

LETTER TO THE EDITOR – USA TODAY

December 17, 2008

In response to an accusation, Groucho Marx once famously replied, “Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?”

The quote came to mind when USA Today, in its recently published story on the state of corruption around the country, tabbed North Dakota as the most corrupt. The story commenced with the paragraph, “Its largest city is legendary for machine-style politics and its elected leaders have been under investigation for years but by one measure, Illinois is not even close to the nation’s most-corrupt state.” North Dakotans scratched their heads in amazement. As the state that year after year has the lowest or near lowest overall crime rate, we were puzzled and insulted.

News reporters – typically a cynical lot – ran first to the news archives and next to the history books to determine the last elected state-wide official to face a corruption charge in North Dakota. Finally they found it: A state attorney general accepted cash to look the other way to the importation of slot machines. The year? 1954.

One newspaperman recalled an appointed official convicted of shoplifting for filching a couple of grapes from the produce section of the supermarket. That was somewhere in the 1980’s. More recently there was the official charged with illegally transporting a deer that someone else had shot. That was as recent as the 1990’s.

Just how did relatively crime-free North Dakota wind up with this notorious distinction? Well, the reporter went to the US Department of Justice website, found a statistic for the number of convictions in federal court over the last ten years, and then divided that number into the population of the state. Voila! The state rankings emerged.

Without giving the ranking any analysis, comparison, or context the reporter presents an egregiously flawed impression that state officials in North Dakota are the most corrupt in the nation; eclipsing even the states like Illinois, Louisiana or New Jersey where corruption is well known and elected officials still sit in prison or are likely headed there.

If the reporter had done even a cursory check, he’d have learned that of the 53 convictions in North Dakota Federal Court, seven involved corruption by members of a local school board who plead guilty to misusing public money for bogus travel expenses. Another three involved misapplication of tribal funds by six officials at two of the state’s Indian reservations. That’s roughly 25% of our state’s total in those four incidents in the last decade. The other federal convictions ranged from embezzlement from tribal casinos to theft by postal employees.

Nor does the story credit states where prosecutors vigorously pursue any and all cases where there is the taint of misuse of the public trust. Cases might be pursued to conviction in North Dakota that might be determined too trivial to bother with elsewhere.

Using USA Today's approach, one might conclude that the states where law enforcement looks the other way at corruption and prosecutors are too lazy or lack resources to take on all the criminal cases that come to them, appear to be the most corruption-free.

That's why other studies we could cite over the years have concluded just the opposite as that presented by USA Today: North Dakota typically leads the nation with the cleanest and most honest government officials in the country, just as it does in having the lowest crime rate in general.

Public corruption is a serious offense, because it involves a misuse of the public trust, and should never be condoned. Dishonesty by public officials is not unheard of here, of course, but stories like the one printed in your paper are of little value to address the issue, and leave a terribly inaccurate impression that does not befit a newspaper like USA Today.

As anyone who has spent time in North Dakota will recognize, the full body of analysis leads to this irrefutable truth: North Dakota regularly leads the nation with the cleanest and most honest government officials in the country, just as it does with the lowest crime rate and a quality of life that is off-the-charts high.

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