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# Paving the Way to Scandal: History Repeats Itself

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## **Abstract**

Presidential candidate Marco Rubio of Florida enjoyed an assist this week managing the fallout from New York Times stories about his personal finances by an unlikely ally: Comedy Central host Jon Stewart, who dismissed the information as an example of “gotcha” politics, unworthy of current discussion. “How is this front page news?” Stewart said, calling the Times reports “inconsequential gossip.” [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

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## **Disciplines**

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# Medium

## Paving the Way to Scandal History Repeats Itself

MICHAEL J. BIRKNER



Presidential candidate Marco Rubio of Florida enjoyed an assist this week managing the fallout from *New York Times* stories about his personal finances by an unlikely ally: Comedy Central host Jon Stewart, who dismissed the information as an example of “gotcha” politics, unworthy of current discussion. “How is this front page news?” Stewart said, calling the *Times* reports “inconsequential gossip.”

*Jon Stewart cherry-picks bits from Marco Rubio story to slam the New York Times*

*It's the talk of Washington this week: A front-page New York Times investigative piece titled "Marco Rubio's Career..."* [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

It remains to be seen how the *Times*' stories will impact his campaign, but it is intriguing that one element of the Rubio's financial dealings—his use of a state Republican Party credit card to pay for a paving project at his home—evokes a political story along similar lines dating back to the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

A “paving scandal,” in fact, torpedoed the president's nomination of the Bronx Democratic political boss Edward J. Flynn as Ambassador Plenipotentiary to Australia in 1943.

*PAVING THE WAY Boss Flynn stays home, January–February 1943 Chapter 159*

*By JAY MAEDER BY CLASSIC New York City thievery standards, it was barely a scandal at all: Boss Ed Flynn of the Bronx...* [www.nydailynews.com](http://www.nydailynews.com)

At first, the appointment seemed like routine payment of a political debt by the president. But it was wartime, and Republicans suggested that Flynn's nomination was problematic on the grounds that he had no background in diplomacy. But what really undid Flynn was the revelation by the Scripps-Howard Press that Bronx County public works crews had installed 8000 Belgian paving blocks in the driveway of Flynn's upstate New York vacation home.

Flynn dismissed the reports as much ado about nothing, and in fact nothing came of two grand jury investigations. But those Belgian paving blocks would prove to be the single most potent argument against him, and certainly the easiest for an interested public to grasp.

During the hearings New Hampshire Republican Senator Styles Bridges asked Flynn basic questions about Australia that the putative nominee had trouble answering. During the session Bridges kept on his desk a five-pound paving brick presented to him by New Yorkers, who hoped it would serve as a "tombstone" for Flynn's career in public life. The delegation that brought Bridges the brick suggested it would serve as a warning to Australians to "nail down all public property when Flynn arrives. . . ."

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Not since 1889 had the Senate rejected a diplomatic appointment. Despite his undistinguished performance at his confirmation hearing Flynn's confirmation was anticipated. After all, the Democrats had a comfortable Senate majority.

But things did not work out that way. The Australians, who were happy with the current Minister, Nelson Trusler Johnson, were notably restrained in their response to Flynn's nomination. Flynn's alleged connections with a New York mobster named Dutch Schulz were raised and never fully explained. (Schulz held the honorary post of Deputy Sheriff in the Bronx from July 1925 until winter 1926 when he was picked up in a raid on Jack Diamond's Bronx club after a shooting there.)



*image via pixabay.com*

And the paving stone business just stank, even as Flynn insisted that he hadn't ordered them taken to his vacation home. For most Americans, it seemed obvious that even if Boss Ed Flynn didn't order anyone to do anything for him, underlings in the Bronx public works department did not need any explicit go-ahead. They knew what "the boss" wanted, or what they thought he would want, and acted accordingly.

It did not help Flynn's cause that at various points in the confirmation hearings, he referred to repaying \$80, \$88, and \$750, respectively, for the labor of the city workers who placed the blocks in his driveway.

Although the Senate Foreign Relations committee advanced Flynn's nomination by a 13–10 margin, his support in the Senate was waning—and ultimately collapsed when a rival Democratic Boss, Ed Crump of Memphis, passed the word to Tennessee's senior Democratic Senator that he wanted Flynn's nomination to fail. That proved the tipping point.

With FDR conspicuously silent about his troubled nominee's prospects, Flynn knew he needed to take a fall. On February 1, 1943, he did, announcing that he was withdrawing his nomination and would return to his life in politics. It was a stunning turnabout. As Scripps Howard publisher Roy Howard put it in a private letter, the Flynn nomination had "just exploded like a can of fermented tomatoes."

All because of some paving blocks placed in a vacation home in upstate New York.

In the 21st century, where politicians are continually under a microscope, it's unlikely that a simple misjudgment about using a credit card for a paving project at home is going to sink a presidential candidate. But it is a reminder that scandals—even those that seem on the face of it to be "inconsequential"—can throw a wrench in the works.

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