It's plainly wrong for a member of Congress to collaborate with a public relations firm to produce knowingly deceptive testimony on an important issue. Yet Representative Tom Lantos of California has been caught doing exactly that. His behavior warrants a searching inquiry by the House Ethics Committee.

Mr. Lantos is co-chairman of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. An article last week on The Times’s Op-Ed page by John MacArthur, the publisher of Harper’s magazine, revealed the identity of a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl who told the caucus that Iraqi soldiers had removed scores of babies from incubators and left them to die.

The girl, whose testimony helped build support for the Persian Gulf war, was identified only as "Nayirah," supposedly to protect family members still in Kuwait. Another piece of information was also withheld: that she is not just some Kuwaiti but the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the U.S.

Saddam Hussein committed plenty of atrocities, but not, apparently, this one. The teen-ager's accusation, at first verified by Amnesty International, was later refuted by that group as well as by other independent human rights monitors. But the issue is not so much the accuracy of the testimony as the identity and undisclosed bias of the witness.

How did the girl’s testimony come about? It was arranged by the big public relations firm of Hill & Knowlton on behalf of a client, the Kuwaiti-sponsored Citizens for a Free Kuwait, which was then pressing Congress for military intervention. Mr. Lantos knew the girl's identity but concealed it from the public and from the other caucus co-chairman, Representative John E. Porter of Illinois.

Mr. Lantos says that the fact that Nayirah is the Ambassador's daughter did not alter her credibility. That doesn't wash. Had her identity been known, her accusations surely would have faced greater skepticism and been questioned more closely. Mr. Porter isn't angered that he was misled. But his complacency is far less troubling than Mr. Lantos's lack of candor and lapse of judgment.

The episode also calls into question the dubious financial dealings of the House caucus system. Unlike Congressional committees, which act on legislation, the caucuses bring together like-minded members to highlight issues like human rights abuses, the environment and minority concerns.

Current rules prohibit the caucuses from accepting private donations or government grants. But the caucuses often have close ties to companion nonprofit "foundations" or "institutes" that attract funds from special interests. Caucus leaders often play a central role in these foundations.

Until recently, for example, Mr. Lantos and Mr. Porter headed the Congressional Human Rights Foundation. It rents space in Hill & Knowlton's Washington headquarters at a reduced rate. The same Citizens for a Free Kuwait that produced the mysterious Nayirah also gave $50,000 to the foundation sometime after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. The foundation has financed caucus travel, including trips by Mr. Lantos and his wife.

Chances are that Congress would have voted to pursue the war even without this deception. Still, it's disappointing that Mr. Lantos, a tiger in pursuing low ethical standards at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, has turned into such a house pet.