Introduction

Carolyn Carpeneti was tall and blonde, a high school dropout with ambition. In 1995, while going through a hotly contested divorce, she met the mayor of a popular medium-sized American city. Although he was still married, she soon became his girlfriend and his fundraiser, and in 2001 they had a child together, a little girl named Sydney.

Carpeneti’s close connection with the mayor made her a huge financial success as a fundraiser. It was reported that she was able “to obtain the donations of corporations and high-wealth individuals beholden to...[the mayor] including city commissioners, lobbyists, contractors and developers with business at City Hall” (Williams and Hoge 2003: A1). According to political observers, a “cadre” of “favored lobbyists and developers have prospered” under the Mayor’s reign. And so has Carpeneti, who gets to keep 15 percent of all the money donated to her fund-raising efforts on his behalf (p. A19).

In 1999, the mayor gave Carpeneti another formal responsibility—to run the annual “Summit for Women.” Since then, she produced five events, for which she was paid $987,000. Ostensibly, for these summits, she was given a spacious rent-free office in the city-owned civic auditorium. According to public records, however, she has also used this city office for her fundraising. This may violate state laws prohibiting “officials from making unauthorized public expenditures ‘solely for the private benefit’ of an individual or an entity” (p. A18).

In this popular American city, not only is there an expectation of a direct relationship between the money you donate to politicians and city contracts you can expect to get (influence peddling?), but there is a
somewhat irregular, lucrative, and, as we have seen, very public relationship between the city’s mayor and his girlfriend (misappropriation?).

Is this a description of New York City’s Tammany Hall in the nineteenth century? No. This describes the city of San Francisco in the twenty-first century and these are among the well-publicized everyday practices of Mayor Willie Brown (Williams and Hoge 2003:A1, A18, A19).

San Francisco politics may seem sexier than politics in other American cities, but in many respects, they are not all that different (Banfield and Wilson 1965, White et al. 2001, Steffens 1957, Meier and Schlesinger 2002). Across the country, reports of questionable practices in Washington, D.C. and in other American cities and states appear on the front pages of local morning newspapers every day (Caiden and Caiden 1977: 301).

Nevertheless, even with all this eyebrow-raising activity and wrongdoing, Transparency International gives the United States a fairly respectable Corruption Perceptions Score. The United States is rated by TI as sixteenth among nations; certainly not a perfect ranking, but a rating that is close to the top, placing the United States among the least corrupt countries.

Why, with so visible an amount of suspicious practices, is the United States considered to be among countries with the least amount of corruption? The answer lies in the careful way corruption is defined in the United States and in the integrity of the American legal approach. This chapter will focus on U.S. corruption in the political, bureaucratic, and economic arenas.

Patterns of Corruption in Politics

In the United States, the public tolerates certain questionable behaviors that seem to contain in them quid pro quo (“If I give you something, you’ll do me a favor”) and self-serving elements. But it is also true that in the United States, there are rules and laws prohibiting blatant and serious forms of corruption. These rules and laws specifying and prohibiting corrupt acts are enforced in a neutral way by public institutions, like the courts, Congress, and regulatory agencies.

Furthermore, in the United States, the rules and laws as well as public sentiment about corruption continually change. What today may be called unacceptable behavior keeps getting re-examined with new cases and changing mores and keeps getting redefined by the passage of newer laws and revised guidelines. But not all problems of wrongdoing in the United States are addressed.

In the United States, violations can go unnoticed and loopholes can continue uncorrected. The media and the public are involved in the process of identifying which violations are most seriously in need of being addressed, punished, and corrected. Examples of well-publicized problem areas include campaign finance reform, and reform of business practices. These will be described more fully later in the chapter.