During last year’s Senate hearings on the Keating scandal, Sen. Alan Cranston accused his colleagues of “sheer hypocrisy” for bringing him up on charges, correctly implying that many of his fellow politicians could easily have been lined up right next to him.

The proper question is not the one the theater-of-politics in Washington has chosen to focus on- whether or not this or that senator is on the take- but whether all of Congress is populated by members who, with some exceptions, are selling out to special interests. The public is distracted from the real issue, and whatever reforming zeal it has is being dissipated by the focus on individuals rather than the system.

Censuring this senator and reprimanding that one, and even driving out an individual member of Congress such as Rep. Tony Coehlo (D-Calif.), will make little difference in the integrity of the American political system if most members of Congress continue to accept large campaign contributions from special interests. Only fools would believe that defense contractors, real estate lobbyists, and the National Rifle Association or the aging labor unions, would dish out millions each election without demanding and getting anything of substance in return.

The law, as widely interpreted, defines corruption as occurring when there is a clear payoff. However, it seems to allow a lobbyist to visit an elected official. Make specific demands and promise a major campaign contribution, all quite legally, as long as the lobbyist does not explicitly tie the two steps together and the member of Congress does not state outright, “I will support a bill in your favor if you make a contribution.” Even a third-rate politico and a rather inexperienced lobbyist can and do find ways to observe the letter of the law. Indeed, often the “next” contribution is simply not made until the legislator “delivers” a special tax provision, a farm subsidy, credit below markets costs, a huge defense contract or whatever. As long as the law does not prohibit such contributions, one sadly concludes, corruption will reign in the national legislature.

There are many reasons the public is preoccupied with individual sinners rather than with the system that urgently needs to be reformed. It is a part of our muckraking tradition to attack this or that person and run him or her up the flagpole, and even to feel we have cleansed the system by chasing somebody out of the House. In contrast, to recognize that our political system has defects and needs shoring up is considered, at least in some quarters, unpatriotic.

The media at once build, satisfy and exacerbate the American tendencies. It makes much better copy to go after this or that senator, even if it means hiding in the bushes outside bedrooms or digging through garbage, than to explain to the public the distorting features of the system. Moreover, the system hardly changes from year to year, but even a slow investigative reporter can come up each season with some new raw meat, some new signs of corruption; after all, there is nearly endless, systemic supply.

Campaign contributions are, under the existing system, an essential tool to obtain and retain most congressional seats. It is these campaign contributions that must be stopped. Congressional elections should be paid for like presidential ones, via public financing. Until this happens it is quite unfair to take on this or that senator, or even five, just because they were caught with their hands in the cookie jar- one that is nearly covered in fingerprints.
For the same reasons, term limitation proposals are, at best, a way for the public, distracted from the basics, to express frustration with Washington politicians. Term limitation will achieve little as long as those whose time is up are replaced by newly elected officials as dependent as the old ones were on campaign contributions from special interests. In effect, as it becomes easier to challenge incumbents, there will be more challengers and more opportunities for special interests to make inroads with those competing for office.

Lobbying in the sense of petitioning the legislature and presenting viewpoints, ideas and pleas from the electorate, will continue, of course, to be protected by the Constitution. All that needs to be removed is the practice of underwriting these petitions with cash. The reason is elementary as it is democratic. Everyone can lobby, but if cash speaks, the deeper pockets will carry the day. Democracy is, I regret the need to recall, one person- one vote. A legislature dependent on campaign contributions is government by the highest bidder- a plutocracy; it is neither defended by nor compatible with our Constitution.