

Paul H. Douglas Award for Ethics in Government
University of Illinois System, Institute of Government & Public Affairs
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room SD-G50, Washington, D.C.

Remarks of Walter M. Shaub, Jr.
Wednesday, November 6, 2019, 5:00 p.m.

Thank you, President Killeen and Vice President Wilson. Thank you, Senator Durbin. Thanks, as well, to the family of Senator Paul Douglas for carrying on the tradition of supporting government ethics. And thanks to all of you for coming tonight.

This is quite an honor, and I'm grateful to receive this award. To be honest, though, it's also daunting because I've worked with so many champions of government ethics who also deserve recognition. Many of them are here today. I am constantly in awe of the kind of people I get to work with. Government ethics draws a self-selecting group of people devoted to protecting government integrity. I'd like to think I'm accepting the award on behalf of the members of this community, both in and out of government.

Government ethics is a straightforward idea. Sure, government ethics rules can be complex—because governing is complex. But, at its heart, government ethics is the simple idea that *public servants should serve the public*.

It's that simple. In a democracy, the people entrust leaders with great power on the understanding that that power is to be used exclusively for our benefit.

- We should never have to wonder whether government officials are pursuing a policy objective or pursuing personal profit.
- We should never have to wonder whether officials are awarding government contracts because they will deliver the best value to us or because they will enrich their cronies.
- We should never have to wonder whether they're hiring the best people or hiring relatives and donors.
- We should never have to wonder whether the government is using its formidable investigative resources to target law breakers or to silence political opponents.

- And we should never have to wonder whether they are wielding the government's might to strengthen our country or to strengthen their hold on power.

These are shared ideals that long held universal support in this town. Many leaders fell short over the years. But few questioned the importance of pursuing these ideals. The vast majority of career public servants still believe in these ideals. They are committed to the principle that public service is a public trust.

I know this holds true for the staff of my former agency, the Office of Government Ethics. I know them well, and I can tell you the public is always on their minds. They believe in the mission of government ethics. And they are still making top officials implement recusals and divest conflicting assets. They know that conflicts of interest are wholly incompatible with faithful public service.

Thousands of other ethics officials across government are doing the same. They spend their days reviewing financial disclosure reports and working with government employees to prevent conflicts of interest. They spend much of their time giving advice to honest public servants who want to do the right thing but need help understanding the rules. The work isn't glamorous, but the reward comes in the form of satisfaction ethics officials feel in serving the public interest.

Then there's the rest of the government. Millions of officials whose first great act of public service was swearing an oath of fidelity. They don't pledge loyalty to individual leaders. They don't serve a political party. They serve in the name of the American people, and their loyalty is to the Constitution.

That loyalty can be tested if their superiors abuse power and expect subordinates to say nothing. In such times, if we're lucky, whistleblowers keep faith with their country by breaking faith with bosses who demand personal allegiance. They step forward. When they do, they take no small risk. Whistleblowers are among our most loyal public servants. They are rays of light revealing wrongdoing.

That's why we have whistleblower protection laws. Those laws are not nearly strong enough, but they reflect a determination by Congress that whistleblowers serve a critical function in our republic. They must be protected. When I led the Office of Government Ethics, I insisted that we include training sessions on whistleblower protection in our government ethics conferences. We were also one of the first agencies certified to have met new standards for notifying our own employees of their rights as whistleblowers.

Of course, the country doesn't only rely on government employees, ethics officials and whistleblowers. The government ethics community is bigger than that.

Outside the government, there are non-profits working to uncover wrongdoing and hold bad actors accountable. I now work at Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, which is staffed by some of the brightest and most committed advocates for government ethics I've known. And they're not alone. I could say the same about my former organization, the Campaign Legal Center. There's also Project on Government Oversight, Public Citizen, American Oversight, the right-leaning Cause of Action Institute and a list of other watchdogs that is longer than I could recite today.

America is better for the efforts of the nonprofit watchdog community—so it's important to acknowledge the role that philanthropy plays in their work. It's the generosity of private citizens that makes this work possible. These donors, large and small, are part of the fight to protect democracy.

Another important player in this fight is the media. During my tenure at the Office of Government Ethics, we frequently hosted visiting foreign officials. They came to learn from America's example. The first thing I would tell them is that you can't have a government ethics program without a free press. Sunlight truly is a disinfectant, and corruption spreads in darkness.

Corruption, says Transparency International, is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. And make no mistake about it: that private gain is public loss. The public loses when leaders help themselves. Self-dealing rots a government's culture from within. It is inefficient. It impairs the delivery of crucial services to the public. The public loses even when leaders only appear to help themselves. The distrust that breeds is a threat to democracy.

Last week, Sarah Saadoun, a researcher for Human Rights Watch published a piece emphasizing that corruption disproportionately harms the poor. Her point is borne out by research and first-hand accounts from around the world. Corruption, you see, is also a human-rights issue. Government officials who help themselves are stealing from the most vulnerable members of our society.

The author made another important point about the role America needs to play in the world. America should be a role model. Our government needs to be able throw its weight behind anticorruption initiatives in the developing world and elsewhere. If we fail to do that—or if we lack the moral authority to do that—corruption will flourish. And Saadoun warns that it will have “profoundly corrosive and transnational ripple

effects.” Degrading government integrity outside our borders destabilizes the world order in ways that will surely come back to harm American interests at home and abroad.

The United States is effective in combating corruption on the world stage only when we occupy the high ground. For that, government ethics has to be a priority in Washington and in every state capital. When *we* are exemplary, we can ask others to follow our example. If we abandon government ethics, others *will* follow us into the wasteland of corruption.

That’s why I’m happy to have worked in government ethics and am proud to have met so many people I can look up to in this field. This is work that has meaning. It is the quiet work of making democracy safe for the world—and that is inherently rewarding.

Now, I won’t lie to you, the work requires a level of meticulous attention that can sometimes feel a bit tedious. Just ask OGE’s financial disclosure manager the next time she’s staying late to review the seventh revision of the seventh asset listed on the seventh page of a financial disclosure report.

But the work can also be intense. Just ask any of OGE’s executives the next time they have to say “no” to someone who can change the course of their careers.

Looking back on my time in government ethics so far, I feel only gratitude for the opportunities I’ve had to stand beside those who fight corruption. I’m proud to know public servants who understand that they serve the public. To our way of thinking, public service is one of the highest callings you can pursue. Public service is for making our country better, helping those who need help, and defending democracy.

In these days, the thing that gives me the greatest hope is the increasingly active participation of the public in our national life. I’m particularly heartened by the passion of young people who are far more focused on the future of our country than I was at their age. We live in a time when their civic engagement is critical. My hope for students attending your universities in Illinois—and across America—is that they hear and heed the call of public service. Our country sorely needs their focus, their drive and their moral commitment.

In closing, I want to add that I admire how this award program puts the spotlight on government ethics. I also want to thank you again for this award. I will try to justify your faith in me going forward. Thank you.