



Feasting on the Spoils: The Life and Times of Randy "Duke" Cunningham, History's Most Corrupt Congressman

Seth Hettena

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Randy "Duke" Cunningham was an ace fighter pilot and Top Gun instructor. He came back from battle as Vietnam's most famous pilot—a Navy hero in an unpopular war. In his political life, Cunningham was an eight-term United States representative who never lost an election. So how did this powerful politician, one of the Vietnam War's most highly decorated pilots, become the most corrupt congressman in U.S. history?

In 2005, Cunningham shocked the nation by pleading guilty to charges of conspiracy to commit bribery, fraud, and tax evasion. A federal judge sentenced him to more than eight years in prison, the longest sentence handed down to a member of Congress in 40 years. And even as Cunningham was led, weeping, to prison, investigators continued to uncover a deep-rooted scandal, reaching the cozy nexus between Congress and lobbyists, military contractors, the Defense Department and the upper ranks of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Cunningham's bribes were seemingly endless. They included a yacht, a Rolls-Royce, and hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of antiques. Defense contractors flew him aboard private chartered jets to luxury destinations, picked up the tab at expensive restaurants, and paid for his daughter's graduation party. In total, he collected at least \$2.4 million in five years, a series of acts unequaled in the long, sordid history of congressional corruption. An ongoing investigation is even exploring allegations that prostitutes were hired by Cunningham's associates to entertain the congressman. His corruption and that of his cohorts was a decisive factor in the 2006 elections, as Democrats retook control of the House for the first time in more than a decade.

What led a man who showed such strength and resolve in battle to show such moral weakness later in life? Had he become a prisoner of greed or was he manipulated by others far more cunning than he? What happened to Randy Cunningham? In *Feasting on the Spoils*, Hettena offers a probing look at deception and avarice. He paints an unforgettable portrait of a life publicly unraveled, and of a man for whom the mysteries—and the history of fraud—only seem to deepen.

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