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# AMERICAN PRESS EDITORIAL

## State's corrupt image could be changing

For years Louisiana has had to live down a national reputation that it is corrupt, and anyone wanting to do business here better be prepared to pay or else.

This is a state where a succession of insurance commissioners have gone to prison, along with a governor and a whole assortment of lesser state and local officials.

Gov. Bobby Jindal campaigned heavily on pledges to clean up the state's negative image and culture of corruption. He has made some steps in the right direction, including ethics reform, but there is much more to do to root out those who feel public graft and corruption are just normal ways of life.

"We used to say that in Louisiana we like our food spicy and our politicians colorful," said Rafael Goyeneche, president of the Metropolitan Crime Commission, a corruption watchdog group. "But lately we have noticed a shift in the public's attitude toward corruption. It's no longer a spectator sport. People don't want to tolerate it anymore."

While Louisiana might be coming a little cleaner in its image, other states, namely Illinois due to deposed Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich, are now finding themselves in the national spotlight.

Louisiana seemed, at least for several decades anyway, to have cornered the market on corruption. However, since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, it appears the state residents are less willing to accept corruption.

Ranked according to corruption convictions per capita from 1998 to 2007, Louisiana is No. 3.

Despite strides for the better, corruption in this state is so deep rooted that last year the state Legislature decided to defeat a bill that would have ended state pensions for public officials convicted of corruption.

In the past six years, the U.S. attorney for the New Orleans district has issued 236 corruption indictments and many more are on their way.

Among the major scandals now under investigation involve the federally financed New Orleans housing agency tasked with rehabilitating houses damaged by Hurricane Katrina that allegedly spent millions but did little or no work, and a city hall contract to install a network of crime surveillance cameras that the New Orleans inspector general says resulted in \$4 million in questionable overpayments for a system that mostly does not work.

Besides ethics reforms, Jindal also expanded whistleblower protections and banned state officials doing business with the state.

New Orleans Inspector General Leonard Odom has a big job ahead in untangling the city's bureaucracy. So far, investigators have identified 140 agencies that are not in any city audit, yet they receive public funding.

It's about time the state shed the skin of corruption. Repairing the state's image is good for public officials and government agencies, for the business community and for all in general.