to take these allegations?

The *Tribune* has mostly buried the scandal news this year about Republican leaders other than George Ryan, who is safely out of the political picture and can therefore be whacked at will. House GOP Leader Lee Daniels' top staff has been accused of ordering the falsification of

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government vouchers to illegally reimburse political travel with state funds, but the

Trib

breezily passed over the whole issue. House Speaker Michael Madigan, however, spends \$7,200 over four years ago on a state office that might or might not have been used for political purposes and the

Trib

goes gaga – plastering the story on its front page and backing it up with a blistering editorial aimed at Madigan that also cited a completely false (

Tribune

) report about him.

I was preparing to run a story in my newsletter this week about all the money the Senate Republican campaign fund has spent to reimburse the state for phone calls. The campaign committee wrote checks totaling more than \$4,000 during the first six months of this year and more than \$20,000 since 1999 to reimburse the state.

I even had a respected good-government type on record calling the payments “fishy” and claiming that reimbursing the state for political expenses doesn’t make the actual use of state employees, state offices, and state phones for campaign work any less illegal.

It was a pretty good story, made even better because the former Senate Republican chief of staff is now Jim Ryan’s campaign manager. And it was very much in line with all the little stuff that has been blown way out of proportion lately by the *Trib* and others.

Instead, I used the story to make the same point I’m making here. Screaming for the police, or darkly implying that the cops should be called every time a politician jaywalks, is serious stuff and should be handled with a whole lot more care than is being exercised these days.

We are in this situation mainly because gubernatorial candidate Jim Ryan, way behind in the polls and desperate to belatedly prove he’s a “corruption fighter,” is more than happy to comply with many of these media demands for federal probes. Reporters love him for elevating their stories to the level of an actual federal investigation, and that atmosphere generates even more overblown “corruption” stories and more calls to bring in the feds. So, instead of sound legal reasoning and objective reporting, we have gross political expedience and a media feeding frenzy.

As you read this, some folks are trying to arrange a truce of sorts amongst the political elite. The idea is to convince the powers that be to refrain from slipping juicy little non-stories to their favorite reporters. Because most (but, to be fair, not all) political journalists are usually hand-fed scandals rather than digging them up themselves, a truce should prevent a lot of mud from being needlessly splashed. I, for one, hope the truce works.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter. He can be reached at (<http://www.capitolfax.com>).