

IMPROVING PUBLIC TRUST IN
GOVERNMENT

HON. TIM ROEMER

OF INDIANA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 14, 2000

Mr. ROEMER. Mr. Speaker, I would like to call to the attention of my colleagues an address by the distinguished former Member of the House, Lee Hamilton. I had the honor of serving with Lee for a number of years and he was widely respected as a reasoned and perceptive voice on how to improve the image and public understanding of Congress. The topic of his speech, "Improving Public Trust in Government" is especially timely. I encourage all Members to give it careful consideration and submit it for the RECORD.

IMPROVING PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

(By the Honorable Lee H. Hamilton)

INTRODUCTION

I am honored to be speaking at this John C. Whitehead Forum.

John Whitehead is one of the preeminent public servants of our time. He has been a friend for many years, and on countless occasions I have had reason to appreciate his constructive, problem-solving approach to national challenges. He will go into my Hall of Fame of distinguished public servants. His accomplishments in the private, public and nonprofit sectors make him a "triple threat" kind of performer. Our nation is deeply indebted to him for his remarkable service.

It is also a pleasure to be here because I have the highest esteem for the work of your Council. Your goal of improving the performance of government is tremendously important. I always think of such efforts as part of the quest for truth and justice. So I commend and encourage you in your good work.

Your partnerships with other organizations and the private sector help build the kind of large base we need to push for positive change in government performance.

I especially want to thank Pat McGinnis for her extraordinary leadership at the Council. She has done a remarkable job advancing the cause of good governance.

Pat has asked me to speak today about trust in government—with a particular emphasis on the Congress.

I approach the task with trepidation. I am only too aware of the low esteem in which the public holds the Congress—we rank only slightly above drug dealers and other felons. Having served in Congress for 34 years, that reputation does not fill me with confidence about my credibility on the topic of trust in government.

My constituents would often tell me just how awful my colleagues and I were. They would say to me fondly:

"You must be a bunch of idiots up there."

"You are irrelevant. Get out of my life."

"I know you have your hands in the till, Hamilton. Come clean!"

"Hell must be full of politicians like you."

Public distrust of government—always present in our history—has been on the rise over the past few decades. In the mid-1960s, three-quarters of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time. In the Council's poll this year, that number was down to 29 percent.

This decline in public confidence in government is deeply worrisome to all of us. It signals a great chasm between the government and the people, and makes it all the more difficult for government officials to carry out their responsibilities.

I. Reasons for public cynicism and distrust

The reasons why Americans are turned off by American politics today are many:

(1) Declining trust generally: Declining trust in government reflects a broader trend in our society of diminished confidence in authority and institutions generally—not just government. Since the 1960s, Americans have become less deferential and more skeptical of authority. Our government's involvement in Vietnam, Watergate, and other scandals contributed to this broad societal change. But many other institutions—including even our churches and synagogues—have suffered a drop in public trust as well.

(2) Changing economy: Even though the American economy has done exceedingly well in recent years, economic anxieties run high for many Americans worried about how to pay for education, health care, and retirement. Workers feel the threats of globalization and technology, and growing income inequality. I have always been impressed how economic pressures bear down on families, in good and bad times. To many people, government seems less relevant and not particularly helpful with their difficult work transitions and burdensome costs. Many Americans see the government as an obstacle rather than a helping hand to achieving the American dream.

(3) Poor leadership: There is disillusionment with the personal flaws of political leaders. This disillusionment is felt most strongly with respect to the misconduct of some of our presidents, but is also felt towards Members of Congress, cabinet members, and many other public officials. Many Americans believe public officials look out for themselves and pursue their own agendas rather than the interests of the people and the nation.

(4) Money and special interests: Americans feel that money and special interests have excessive influence in politics. Most Americans believe their own representative has traded votes for campaign contributions. They know our system of financing elections degrades politician and donor alike, and arouses deep suspicion of undue, disproportionate influence in exchange for the large contributions.

Special interests often contribute to public distrust of government by portraying government negatively—by using overblown rhetoric to convince people they are being endangered by sinister politicians and corrupt government. These groups excel at making themselves look good and the government look bad.

(5) Negative campaigns: Americans dislike the dirty, negative election campaigns that have become so common. They are turned off by personal attacks, and the view held by many politicians that to win a close race you must tear down your opponent. Americans disapprove of the way politicians attack other politicians' motives and criticize the very institutions they are seeking to join and lead. Candidates run for Congress today by running against Congress and often against government, too. It is really rather easy for a candidate for Congress to go before any audience in America and make himself look frugal, wise and compassionate and the Congress look extravagant, foolish and cold-hearted.

(6) Partisanship: There is a widespread belief that politics has become too partisan, too sharp-edged, too mean-spirited. The messy political process and the constant bickering signal to many Americans that partisan considerations take precedence in Washington over sound policy formulation.

(7) Performance of government: Large numbers of Americans are simply disappointed by the performance of govern-

ment. They think it spends their money wastefully, is ineffective, or too intrusive. In a survey taken a couple years ago, 42 percent of Americans couldn't name a single important achievement of the federal government over the past 30 years.

(8) Media: The role of the media in politics exacerbates public disdain of government. The media accentuate differences and conflicts between politicians. I can remember many times when I was rejected for a TV talk show because my views were too moderate. The media focus on the personal lives of politicians, on style rather than substance, entertainment over education. Since the 1960s, newspaper and television coverage has become increasingly negative, cynical and adversarial.

So it is not surprising that many people think there is nothing right with our political system at all.

II. Consequences of skepticism

What are the consequences of this public distrust and skepticism of government?

Skepticism is healthy: To an extent, skepticism is healthy. Voters should not take everything politicians say at face value, or blindly trust everything the government does.

Skepticism is part of our American heritage. We can trace it back to the battle for independence, which was triggered by a growing disillusionment with British rule. The Constitution is based on assumptions of wariness of government and the need for checks and balances to restrain the branches.

Skepticism indicates an attitude of questioning, of independence of thought, of challenging the status quo. It suggests to our leaders that people will not believe them if they do not fully explain their views, or, of course, if they lie or act deceitfully. In this sense, it serves us well.

Too much skepticism is unhealthy: The program arises when skepticism becomes so deep that Americans have no trust in government.

The effectiveness of our public institutions depends on a basic foundation of mutual trust between the people and public officials. When skepticism turns to cynicism, our political system works only with great difficulty.

If politicians' character and motives are constantly attacked, reasoned debate and consideration of their views becomes impossible. The dialogue of democracy, upon which our system depends, comes to an end.

Often when I was meeting with a group of constituents, I could feel a curtain of doubt hanging between them and me: I took the positions I did, they believed, because of this or that campaign contribution, not because I'd spent time studying and weighing the merits of issues. I would often ask myself what I had done to prompt such profound doubt about my motives and actions. For whatever reason, those constituents had given themselves over to cynicism, and cynicism is the great enemy of democracy. It is exceedingly difficult for public officials to govern when their character, values and motives are always suspect.

III. What to do?

So how can we improve public trust in government?

I want to focus on what government—especially the Congress—can do.

Some of the factors contributing to the decline in public trust are not easily changed. The government cannot readily affect the negative tone of the media or the broad decline in confidence in authority and institutions.

But there is much that government can do to restore and build public trust.

1. *Improve the way government works*

The most basic and important way to restore confidence in government is to make the government work better and cost less—to make it more responsive, accountable, accessible, and efficient.

On this subject, let me say a few words about the role of the Congress.

In a number of ways, current practices of the Congress help alienate people from the political process, and weaken trust in government.

Several trends have made Congress less deliberative, less transparent, and less accountable.

Omnibus legislation: Congress is increasingly unable to pass its spending bills on time, and then makes major legislative decisions through huge omnibus measures that are shaped in a great hurry and in secret by a limited group of congressional leaders and staff. 5 of 13 appropriations bills were dumped into one omnibus bill this year, totaling \$385 billion and composed of 2,000 pages. These bills—often gauged more by weight than the number of pages—are—from the standpoint of good process, if not content—an abomination.

Riders: Congress increasingly loads appropriations bills with legislative riders dealing with controversial policy measures that should be dealt with in other committees. These devices short-circuit deliberation and accountability.

Earmarks: There has been a proliferation of appropriations “earmarks,” which target federal money to specific projects favored by individual Members. Many earmarks are just wasteful pork barrel spending inserted into an appropriations bill by a powerful Member, often without the knowledge or consent of his colleagues or the executive branch—on everything from the production of fighter aircraft to manufacturing chewing gum.

Circumventing committees: It has become common practice to bring bills directly to the House and Senate floor without full committee consideration. In 1995, for instance, a major Medicare reform package was crafted in the Speaker's office, rather than the appropriate committee which had jurisdiction over it. This practice excludes the main sources of policy expertise, cuts short deliberation, expands the influence of powerful lobbying groups, and places decisions more tightly in the hands of the congressional leadership and their staff.

Restrictive rules: Restrictive rules for the consideration of bills in Congress undermine debate. He who controls the rules of procedure almost always controls the results. Procedures are often used that sharply restrict debate, reduce the amendments and policy options that can be considered, and greatly advantage the leadership.

Scheduling practices: Selecting practices in the Congress weaken accountability. There is typically a rush of major legislation in the closing days of a session. Major policy choices are made with little advance notification, often late at night, and with inadequate information. The Congress now works a 2½ to 3 day week, except in the closing days of a session. The result is too little time for committee deliberation and floor consideration.

Senate filibusters: Senate filibusters, or the threat of them, have become too common. On many issues, the Senate no longer operates by majority rule because 60 Senators are needed to prevent an individual Senator from blocking consideration of legislation. Thirty years ago, filibusters were rare, and primarily occurred on issues of major constitutional importance. Today, the filibuster may be the single most important way in which the majority will is frustrated,

and the greatest source of institutional gridlock in Washington.

Congress should make reforms to remedy these practices and make itself more efficient, accountable and transparent. It should:

Streamline and strengthen the committee system;

Reduce the use of omnibus legislation, riders and earmarks;

Adopt fairer rules and a more reasonable schedule; and

Diminish the number of Senate filibusters.

Campaign finance reform: Also critical to restoring trust in government is enacting campaign finance reform. Poll after poll shows that most Americans believe our campaign finance system corrupts the political process, and should be reformed. If Congress enacts serious campaign finance reform, it will make itself more accountable and boost public trust.

Oversight: Congress should also do a better job of performing its important task of overseeing executive branch operations. Monitoring executive branch implementation of legislation is one of the core responsibilities of Congress. If done properly, congressional oversight can protest the country from the imperial presidency and bureaucratic arrogance. It can maintain a degree of constituency influence in an administration, encourage cost-effective implementation of legislation, ensure that legislation achieves its intended purposes, and determine whether changing circumstances have altered the need for certain programs.

But in recent years, congressional oversight has declined and has shifted away from the systematic review of programs to highly politicized investigations of individual public officials—looking at great length, for instance, at Hillary Clinton's commodity transactions or charges of money-laundering and drug trafficking at an Arkansas airport when Bill Clinton was governor. These personal investigations, while sometimes necessary, have been used excessively. They exacerbate partisan tensions and reduce the time and political will available for rooting out flaws in public policy.

A renewed commitment to congressional oversight will show that Congress is taking its responsibility seriously and help restore public confidence in the institution.

Tackle issues that concern voters most: Congress, and the government in general, can also strengthen public trust by tackling the big issues that concern voters most. In recent years, public confidence in Congress rose as Congress took tough steps to reduce the government's deficit and balance the federal budget. Today, the public is most concerned about the long-term outlook for Social Security and Medicare, education, and health care. In each of these areas, most Americans are looking to the government to act in a substantial and productive way. If the government addresses these issues, even if with only partial success, public perceptions of government will improve.

2. *Improve public understanding of government*

Yet improving the way government operates is not enough. We also need to do a better job explaining to Americans what the government does—how it works, why it is important, how it affects their everyday lives. We need to clear away misperceptions, and strengthen public appreciation for the political process. So we need to make government reforms, but we also need to educate people about the government's activities and importance.

I have often been struck by the extent to which Americans have incorrect assumptions about government spending and programs.

For instance, Americans frequently complain about the large amount of money our government spends on foreign aid, which they think is around 20 percent of the total federal budget and say should be closer to 10 percent. It is small wonder, then, that foreign aid is a much criticized program. Yet only one percent of the federal budget actually goes to foreign aid.

We should better explain to people that most government spending goes to programs, such as national security, Social Security and Medicare, that are widely popular and beneficial to Americans. Support for the federal government improves considerably when people appreciate the influence of government and are informed about the government's role in improving health care for seniors, insuring food safety, discovering medical cures, and protecting the environment.

We should also work to improve public understanding of the way our system works. We should emphasize that the political process is adversarial, untidy and imprecise. Politicians may not be popular, but they are indispensable. Politics is the way that we express the popular will of the people in this country. At its best, our representative democracy gives us a system whereby all of us have a voice in the process and a stake in the product.

While we should work to make government as efficient as possible, we should explain that legislative deliberation and debate—even heated debate—and delay, are important parts of the legislative process. Delay occurs because the issues before the government are very complicated and intensely debated. It's an incredibly difficult job making policy for a country of this vast size and remarkable diversity. It's the job especially of the Congress to give the various sides a chance to be heard and to search for a broadly acceptable consensus. The founders established our system of checks and balances so that policies could not be rammed through the government with little debate or deliberation.

The Council for Excellence in Government, of course, plays a critical role in the area of public education about government. I have been trying to contribute to the effort through The Center on Congress, which I direct at Indiana University. The central mission of the Center is to help improve the public's understanding of Congress—its role in our country, its strengths and weaknesses, and its daily impact on the lives of ordinary Americans. Through newspaper columns, a website, videos, radio segments, and other media, we seek to explain to ordinary people the role and importance of Congress.

Finally, we must also include a dose of civic responsibility. Citizens must understand their own responsibility to be involved in the political process. I was particularly pleased the Council's poll found that a majority of Americans believe citizen engagement is the single most important change necessary to improve government.

My observation is that participation is the best antidote to cynicism. A person who is deeply involved in fighting for a better school board, a safer railroad crossing, or a more effective arms control treaty, is rarely cynical.

Effective government is a two-way street. Our system of government simply does not work very well without popular support and participation.

Freedom is not free.

IV. *Optimism*

I've recommended a lot of changes today, but let me not mislead you. Like you, I have concerns about declining trust in government. But I am confident that our political system still basically works. It has a remarkable resilience and underlying strength.

Our government needs reforms, and we need to work to rebuild confidence in government, but we do not need a radical overhaul of our institutions.

Given the size and diversity of our country, and the number and complexity of the challenges we confront, it seems to me that representative democracy works reasonably well in America. The system may be—and at times is—slow, messy, cumbersome, complicated, and even unresponsive, but it has served us well for many years, and continues to do so.

Just think about the condition of our country today. In general I think America is a better place today than it was when I came to Congress almost four decades ago.

The Cold War is over, and we are at peace.

Our economy is thriving and is the envy of the world.

We have greatly improved the lot of older Americans with programs like Social Security and Medicare.

Women and minorities have had new doors opened to them as never before.

The Internet has brought a world of knowledge to the most remote classrooms and homes.

And, most important of all, this is still a land of opportunity where everyone has a chance, not an equal chance unfortunately, but still a chance to become the best they can be.

We must be doing something right.

As I look at the government today, I'm not cynical, pessimistic or discouraged. I'm optimistic about the institutions of government and about the country. I am confident that our government will continue to meet the important challenges we will face in the coming years.

This was indeed the most encouraging finding in the Council's poll this summer—that despite their distrust, Americans still believe that government has an important role to play in the next century, particularly in defense, education, helping senior citizens, medical research, reducing violence and cleaning up the environment. Americans still recognize the importance of government, and look to government to better their lives and our nation.

So the opportunity for improving the relationship between government and the people is clearly there for all of us to seize.

Thank you.

IN RECOGNITION OF THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE OHIO VALLEY CHAPTER OF THE ASSOCIATED BUILDERS AND CONTRACTORS AND OSHA

HON. ROB PORTMAN

OF OHIO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 14, 2000

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. Speaker, I rise to commend the partnership the Ohio Valley Chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors, Inc. recently forged with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). These two groups have mutually recognized the importance of providing a safe work environment for our nation's construction workforce.

I am pleased to see the federal government and the private sector working so closely toward a common goal—worker safety and health. As part of this innovative partnership, participating contractors from the Ohio Valley chapter will voluntarily improve their current

safety and health programs and adhere to a more stringent set of standards. In return, OSHA will recognize contractors who have demonstrated exemplary safety records.

According to the agreement, ABC and OSHA will take positive steps together, such as: maintaining an open communications policy at the regional, chapter, and national levels; sharing knowledge of the best industry technology, innovations, and practices that improve safety; cooperating in the development and improvement of safety programs; ensuring that policies and practices are effective, consistent, and fair; and promoting the principles of good faith and fair dealings.

This agreement is good for ABC contractors, OSHA, and most importantly, workers on the job site. I firmly believe that commonsense partnerships such as these, characterized by cooperation and communication, will best serve those it was meant to help—the worker.

MOTHER NATURE WAITS ON NO ONE

HON. LOUISE McINTOSH SLAUGHTER

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 14, 2000

Ms. SLAUGHTER. Mr. Speaker, oil prices have tripled since the end of 1998 and are higher than they have been in nearly a decade. Today in response, I am cosponsoring legislation that is an aggressive response to the reduction in oil produced by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) nations. This legislation would direct the Administration to file a case with the World Trade Organization (WTO) against oil-producing countries. Article XI of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) prohibits members of the WTO from setting quantitative restrictions on imports or exports. I believe oil-producing countries' production limits fall within this Article, therefore these countries have violated the rules of the WTO. With the majority of oil-producing nations already members of the WTO or in the process of applying for membership, a complaint filed by the United States would have an immediate impact on the current and future behavior of these countries.

This particular crisis has to be investigated. I consider these actions a shameful display of ingratitude on the part of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, after Americans put their lives on the line to safeguard the stability and oil fields of these nations in the Gulf War.

I was pleased with Secretary Richardson's efforts to meet with oil industry representatives and OPEC members, but I frankly think that the cautious approach that the White House is taking is still too little and too late. We know that actions will speak louder than words.

The people that I represent in Monroe County, New York, have the dubious distinction this year of having had more snow than any place else in the United States. My constituents were then especially hard hit by the high heating oil and diesel fuel costs this winter. Now, the rest of the country is being affected by the soaring cost of gasoline. These enormous oil price increases pose a significant threat to our nation's continued economic growth by increasing the likelihood of inflation and the costs of doing business.

So, on behalf of all my constituents today who are still shoveling snow, paying their heating oil bills and now paying these high gas prices, I want to say to my colleagues and to everyone in this Congress that quick action is needed now. Mother Nature waits on no one.

A TRIBUTE TO KRISTEN THALMAN—A DEDICATED PUBLIC SERVANT

HON. EDWARD R. ROYCE

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 14, 2000

Mr. ROYCE. Mr. Speaker, I rise to recognize a distinguished American, Kristine Thalman.

She dedicated her career to public service in city government and she ensured that our local citizens received the services they expect from their municipalities.

She has been the Intergovernmental Relations Director for the City of Anaheim California, for the last thirteen years of her career. She retires this month. Her career at Anaheim has been admired by many of us here in Congress.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Kris for her assistance to me since I am pleased to have part of the City of Anaheim in my Congressional District.

Mr. Speaker, I understand that this Thursday is Kris' birthday and certainly greetings are also in order at this time.

THE ORDEAL OF ANDREI BABITSKY

HON. CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 14, 2000

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, a small bit of good news has emerged from the tortured region of Chechnya, where the Russian military is killing, looting, and terrorizing the population under the guise of an "anti-terrorism operation."

Andrei Babitsky, the Radio Liberty correspondent who had disappeared in Chechnya in early February after Russian authorities had "exchanged" him to unknown persons in return for some Russian prisoners of war, has emerged in Dagestan and is now in Moscow recuperating from his ordeal. Mr. Babitsky's courageous reporting from the besieged city of Grozny had infuriated Russian military authorities, and he was arrested in mid-January and charged with "participating in an unlawful armed formation."

Prior to his release, Mr. Babitsky had spent time in the notorious Chernokozovo "filtration" camp where the Russian military has been detaining and torturing Chechens suspected of aiding the resistance. Following his arrival in Moscow, Mr. Babitsky provided a harrowing account of his incarceration at the Chernokozovo prison, and especially the savage treatment of his fellow prisoners. It is another graphic reminder that for all the fine words and denials coming out of Moscow, the Russian military has been conducting a brutal