

# SAVING OUR DEMOCRACY

BY BILL MOYERS

"Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac."  
~HENRY KISSINGER

"The lust for power in political minds is the strongest passion of life, and impells ambitious men to deeds of infamy."  
~GENERAL WILLIAM TECUMSEH SHERMAN

I will leave to Jon Stewart the rich threads of humor to pluck from the hunting incident in Texas. All of us are relieved that the Vice President's friend has survived. I can accept Dick Cheney's word that the accident was one of the worst moments of his life. What intrigues me as a journalist is the rare glimpse we have serendipitously been offered into the tightly-knit world of the elites who govern today.

The Vice President was hunting on a 50-thousand acre ranch owned by a lobbyist friend who is the heiress to a family fortune of land, cattle, banking and oil. (Ah, yes, the quickest and surest way to the American dream remains to choose your parents well.) The circumstances of the hunt and the identity of the hunters provoked a lament from *The Economist*. The most influential pro-business magazine in the world is concerned that hunting in America is becoming a matter of class: the rich are doing more, the working stiffs less.

The annual loss of 1.5 million acres of wildlife habitat and 1 million acres of farm and rangeland to development and sprawl has come "at the expense of 'The Deer Hunter' crowd in the small towns of the Northeast, the rednecks of the South and the cowboys of the West." Their places, says *The Economist*, are being taken by the affluent who pay plenty for such conveniences as being driven to where the covey cooperatively awaits. The magazine (hardly a Marxist rag, remember) describes Mr. Cheney's own expedition as "a lot closer to 'Gosford Park' than 'The Deer Hunter' — a group of fat old toffs waiting for wildlife to be flushed towards them at huge expense."

At the heart of this story is a metaphor for power. The Vice President turned his host, the lobbyist who is also the ranch owner, into his *de facto* news manager. She would disclose the shooting only when Cheney was ready and only on his terms. Sure enough, nothing was made public for almost 20 hours until she finally leaked the authorized version to the local newspaper. Ms. Armstrong suggested the blame lay with the victim, who, she indicated, had failed to inform the Vice President of his whereabouts and walked into a hail of friendly fire. Three days later Cheney revised the story and apologized. Don't you wonder what went back and forth with the White House that long night of trying to agree on the official line?

We do know someone from the hunting party was in touch with Karl Rove at the White House. For certain, Rove's kind of fellow you want on the other end of the line when great concoctions are being hatched, especially if you wish the victim to hang for the crime committed against him.

Watching these people work is a study of the inner circle of American politics. Sidney Blumenthal, writing on *Salon.com*, reminds us of the relationship between the Armstrong dynasty and the Bush family and its retainers. Armstrong's father invested in Rove's political consulting firm that managed George W. Bush's election as governor of Texas and as President. Her mother, Anne Armstrong, is a longtime Republican activist and donor. Ronald Reagan appointed her to the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board after her tenure as Ambassador to the United Kingdom under President Gerald Ford, whose chief of staff was a young Dick Cheney. Anne Armstrong served on the board of directors of Halliburton that hired Cheney to run the company.

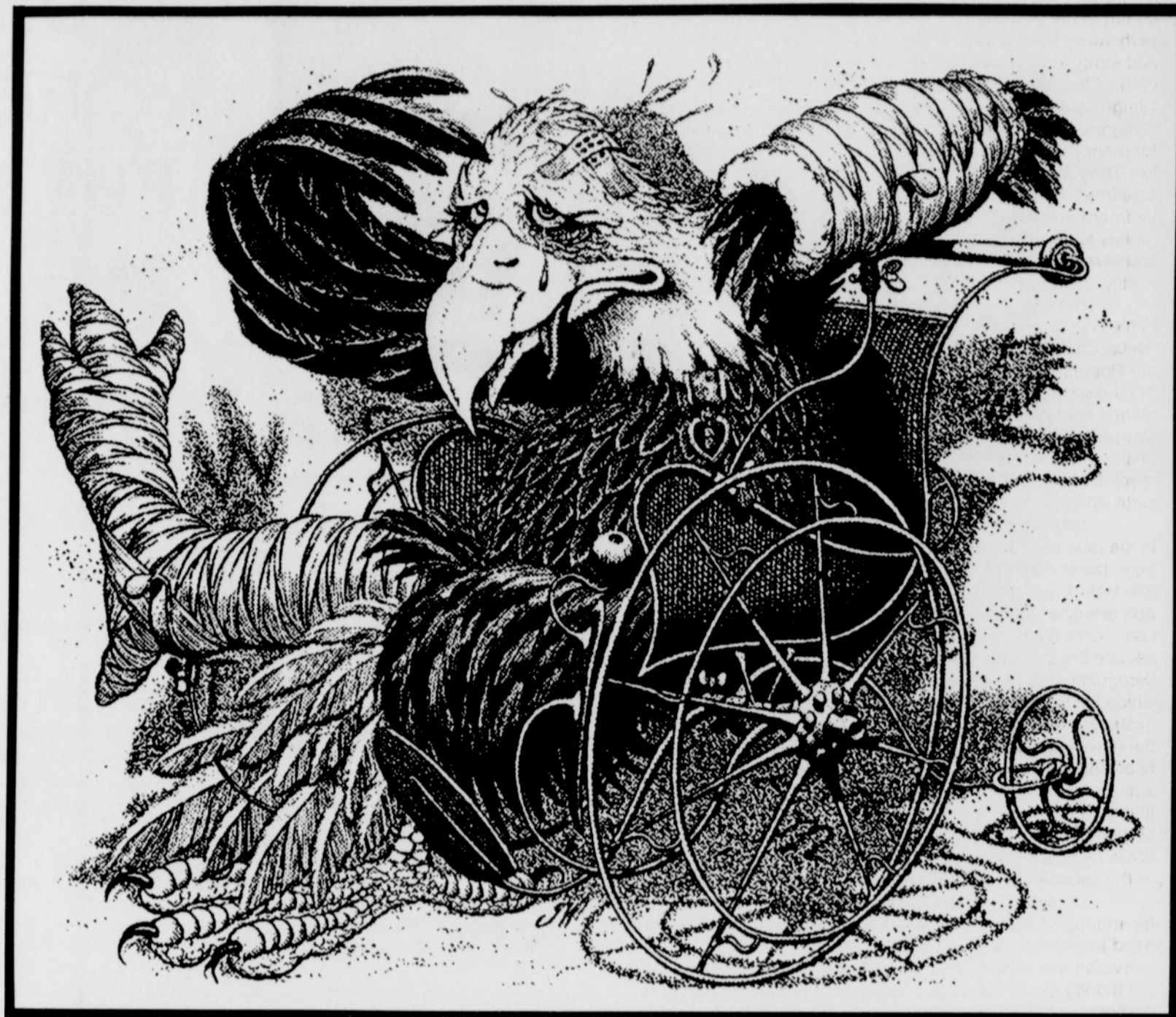
Her daughter, Katharine Armstrong, host of the hunting party, was once a lobbyist for the powerful Houston law firm founded by the family of James A. Baker III, who was chief of staff to Reagan, Secretary of State under the first George Bush, and the man designated by the Bush family to make sure the younger Bush was named President in 2000 despite having lost the popular vote. According to the Blumenthal, one of her more recent lobbying jobs was with a large construction firm with contracts in Iraq.

It is a Dick Cheney world out there — a world where politicians and lobbyists hunt together, dine together, drink together, play together, pray together and prey together, all the while carving up the world according to their own interests.

Two years ago, in a report entitled *Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality*, the American Political Science Association concluded that progress toward realizing American ideals of democracy "may have stalled, and even, in some areas, reversed." Privileged Americans "roar with a clarity and consistency public officials readily hear and routinely follow," while citizens "with lower or moderate incomes are speaking with a whisper."

The following year, on the eve of President George W. Bush's second inauguration, the editors of *The Economist*, reporting on inequality in America, concluded that the United States "risks calcifying into a European-style class-based society."

As great wealth has accumulated at the top, the rest of society has not been benefiting proportionately. In 1960 the gap between the top 20% and the bottom 20% was 30-fold. Now it is 75-fold. Thirty years ago the average annual compensation



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of the top 100 chief executives in the country was 30 times the pay of the average worker. Today it is 100 times the pay of the average worker. A recent article in *The Financial Times* reports on a study by the American economist Robert J. Gordon, who finds "Little long-term change in workers' share of U.S. income over the past half century." Middle-ranking Americans are being squeezed, he says, because the top 10% of earners have captured almost half the total income gains in the past four decades and the top 1% have gained the most of all — "more in fact, than all the bottom 50%."

No wonder working men and women and their families are strained to cope with the rising cost of health care, pharmaceutical drugs, housing, higher education, and public transportation — all of which have risen faster in price than typical family incomes. The recent book, *Economic Apartheid in America: A Primer of Economic Inequality & Insecurity*, describes how "thirty zipcodes in America have become fabulously wealthy" while "whole urban and rural communities are languishing in unemployment, crumbling infrastructure, growing insecurity, and fear."

This is a profound transformation in a country whose DNA contains the inherent promise of an equal opportunity at "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," and whose collective memory resonates with the hallowed idea — hallowed by blood — of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." The great progressive struggles in our history have been waged to make sure ordinary citizens, and not just the rich, share in the benefits of a free society. Yet today the public may support such broad social goals as affordable medical coverage for all, decent wages for working people, safe working conditions, a secure retirement, and clean air and water — but there is no government "of, by, and for the people" to deliver on those aspirations. Instead, our elections are bought out from under us and our public officials do the bidding of mercenaries. Money is choking democracy to death. So powerfully has wealth shaped our political agenda that we cannot say America is working for all of America.

In the words of Louis Brandeis, one of the greatest of our Supreme Court justices: "You can have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, or democracy, but you cannot have both."

Some simple facts:  
The cost of running for public office is skyrocketing. In 1996, \$1.6 billion was spent on the Congressional and Presidential elections. Eight years later, that total had more than doubled, to \$3.9 billion.

Thanks to our system of privately financed campaigns, millions of regular Americans are being priced out of any meaningful participation in democracy. Less than one half of one percent of all Americans made a political contribution of \$200 or more to a federal candidate in 2004. When the average cost

of running and winning a seat in the House of Representatives has topped \$1 million, we can no longer refer to that august chamber as "The People's House." If you were thinking of running for Congress, do you have any idea where you would get the money to be a viable candidate?

At the same time that the cost of getting elected is exploding beyond the reach of ordinary people, the business of gaining access to and influence with our elected Representatives has become a growth industry. Six years ago, in his first campaign for President, George W. Bush promised he would "restore honor and integrity" to the government. Repeatedly, during his first campaign for President, he would raise his right hand and, as if taking an oath, tell voters that he would change how things were done in the nation's capitol. "It's time to clean up the toxic environment in Washington, D.C.," he would say. His administration would ask "not only what is legal but what is right, not what the lawyers allow but what the public deserves."

Hardly.  
Since Bush was elected the number of lobbyists registered to do business in Washington has more than doubled. That's 16,342 lobbyists in 2000 to 34,785 last year — 65 lobbyists for every member of Congress.

The amount that lobbyists charge their new clients has increased by nearly 100% in that same period, according to *The Washington Post*, going up to anything from \$20,000 to \$40,000 a month. Starting salaries have risen to nearly \$300,000 a year for the best-connected people, those leaving Congress or the administration.

The total spent per month by special interests wining, dining, and seducing federal officials is now nearly \$200 million. Per month.

But numbers don't tell the whole story. There has been a qualitative change as well. With pro-corporate business officials running both the executive and legislative branches, lobbying that was once reactive has gone on the offense, seeking huge windfalls from public policy and public moneys.

One example cited by *The Washington Post*: Hewlett-Packard, the California computer maker. The company nearly doubled its budget for contract lobbyists in 2004 and took on an elite lobbying firm as its Washington arm. Its goal was to pass Republican-backed legislation that would enable the company to bring back to the United States, at a dramatically lowered tax rate, as much as \$14.5 billion in profit from foreign subsidiaries. The extra lobbying paid off. The legislation passed and Hewlett-Packard can now reduce its share of the social contract. The company's director of government affairs was quite candid: "We're trying to take advantage of the fact that Republicans control the House, the Senate, and the White House." Whatever the company paid for the lobbying, the investment returned enormous dividends.

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