

Good old boys and good government  
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The indictments handed down this week against three former officials at the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries ought to reassure Virginians that the good old boys no longer rule state government.

Unfortunately, many Virginians will conclude that exactly the opposite is true. Attorney General Bob McDonnell has himself to blame for the cloud that remains over his office's investigation of the agency.

The former department director and two wardens have paid a heavy price for using \$10,000 in public funds to lavishly outfit themselves for an African safari. First they lost their jobs; now they face prison time.

Dan Hoffler, the former board chairman who inspired the romp around Zimbabwe and South Africa, was spared. He did nothing illegal, but because of his connections, the suspicion lingers, right or wrong, that he caught a break.

When state officials questioned the merit and propriety of the safari, Hoffler tried to snuff the controversy by writing a check to cover expenses. McDonnell's office concluded that refunds don't absolve such grand extravagance. That's pretty tough, but not tough enough to erase inescapable doubts that this investigation was handled on the up and up.

Hoffler gave McDonnell \$25,000 in campaign donations in late 2005, months after a blistering audit had been turned over to law enforcement. By keeping the money, McDonnell kept the taint that came with it.

McDonnell is hardly the only well-placed Virginian to get a generous check from Hoffler. He's been a big contributor to Gov. Tim Kaine, former Gov. Mark Warner and former Attorney General Jerry Kilgore.

McDonnell did some things right. He recused himself, then placed his top deputy, William Mims, in charge. Mims is a former state senator who is well respected around Capitol Square for handling tricky issues. Incidentally, he's never gotten a dime from Hoffler.

But the bottom line is that McDonnell took money from Hoffler when Hoffler's actions were under legal scrutiny.

State government in Virginia is largely clean and run by competent, ethical professionals. The Game Department was slow to get that memo, but this week's indictments send an unambiguous message to everyone.

Except the public, sadly.

McDonnell would be well-advised to add some campaign finance reforms to his legislative agenda next year, but first he'll need to give his own election kitty a good scrubbing.