

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Congressional Conflict of Interest Slips By Media

It should be newsworthy that 81 members of Congress were treated to an all-expenses-paid international excursion

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | [Published on 08.22.2011 3:14 p.m.](#)



The first time the term “conflict of interest” became meaningful for me was in the mid-1980s, when my husband and I were in the process of buying a house in Goleta.

A problem arose during the inspection period, and we soured on the deal. Seeking our real estate agent’s advice, he revealed that he was, in fact, a sub-agent to the seller’s agent and therefore obligated to push to complete the sale. We felt betrayed, found our own way out of the mess and made sure to use a buyer’s agent on subsequent purchases.

Conflicts of interest abound. Doctors benefit from writing certain drug prescriptions; some even direct patients to labs with which the doctor has an equity interest. Insurance agents, banks and financial advisors offer investment advice involving the purchase of products for which they receive a substantial commission. This is considered acceptable as long as these professionals reveal their conflicts — even if only in the fine print.

Most citizens don’t have time to research all the potential conflicts our society is expected to sort out. One of the most important jobs of the media is to call our attention to issues about which Americans should know. Publications have been hard-pressed to keep current with the disintegration of their industry, but as long as they are in print (or e-print), they are obligated to investigate and disclose. Heaven knows we hear a lot about conflict of interest in the media, which makes a recent omission rather curious.

We know blow-by-blow what [Congress](#) did right up to its August recess, but did you read that 81 members all attended the same eight-day international trip to

the same place? Neither did I. And why didn't we know? Because none of the mainstream media or local papers covered it. How can that be?

Wouldn't you think it is news when 20 percent of Congress spends more than a week on an all-expenses-paid trip rather than listening to the views of their constituents? Apparently no reporters heard about the trip. Or perhaps they didn't consider it newsworthy.

When I heard, I [Googled The New York Times](#), the [Los Angeles Times](#), the [Chicago Tribune](#), the News-Press and [The Wall Street Journal](#). Not a whisper. On the second page of Google listings I found a mention in [The Baltimore Sun](#) and clicked on it. Alas, it was just a reader post about the journey to Israel.

I finally came upon one journalist who sleuthed it out: [The Atlantic Monthly's](#) electronic version, [The Atlantic Wire](#). The trip reminded that writer of an apropos joke: "Why doesn't Israel want to become the 51st state? Because then it would only have two senators." The New York Times eventually "broke" the story, halfway through the second of two one-week delegations. Two trips were organized, reportedly to separate the Democrats and Republicans.

Although anti-graft and corruption laws prevent congressional members from accepting free trips from lobbyists, they granted themselves a special exception for educational arms of lobbying organizations. So it's not illegal, but it's surely noteworthy considering the size, timing and destination of this trip.

It may be the dog days of summer, where dipping toes in the ocean is more appealing than pounding the hot pavement. But we expect more — we need more — from our elected officials and from our media.

Further, it begs the questions: Why didn't we get the news? Is there an unsustainable media conflict of interest?

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*