

Louisiana chief justice exchanges blindfold for rose-colored glasses

By Bruce Alpert, Times-Picayune

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Daniel Erath/The Times-Picayune Louisiana Chief Justice Catherine

Kimball

One Louisiana judge is facing impeachment by the U.S. House of Representatives. Another just pleaded guilty to taking \$70,000 in bribes to let inmates get out of jail. And a third is being kicked off the bench for giving a cash award in a bogus case because an attorney gave her money.

But the Chief Justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court took offense Friday that two members of Congress think the state has a problem with crooked judges.

"Let me assure you that New Orleans state judges, as well as judges throughout the entire state of Louisiana, operate under a very strict Code of Judicial Conduct and are subject to some of the most stringent financial disclosure rules in the country," Chief Justice Catherine Kimball said in a letter Friday.

She called the comments Wednesday by Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, and Pedro Pierluisi, Puerto Rico's non-voting representative, about possible corruption in Metro New Orleans, a "slap in the face of these courageous and dedicated public servants in both the federal and state judiciary."

Kimball's comments come at a time when there's been a surplus of misconduct allegations against members of the Louisiana bench.

Thomas Porteous, a former state judge elevated to the federal bench by President Clinton, is facing impeachment for, among other things, taking cash and other gifts from judges with cases before him. St. Bernard Parish Judge Wayne Cresap pleaded guilty to a kickback scheme and the Supreme Court is moving to remove Jefferson Parish Judge Joan Benge for awarding damages to a plaintiff in 2001 as a favor to his attorney, a campaign contributor.

Gohmert and Pierluisi, a Democrat, made their comments this week at the impeachment hearing for Porteous, who may become only the 15th judge in United States to suffer that penalty. They raised concerns about the Metro New Orleans justice system after hearing testimony from a New Orleans attorney that a lawyer and judge with whom he had a case pending having lunch together wouldn't raise eyebrows.

In her letter to the two impeachment task force members, Kimball said that allegations of misconduct are taken seriously and investigated and prosecuted by the Louisiana Judiciary Commission.

"The Louisiana Supreme Court's record of imposing appropriate discipline is outstanding," Kimball wrote. "I also note that the very case (the Porteous impeachment matter) is presented due to the referral by the federal judiciary internally."

Kimball said that while "it is true that, as with any profession, there are a few incidents of alleged misconduct," the vast majority of Louisiana judges work hard and do their jobs well.

"The truth is that local judges in post-Katrina New Orleans as well as their colleagues from all over the state, worked countless hours at great personal sacrifice and expense, to get the judicial system up and running again after the worst natural disaster in our country's history and its horrific aftermath," Kimball said.