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Testimony of U.S. Senator Russ Feingold
At the Senate Rules Committee Hearing
On Making the Legislative Process More Transparent

As Prepared

February 8, 2006

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for the invitation to testify at this important hearing.

Jack Abramoff's guilty plea inspired immediate promises that Congress would act on lobbying reform, and it certainly seemed like we were on a fast track to get something done. I still have high hopes that that can happen, but I must say that the last few weeks have not been encouraging. Already, we are hearing the sound of furious back-peddling in the corridors of power.

People even seem to be having doubts about something that seemed a few weeks ago like a done deal -- a ban on privately funded travel. Even though the Speaker of the House announced that his proposal will include that reform, the newly elected House Majority Leader feels differently. He suggested this weekend that what we need is "more transparency with what members are doing on these trips" and then we can "let the public decide."

I submit, Mr. Chairman, that the public has already decided. They decided years ago. They didn't like these trips even before Jack Abramoff showed how they are being abused. And they don't even know the half of it.

My staff keeps a file of invitations for fact-finding trips for staff. Here are a few from over the years. A "legislative issues seminar" on St. Michaels Island, sponsored by MCI World Com, with dinner at the Inn at Perry Cabin. A trip to Silicon Valley sponsored by the Information Technology Industry Council, with dinner sponsored by the Wine Institute. A "congressional field trip" sponsored by GTE to Tampa and Clearwater Beach. The invitation reads: "To take advantage of the terrific location beside Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, we'll demonstrate that you *can* place a cellular call over water, either while dining aboard a boat or fishing for that night's dinner." Mr. Chairman, enough. If Members of Congress can't justify spending taxpayer money to do a fact-finding trip, they shouldn't go and neither should their staffs.

Now let's talk about gifts. I am not going to sit here and tell you that any Member of Congress's vote can be purchased for a free meal or two. But I think we also know that lobbyists usually

aren't buying these meals out of the goodness of their hearts. At this point, no reform bill is going to be credible that does not contain a strict lobbyist gift ban. And no one has ever explained to me why Members of Congress need to be allowed to accept free meals, tickets, or any other gift from a lobbyist. If you really want to have dinner with a lobbyist, no one is saying that you can't. Just take out your credit card and pay your own way. I can tell my colleagues from personal experience that you will survive just fine under a no-gifts policy. The Wisconsin Legislature has such a policy and I brought it here with me to Washington. I don't go hungry, and I get to play a bit of golf every now and then too.

Let me mention a few other things – starting with corporate jets. I think many in Congress are coming around to where the public is: Corporate jet travel is a real abuse. Sure it's convenient, but it's based on a fiction – that the fair market value of such a trip is just the cost of a first class ticket. And when that fiction is applied to political travel, it creates a loophole in the ban on corporate contributions that we've had in this country for over a century. Any legislation on corporate jets must include campaign trips because one thing is certain -- the lobbyist for the company that provides the jet is going to be on the flight, whether it's taking you to see a factory back home, or to a fundraiser for your campaign.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I wanted to remind you about S. 1508, which Sen. McCain and I have introduced, along with Sen. Cochran, and that is pending before this Committee. It's a commonsense bill that would simply require electronic filing of Senate campaign committee reports. House reports are already filed electronically, and many Senate campaigns are doing it voluntarily. It's long past time for this, so I think it should be included in the lobbying and ethics reform package.

Mr. Chairman, there are many things that can be done to improve the transparency of the legislative process and address the issues raised by the Abramoff scandal. But don't let people change the subject from the important ethics reforms I have raised here today. Our constituents will not accept weak tea. They want a strong brew, and they want it soon. Thank you.