When public officials entrusted with government authority are accused of corruption, the independent federal judiciary is called upon to determine their guilt or innocence.

Teapot Dome, 1924–1931

In 1924, investigations accused Secretary of the Interior Albert H. Fall of secretly leasing the federal naval oil reserve at Teapot Dome to Harry Sinclair of the Mammoth Oil Company and Edward Doheny of the Pan American Oil Company. The two allegedly provided Fall with cash, gifts, and a "no-interest" loan (equivalent to $4.1 million in 2005 dollars). The scandals resulted in eight trials before the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia (the predecessor of the District Court). One jury acquitted Doheny of bribing Fall, while another convicted Fall for accepting the bribe. Sinclair was acquitted of bribery but later convicted of contempt of court when it was discovered that he had hired a detective agency to shadow the jury. Fall became the first cabinet-level official convicted and imprisoned for a felony offense committed while in office.

Abscam, 1984–1986

Suspicious that congressmen were accepting bribes, the FBI constructed a "sting" operation in 1978. FBI agents posing as Middle Eastern businessmen offered money for favors on behalf of a fictional sheik. Six members of Congress were caught on tape accepting money: Representatives John Jenrette, Richard Kelly, Raymond Lederer, John Murphy, Michael Myers, and Frank Thompson, as well as Senator Harrison Williams, were convicted, although Representative Kelly’s conviction was reversed on appeal.

Iran-Contra, 1986

In the fall of 1986, the Senate and House convened special committees to investigate covert sales of U.S. arms to Iran and the diversion of proceeds to fund rebel groups in Nicaragua. The televised hearings gripped the nation. A special division of the D.C. Circuit (the Special Division for the Purpose of Appointing Independent Counsels) appointed Lawrence Walsh to investigate under the 1978 Independent Counsel Act. The resulting investigation focused on National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane and White House aides Lt. Col. Oliver North and Admiral John Poindexter. McFarlane pleaded guilty to withholding information from Congress. Highly publicized trials before Judges Gesell and Greene of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia resulted in convictions for, among other things, obstructing congressional investigations and destroying or altering documents. North's and Poindexter's convictions were later overturned. A third defendant, Clair E. George, Chief of the CIA’s Division of Covert Operations, was convicted of perjury, but he received a pardon from President George H.W. Bush before he could be sentenced.

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"A Government of Laws, Not of Men"