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CORRUPTION ERUPTION; Covering their cash

THE UNITED STATES IS A VERY far cry from Kazakhstan or Nigeria, countries where corruption and bribery infiltrate every contact with government. But while gossiping at the water cooler about Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham's shocking bribery story (whose yacht was he living on, and what was up with that sleigh bed?), it's good to remember that the San Diego Republican got caught mostly because he was amazingly careless.

His accused briber was also a relative amateur, low on the Pentagon food chain. Investigations of that contractor, MZM Inc., and its relationships with other elected and appointed officials continue, but keep in mind that its chief contract with the government amounted to only about \$250 million.

A level up, corruption-wise, is Darleen Druyun, a former senior official in the contracting office of the Air Force. She pleaded guilty last year to steering billions of dollars in lucrative contracts to Boeing even as she negotiated for a job with the aircraft maker. Adding to the blatancy of the conflict, she also got Boeing to hire her daughter and future son-in-law.

Boeing's chief financial officer, who had overseen job negotiations with Druyun, went to jail for a few months. The company's chairman, Philip M. Condit, had to resign (not just because of the Druyun case but also for some industrial espionage). Like other well-insulated and expensively defended CEOs, he avoided the stain of indictment.

Since Boeing ate McDonnell, which had already merged with Douglas, and the world of aerospace shrank to a handful of companies, the biggest contractors have rarely faced serious punishment. They're too important to fail, so instead of issuing broad criminal charges, the government settles for long-faced apologies, new corporate ethics programs and a big fine or settlement. That yardstick won't apply to MZM and its clumsy dealings.

Secrecy and compartmentalization in the defense budget are other impediments to honesty. Investigating Cunningham's actions on the House Intelligence Committee, which oversees secret CIA contracts, will be even touchier than digging into military contracts connected to his membership on the powerful Appropriations Committee.

Advocacy groups such as the nonprofit Project on Government Oversight track and archive news stories and government documents about fraud, corruption and waste (good reading for those who fondly recall the \$7,000 Air Force coffeepots). The government itself, however, has failed to keep adequate records on contractor misbehavior. Whistle-blowers are key to uncovering corruption, along with some determined critics of secrecy and cronyism in Congress, most notably Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles).

But to get back to Cunningham, the biggest shock was that he took bribes personally. Most corruption in the contracting world is legal, alas, because most politicians take their handouts in the form of campaign contributions, not tangible goodies.