

I want to point out here that I believe in equal opportunity muckraking. When I left Washington for journalism I did not leave behind my conviction that government should see to it that we have a more level playing field with one set of rules for everyone, but I did leave behind my partisan affections. Anyone who saw the documentary my team and I produced a few years ago on the illegal fund raising for Bill Clinton's re-election, knows I am no fan of the Democratic money machine that helped tear the party away from whatever roots it once had in the daily lives and struggles of working people, turning it into a junior partner of the Chamber of Commerce. I mean people like California's Congressman Tony Coelho, who in the 1980s realized that Congressional Democrats could milk the business community for money if they promised to "pay for play." I mean people like Terry McAuliffe, the former Democratic National Committee Chairman, who gave Bill Clinton the idea of renting the Lincoln bedroom out to donors, and who did such a good job raising big money for the Democrats that by the end of his reign, Democrats had fewer small donors than the Republicans and more fat cats writing them million dollar checks.

But let's be realistic here. When the notorious Willie Sutton was asked why he robbed banks, he answered, "Because that's where the money is." If I seem to be singling out Republicans, it's for one reason: that's where the power is. They own the government lock, stock, and barrel. Once they gained control of the House of Representatives in 1994, their self-proclaimed revolution has gone into overdrive with their taking of the White House in 2000 and the Senate in 2002. Their revolution soon became a cash cow and Washington a one-party state ruled by money.

Look back at the bulk of legislation passed by Congress in the past decade: an energy bill which gave oil companies huge tax breaks at the same time that Exxon Mobil just posted \$36 billion in profits in 2005 and our gasoline and home heating bills are at an all-time high; a bankruptcy "reform" bill written by credit card companies to make it harder for poor debtors to escape the burdens of divorce or medical catastrophe; the deregulation of the banking, securities and insurance sectors which led to rampant corporate malfeasance and greed and the destruction of the retirement plans of millions of small investors; the deregulation of the telecommunications sector which led to cable industry price gouging and an undermining of news coverage; protection for rampant overpricing of pharmaceutical drugs; and the blocking of even the mildest attempt to prevent American corporations from dodging an estimated \$50 billion in annual taxes by operating a P.O. Box in an offshore haven like Bermuda or the Cayman Islands.

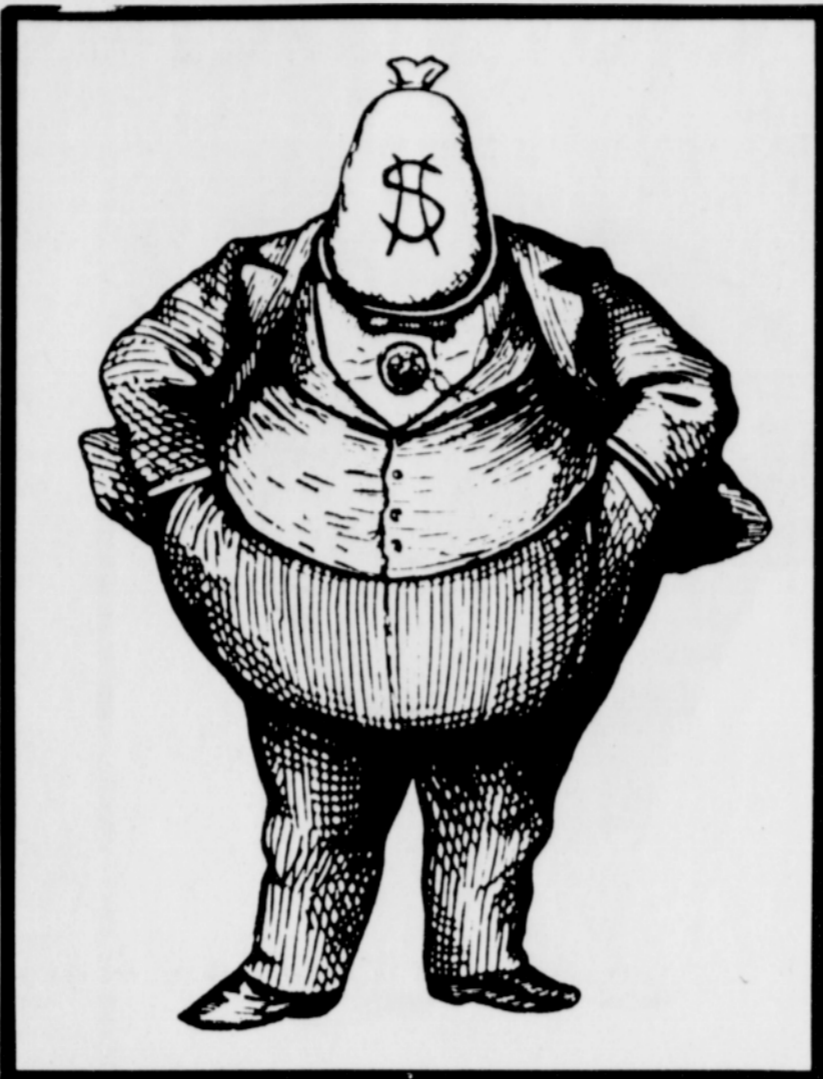
In every case the pursuit of this legislation was driven by big money. Our public representatives, the holders of our trust, need huge sums to finance their campaigns, especially to pay for television advertising, and men and women who have mastered the money game have taken advantage of that weakness in our democracy to systematically sell it off to the highest bidders.

Let's start with the "K Street Project." K Street is the Wall Street of lobbying, the address of many of Washington's biggest lobbying firms. The K Street Project was the brainchild of Tom DeLay and Grover Norquist, a rightwing strategist who famously said his goal is to shrink government so that it can be "drowned in a bathtub." This, of course, would render it impotent to defend ordinary people against the large economic forces—the so-called "free market"—that Norquist and his pals believe should be running America.

Tom DeLay, meanwhile, was a small businessman from Sugar Land, Texas, who ran a pest extermination business before he entered politics. He hated the government regulators who dared tell him that some of the pesticides he used were dangerous — as, in fact, they were. He got himself elected to the Texas legislature at a time the Republicans were becoming the majority in the once-solid Democratic South, and his reputation for joining in the wild parties around the state capitol in Austin earned him the nickname of "Hot Tub Tom." But early in his political career, and with exquisite timing and the help of some videos from the rightwing political evangelist, James Dobson, Tom DeLay found Jesus and became a full-fledged born again Christian. He would later humbly acknowledge that God had chosen him to restore America to its biblical worldview. "God," said Tom DeLay, "has been walking me through an incredible journey... God is using me, all the time, everywhere... God is training me. God is working with me..."

Yes, indeed: God does work in mysterious ways. In addition to finding Jesus, Tom DeLay also discovered a secular ally to serve his ambitions. He found out the power of money to power his career. "Money is not the root of all evil in politics," DeLay once said. "In fact, money is the lifeblood of politics." By raising more than \$2 million from lobbyists and business groups and distributing the money to dozens of Republican candidates in 1994, the year of the Republican breakthrough in the House, DeLay bought the loyalty of many freshman legislators and got himself elected Majority Whip, the number three man in Newt Gingrich's "Gang of Seven" who ran the House.

Here's how they ran it: On the day before the Republicans formally took control of Congress on January 3, 1995, DeLay met in his office with a coterie of lobbyists from some of the biggest companies in America. The journalists Michael



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Weisskopf and David Maraniss report that "the session inaugurated an unambiguous collaboration of political and commercial interests, certainly not uncommon in Washington but remarkable this time for the ease and eagerness with which these allies combined."

DeLay virtually invited them to write the Republican agenda. What they wanted first was "Project Relief" — a wide-ranging moratorium on regulations that had originally been put in place for the health and safety of the public. For starters, they wanted "relief" from labor standards that protected workers from the physical injuries of repetitive work. They wanted "relief" from tougher rules on meat inspection. And they wanted "relief" from effective monitoring of hazardous air pollutants. Scores of companies were soon gorging on Tom DeLay's generosity, adding one juicy and expensive tidbit after another to the bill. According to Weisskopf and Maraniss, on the eve of the debate, 20 major corporate groups advised lawmakers that "this was a key vote, one that would be considered in future campaign contributions." On the day of the vote, lobbyists on Capitol Hill were still writing amendments on their laptops and forwarding them to House leaders.

The Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, famously told the lobbyists: "If you are going to play in our revolution, you have to live by our rules." Tom DeLay became his enforcer.

The rules were simple and blunt. Contribute to Republicans only. Hire Republicans only. When the electronics industry ignored the warning and chose a Democrat member of Congress to run its trade association, DeLay played so rough—pulling from the calendar a bill the industry had worked on two years, aimed at bringing most of the world in alignment with U.S. copyright law — that even the House Ethics Committee, the watchdog that seldom barks and rarely bites, stirred itself to rebuke him — privately, of course.

DeLay wasn't fazed. Not only did he continue to make sure the lobbying jobs went to Republicans, he also saw to it that his own people got a lion's share of the best jobs. At least 29 of his former employees landed major lobbying positions — the most of any Congressional office. The journalist John Judis found that together ex-DeLay people represent around 350 firms, including 13 of the biggest trade associations, most of the energy companies, the giants in finance and technology, the airlines, auto makers, tobacco companies, and the largest health care and pharmaceutical companies. When tobacco companies wanted to block the FDA from regulating cigarettes, they hired DeLay's man. When the pharmaceutical companies — Big Pharma — wanted to make sure companies wouldn't be forced to negotiate cheaper prices for drugs, they hired six of Tom DeLay's team, including his former chief of staff. The machine became a blitzkrieg, oiled by campaign contributions that poured in like a gusher.

Watching as DeLay, with approval of the House leadership, became the virtual dictator of Capitol Hill, I was reminded of the card shark in Texas who said to his prey, "Now play the cards fair, Reuben, I know what I dealt you." Tom DeLay and his cronies were stacking the deck.

They centralized in their own hands the power to write legislation. Drastic revisions to major bills were often written at night, with lobbyists hovering over them, then rushed through as "emergency measures," giving members as little as half an hour to consider what they may be voting on.

The Democratic minority was locked out of conference committees where the House and Senate are supposed to iron out their differences with both parties in the loop. The Republican bosses even took upon themselves the power to rewrite a bill in secrecy and move it directly to a vote without any other hearings or public review.

Sometimes this meant overruling what the majority of House members really wanted. Consider what happened with the bill to provide Medicare prescription drug coverage, analyzed by Robert Kuttner in *The American Prospect*. As the measure was coming to a vote a majority of the House was sympathetic to allowing cheaper imports from Canada and to giving the government the power to negotiate wholesale drug prices for Medicare beneficiaries. But DeLay and his cronies were working on behalf of the big pharmaceutical companies and would have none of it. So they made sure there would be no amendments on the floor. They held off the final roll call a full three hours — well after midnight — in order to strongarm members who wanted to vote against the bill.\*

It was not a pretty sight out there on the floor of the House. At one point DeLay marched over to one Republican — Representative Nick Smith, who opposed the Medicare bill — and attempted to change his mind. Smith, serving his final term in office, later alleged he was offered a bribe, \$100,000 for his son's campaign to succeed him. When he subsequently retracted his accusation, the House Ethics Committee looked into the charges and counter-charges and wound up admonishing both Smith and DeLay, who admitted that he had offered to endorse Smith's son in exchange for Smith's support but that no money or bribe were involved. Timothy Noah of *Slate.com* has mused about what DeLay's endorsement would nonetheless have meant in later campaign contributions if Smith had gone along. While the report of the Ethics Committee never did find out the true story, Noah asks: "Who did whisper '\$100,000' in Smith's ear? The report is full of plausible suspects, including DeLay himself, but it lacks any evidence on this crucial finding. You get the feeling the authors would prefer to forget this mystery ever existed."

There are no victimless crimes in politics. The price of corruption is passed on to you. What came of all these shenanigans was a bill that gave industry what it wanted and gave taxpayers the shaft. The bill covers only a small share of drug expenses. It has a major gap in coverage — the so-called "donut hole." It explicitly forbids beneficiaries from purchasing private coverage to fill in the gap and explicitly forbids the federal government from bargaining for lower drug prices. More than one consumer organization has estimated that most seniors could end up paying even more for prescription drugs than before the bill passed.

Furthermore, despite these large flaws the cost of the bill is horrendous — between \$500 billion and \$1 trillion in its first 10 years. The chief actuary for Medicare calculated a realistic estimate of what the bill would cost, but he later testified before Congress that he was forbidden from releasing the information by his boss, Thomas Scully, head of the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services, who was then negotiating for a lucrative job with the health care industry. Sure enough, hardly had the prescription bill become law than Scully went to work for the largest private equity investor in health care and at a powerful law firm focusing on health care and regulatory matters.

One is reminded of Senator Bois Penrose. Back in the first Gilded Age, Penrose was a United States Senator from Pennsylvania who had been put and kept in office by the railroad tycoons and oil barons. He assured the moguls: "I believe in the division of labor. You send us to Congress; we pass laws under which you make money... and out of your profits you further contribute to our campaign funds to send us back again to pass more laws to enable you to make more money."

Gilded Ages, then and now, have one thing in common: audacious and shameless people for whom the very idea of the public trust is a cynical joke.

Tom DeLay was elected to Congress by the ordinary people of Sugar Land, Texas. They had the right to expect him to represent them. This expectation is the very soul of democracy. We can't all govern — not even tiny, homogenous Switzerland practices pure democracy. So we Americans came to believe our best chance of responsible government lies in obtaining the considered judgments of those we elect to represent us. Having cast our ballots in the sanctity of the voting booth with its assurance of political equality, we go about our daily lives expecting the people we put in office to weigh the competing interests and decide to the best of their ability what is right. Instead, they have given the American people reason to believe the conservative journalist P. J. O'Rourke was right when he described Congress as "a parliament of whores."

A recent CBS News/*New York Times* poll found 70% of Americans believe lobbyists bribing members of Congress is the way things work: 57% think at least half of the members of Congress accept bribes or gifts that affect their votes. A Fox News poll reported that 65% believe most elected officials in Washington make policy decisions or take actions on the basis of campaign contributions. Findings like these underscore the fact that ordinary people believe their bonds with democracy are not only stretched but sundered.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

\*Among those successfully strongarmed to change his vote was Oregon Democrat David Wu.  
\*\*Gale Norton has resigned as Interior Secretary.

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