

# The Rangel diversion: Democratic congressman convicted on ethics charges

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It would require an army equipped with shovels and gas masks to dispose of all the hypocritical horse manure pumped out by American politicians and the media over the past several days concerning the case of Congressman Charles Rangel.

The case dominated news coverage this week in both New York City, where Rangel has represented a Harlem district for four decades, and in Washington DC.

On Tuesday, an eight-member panel of the House Ethics Committee found Rangel guilty of 11 violations of House rules. On Thursday evening, the full committee sentenced him to be censured by the House. The 10 members of the committee, five Democrats and five Republicans, voted 9-1 in favor of censure, with one of the Democrats backing the lighter penalty of a written reprimand.

At some point in the next few weeks, the Harlem Democrat will appear in the well of the House, with all his colleagues in attendance, to be formally admonished by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi.

Both the facts of the Rangel case and its outcome demonstrate the degraded and false character of the official two-party political system in the United States. The charges range from the minor (failing to pay taxes on a vacation home in the Dominican Republic, using a rent-controlled apartment in Harlem as a campaign office) to the obscure (using official franked mail to solicit contributions to a non-profit college center named after himself) to the ludicrous (bringing the name of Congress into disrepute.)

One could legitimately ask whether it is even possible to commit the last-named offense, in view of the low public standing of the institution. In the same vein, one might question the contradiction in terms posed by the very existence of a body called the “House Ethics

Committee,” given the bought-and-paid-for character of the entire US Congress.

More than \$4 billion was raised and spent on the 2010 congressional elections, an amount that, if divided evenly among the 36 Senate seats and 435 House seats at stake, would make the average price tag of more than \$8 million per seat. The giant corporations and wealthy individuals who bestowed the bulk of these thinly disguised bribes, in the form of campaign contributions, get what they are paying for: tax breaks and lucrative government contracts worth tens of billions, and an overall policy in defense of wealth and privilege. In that context, Rangel’s personal peculations hardly rate a second glance.

Moreover, the chief counsel of the House Ethics Committee, Blake Chisam, conceded during the hearing that there was no allegation that Rangel had profited either from his fundraising for the Rangel Center at City University of New York, or from his failure to report rental and investment income on disclosure forms filed with the House of Representatives.

Whatever benefit Rangel obtained from his failure to pay taxes on the Dominican vacation home is dwarfed by the legal bills of more than \$2 million that he has run up in the two years since the investigation began. The law firm withdrew from his defense last month amid disputes over legal strategy and concerns that Rangel would not be able to raise the money to pay an additional \$1 million in fees.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has unbridgeable political differences with Rangel, a liberal Democrat who has been a fervent supporter of the policies of the Obama administration, including the Wall Street bailout. But there is a demeaning element in the spectacle of the public humiliation of an 80-year-old

man who has not become a multimillionaire in the course of his long political career, although his years as chairman of the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee provided ample opportunity to do so.

Rangel's own behavior during the week-long proceeding suggests an inner collapse. He arrived at Monday's hearing without counsel, and eventually walked out in protest because the panel would not give him more time to raise money to pay new lawyers. During the sentencing Thursday evening he made an appeal for mercy, citing his 50-year political career, and gave a tearful apology for his actions, which he blamed on carelessness.

The last such ethics proceeding took place in 2002, when Ohio Democrat James Traflicant faced charges of taking bribes in return for legislative favors, as well as tax evasion. He was expelled from the House after a conviction on federal racketeering charges, and served prison time.

The Rangel case involves no such vote-selling. One exchange during Monday's hearing demonstrates this. Chisam, the committee counsel, was pressed by North Carolina Democrat G.K. Butterfield, who reportedly favored a reprimand rather than censure, on whether there was evidence of corruption on Rangel's part.

Chisam responded: "I see no evidence of corruption," adding: "Do I believe, based on this record, that Congressman Rangel took steps to enrich himself based on his position in Congress? I do not. I believe that the congressman, quite frankly, was overzealous in many of the things that he did, and at least sloppy in his personal finances."

A committee Republican, Michael Conaway of Texas, countered, "So you're saying, then, sir, that sloppiness is a defense?" Chisam replied, "I don't believe it's a defense at all. In fact, I believe that it's a violation of the rules."

The Rangel case was pressed by congressional Republicans and the media as part of the overall effort to shift American politics further to the right, which culminated in the rout of the Democrats in the November 2 elections.

The Democrats responded to this campaign, predictably, with a combination of capitulation and double-dealing. Speaker Pelosi compelled Rangel to step down last March from his position as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, where he had played

a key role in the passage of the Obama health care plan.

There was considerable pressure on Rangel to retire from Congress, which would have mooted the ethics investigation, but he refused, and won reelection with an 80 percent majority. He insisted on a hearing, maintained his innocence, and is now paying the price.

The editorial pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* pontificated about the significance of the hearing. Rangel's sins "are more serious than simple sloppiness," the *Times* intoned. The *Post* wrote that the Rangel case was a demonstration of "Why Congress must retain a strong ethics cop."

Rangel's conviction and exemplary punishment will now be used to demonstrate that, in the wake of the election, both parties are "cleaning house" on Capitol Hill. What a farce!

The corporate lobbyists for the oil, banking, health insurance and other industries will continue to rule the roost in the new Congress. They will enjoy even greater access under the speakership of Republican John Boehner, who once hand-delivered checks from the tobacco lobby to favored congressmen on the floor of the House.



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