

Senate Democrats Call for Chief Justice Investigation into Justice Thomas' Lavish Trips



All Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee have called on Chief Justice John Roberts to investigate undisclosed luxury trips that Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas accepted from a wealthy Republican donor. The committee would soon hold a hearing on the court's ethical standards.

The senators, led by Chairman Dick Durbin, said in a letter to Roberts that the panel "has a role to play in ensuring that the nation's highest court does not have the federal judiciary's lowest ethical standards." They also asked Roberts to adopt a code of conduct that would subject the justices to the standards now applied to lower courts. They vowed to consider legislation to resolve the issue if the Supreme Court does not act independently.

A ProPublica report last week detailed gifts of trips on jets and private yachts, as well as luxury accommodations, accepted by Thomas over two decades from Dallas real estate magnate Harlan Crow but never reported. The gifts included a 2019 "island hopping" vacation with costs that "could have exceeded \$500,000," along with travel to California's Bohemian Grove retreat for men and Crow's East Texas ranch.

Thomas issued a one-paragraph statement last Friday defending himself, saying he'd sought guidance from colleagues and others in the judiciary early in his 32-year tenure on the Supreme Court. He said he was "advised that this sort of personal hospitality from close personal friends, who did not have business before the court, was not reportable."

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Critics of the justice insist that the lack of reporting ran afoul of a Watergate-era law requiring justices and other federal officials to disclose most gifts they receive and that stricter rules for the justices are needed. The nine justices of the Supreme Court are the only federal judges who aren't formally bound by a code of conduct.

Roberts has not embraced the idea of the court taking action. In a 2011 year-end Supreme Court report, he said, "The court has had no reason to adopt the Code of Conduct as its definitive source of ethical guidance." Senate Democrats have suggested legislation could come, but its prospects would be doubtful. Republicans have been silent recently about the matter, and at least nine Senate Republicans would have to back legislation for it to proceed to the floor in that chamber. Republicans control the House.

The potential legal and ethical implications of Thomas' acceptance of gifts from Crow could be significant. If it's determined that Thomas violated the law, he could face fines or impeachment. Even if he didn't break the law, his acceptance of lavish gifts from a donor with interest in the court's decisions raises questions about the impartiality of the court and the need for stronger ethical standards.

The fact that Thomas never reported the gifts is also troubling, suggesting a lack of transparency and accountability. If justices aren't required to report gifts and other financial interests, it's difficult for the public to know if they have conflicts of interest that could affect their decisions.

Overall, the situation with Justice Thomas and his acceptance of gifts highlights the need for stronger ethical standards and greater transparency in the federal judiciary. The Supreme Court is the final arbiter of the law in the United States, and its decisions have far-reaching consequences for the country and its citizens. The court's justices must be held to the highest standards of ethical behavior and are accountable to the public they serve.