

Hicks: Public corruption through the prism of Memorial Day

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columnist

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This weekend many of us will gather to remember those who gave their lives in the service of our country. As an old soldier, I will recall far too many, especially those who served beside me in Iraq more than a quarter century ago. This weekend will be especially poignant for my family as we gather to bury my father, whose selfless service to his country spanned five decades in both the Navy and the CIA.

Grief requires no calendar nor proclamation, but Memorial Day weekend is more than sorrow. Memorial Day asks us to recollect not only those we love, but also those we never met, and perhaps could never meet. In so doing we honor their particular traits of character: steadfast, courageous and sacrificial public service.

In contemplating the profound meaning of Memorial Day, I thought it useful to ask what might be the opposite trait of character we honor on this weekend? What stands in dishonorable counterpoise to courageous and sacrificial public service? The answer to that is clear; it is craven and self-serving public service. This most visibly manifests itself in public corruption.

The use of public office for illegal personal gain as old as government itself. Bribes, kickbacks and using inside information for purchase or sale of assets are its hallmark. Payment for work not performed, skimming of contracts and pay-to-play arrangements are common in public corruption. If a political party or a union or a small number of families are involved, then racketeering and conspiracy may also be part of the crime. But, whatever else it is called, it is theft. Public corruption, particularly in local government is simply stealing from neighbors and friends.

Economists have long studied the effects of corruption. In dozens of studies across different times and place the same sorts of findings emerge. Corrupt places grow more slowly than honest ones. Corruption reduces employment and investment as businesses see greater risk from dishonest dealings. Corruption siphons off tax dollars, leaving infrastructure in disrepair. Corrupt places have schools with fewer resources and students suffer as a result.

In short, abundant economic research confirms the common sense notion that corruption robs a place of its economic vitality while condemning its residents to poor public services and dismal opportunities. In the end, public corruption steals from innocent residents the chance to build wealth in their homes, educate their children and work towards the American dream.

It is no matter of chance that I chose this topic on this weekend of deep reflection. The city in which I work, Muncie, is awash in a lengthy and broad FBI investigation into public corruption. Obviously, I am not privy to the details of the investigation, but the economic effects I just described come from a series of published studies detailing the effects of government corruption. However apt, that was not my description of Muncie.

Beyond the economic effects of corruption, honest citizens have reason for outrage. We all are angered at the hapless addict robbing a convenience store. But, is not a desperate addict suffering withdrawal less immediately culpable of theft than a public official whose own crimes, committed over years offer the time for deep moral reflection? Corruption is nothing less than deliberate and ruthless theft.

The opposite of the sort of corruption now under investigation in Muncie is not merely honest governance, but the brave and unfaltering sacrifice offered by those men and women we remember on Memorial Day.

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