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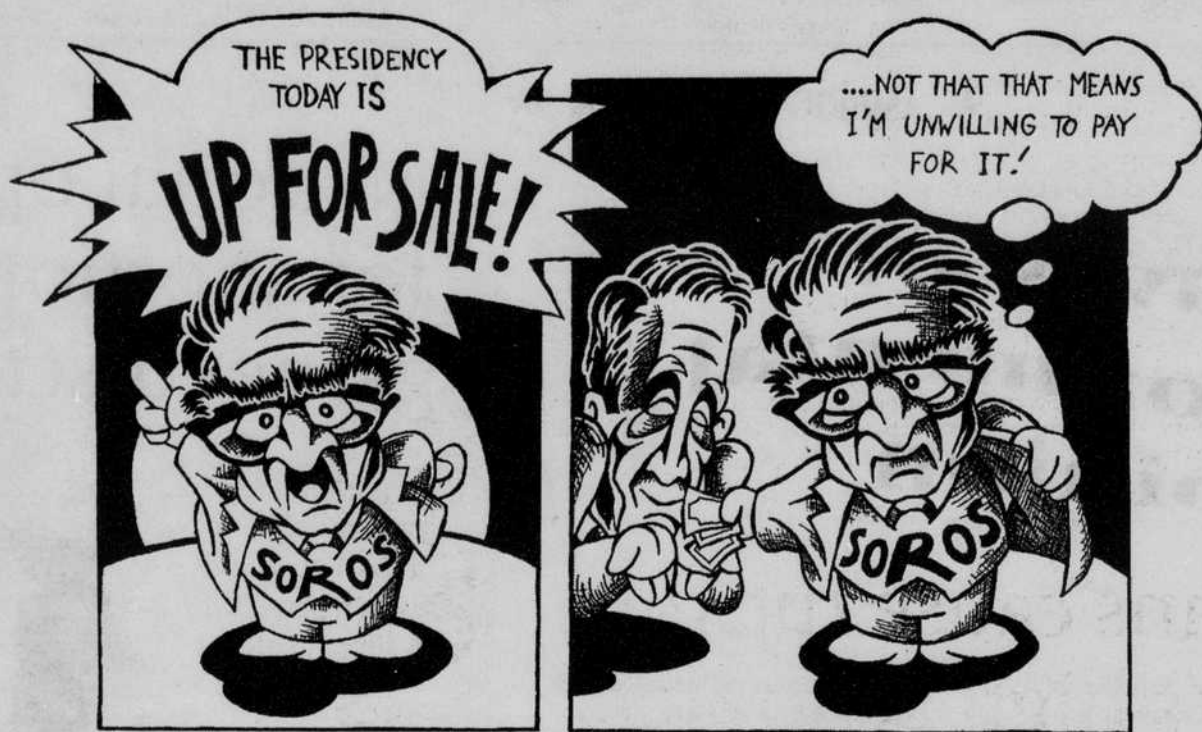
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## In my opinion

# The ABCs of underbanded 527s

You don't know who I am. You've never heard of me before. You don't know what my agenda is. Do you trust me?

Don't.

Oregon's position as a presidential swing state has left the public deluged with political commercials, not all of them produced by candidates. Establishments such as MoveOn.org and Swift Boat Veterans for Truth wield multi-million-dollar bludgeons in the war for the hearts and minds of voters.

Nicknamed "527s" after an Internal Revenue Service provision granting tax-exempt status to political organizations, these groups have legally existed since 1974. If you haven't heard of them before this year, it's because they've never exerted such enormous influence before. Thus far, 527s have used \$200 million on the presidential campaign — outspending both Kerry and Bush themselves.

The sudden budgetary boost to 527s is entirely the fault of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act. More popularly known as McCain-Feingold, this act attempted to reform campaign-finance laws. It included restrictions on monetary contributions and forced candidates to post pictures of themselves in their ads, making them publicly accountable for any misstatements.

527s don't face similar guidelines. Groups qualify for unlimited donations as long as they don't endorse a candidate. The only way Congress could have invited more virulent mudslinging was to moon Rupert Murdoch.

The rules that do restrain 527s are easily sidestepped, as demonstrated by the runaround many 527s have orchestrated against disclosure laws. The IRS recently forced reluctant political organizations to publish the names of major contributors in accordance with federal law, but months of playing hide-and-go-seek continue to go unpunished. Not revealing campaign contributors can result in taxes on the accounts not revealed, but not the revocation of full tax-exempt status. Some 527s are willing to pay a price in order to keep their connections



JENNIFER MCBRIDE  
QUASHING DISSENT

secret from voters and lawmakers. There is no reason taxpayers should implicitly subsidize corporations who gamble with political groups but refuse to take responsibility for their statements.

In addition, 527s are legally required to operate separately from political candidates and parties. Only the naive could truly believe there is no coordination between campaigns and 527s when they share staff or legal advisors. The most notable infraction is Benjamin L. Ginsberg, who was a top lawyer in the Bush-Cheney campaign until he resigned after his connections to the anti-Kerry Swift Boat group were revealed.

Republicans are not the only ones with unclean hands: Zack Exley left his post as Special Projects Director of MoveOn.org to join the Kerry campaign, causing Republicans to cry foul.

These examples are hardly isolated. Most 527s seem little more than sophisticated wind-up dolls, and the hands that are guiding them are prominent party activists or business people hiding under innocuous names. Thus, candidates circumvent the law and corporate influence is still entrenched in the political system.

No matter how transparent the veneers, 527s allow candidates to distance themselves from unfavorable or irresponsible groups, projecting themselves as positive and optimistic. Of course they are ... as long as they have surrogates to play dirty for them.

Whether these advertisements' allegations are fact or fiction is open to debate, but one thing is clear: No matter how neutral the title of "America Coming Together" sounds, anything coming from politicians or their cronies must not be

treated with blind faith. Unfortunately, many people are doing just that.

The Federal Election Commission has tried to close some loopholes by limiting individual contributions to 527s for the next election cycle, but for the most part the commission has been unwilling or unable to intervene, despite requests from both sides of the aisle.

Some argue that part of freedom of speech is freedom to spend, but there is no intrinsic right to tax-exempt status. By revoking the 527 from 527s that violate the letter or the spirit of federal law, the government will encourage responsible campaigning.

Unfortunately, it appears unlikely that the flow of illegal soft-money contributions can be stopped without totalitarian measures. As long as there is law, there are loopholes. The alternative to current programs is to strengthen regulation and achieve what we can or abandon limits altogether.

The easiest and simplest way to redress the problem may start with us. When faced with a decision so immensely important, we can't afford to let partisan passions override skepticism. You can start the scrutiny by knowing a little about who's preaching to you. Opensecrets.org, run by the Center for Responsive Politics, offer summations of ads run by 527s, as well as budgetary estimates and lists of major contributors. Factcheck.org is another excellent resource. Run by the University of Pennsylvania, it assesses the accuracy of political commercials' claims.

In the spirit of full disclosure, my name is Jennifer McBride and I'm a student at the University's journalism school. I have no familial or business connections with anyone in state, local or national politics, but I am a registered Democrat (albeit a reluctant one). My only agenda is to convince you to ask if I have an agenda.

The question is, can you believe me when I say that?

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## Editorial

# Bush, Kerry both fizzle without planet plans

Neither presidential candidate has made environmental policy a cornerstone of his campaign. But relative to other politicians in Washington, Kerry has a good record on the environment. The League of Conservation Voters gave him over a 90 percent score during 2001 and 2002 for environmental votes. In 2003 he received a score of 53 percent, but that was due to his frequent absence from key environmental votes, which the League, quiet rightly, counts as a negative. But when he has shown up to vote, he has been firmly on the side of enforcement.

The Bush doctrine, on the other hand, has been to let polluting industries police themselves while the U.S. government is busy policing the world. Bush has ignored scientific advice, appointed industry-friendly regulators to key environmental positions, sent up a long list of anti-environmental judicial nominees for Senate review and allowed corporate polluters to write the nation's energy policy.

If the environment is an important issue, Kerry is the clear choice for president. But it is not quite that simple. When we speak of the environment, we are really speaking of two separate, but related, issues: environmental health and environmental sustainability.

Neither candidate will admit that if we really wish to turn back the damage we are currently inflicting on the earth, then the lifestyle that the majority of Americans enjoy — in fact demand — will need to be vastly altered. Solar power and recycling alone won't do the trick. We need to consume differently. And Americans are not going to give up their freedom to shop without a fight.

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks were our best hope to convince Americans to make lifestyle changes. If the government had connected patriotism with driving less, buying more fuel-efficient cars, conserving electricity, generating less waste, etc., Americans would have listened. But Bush squandered the opportunity, asking us to shop more, not less, in order to jump-start the economy.

Would such an action have staved off future environmental Armageddon? Probably not. But most of us still recycle our papers and cans, hoping to slow down the destruction of the earth long enough for a technological miracle to come along and save us from ourselves. We are now the idealists, with a quasi-religious faith in the Human Progress. Kerry is about as good as we are going to get.

But for those who take an "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we'll die" attitude about the environment, Bush is your man. And as hard as it is to say, you just might be the most practical among us.

In the Oct. 11 article "Student Senate violates state law," the Emerald erroneously reported that ASUO Accounting Coordinator Jennifer Creighton-Neiwert presided over the Oct. 6 Senate meeting. Creighton-Neiwert attended the meeting to oversee the election process. The Senate president presided over the meeting. The Emerald regrets the error.