

The influence of Big Money on U.S. elections cannot be underestimated. (See Greg Palast's "Jim Crow in Cyberspace" in *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, the work on election fraud by Bob Fittrakis and Harvey Wasserman [NCTE, Marpril 2006], and the recent articles by Warren Stewart, "Do You Know How Your Vote Will Be Counted?" and Fred Grimm "Election Official Hammered for Telling the Truth.") The problem with the role of money in a supposedly democratic country is not restricted to the many and all-too regular scandals — such as the Abramoff affair or the conviction of Randy 'Duke' Cunningham — nor is the problem restricted to the corruption that has ensnared elected officials and exposed lobbyists as little more than bribes-makers and bagmen. (See Geov Parrish, "That Old Fashioned Corruption," and Katrina vanden Huevel's "Annals of Outrage I, II & III.") It is, rather, that money, as John McCain famously said, "is the mother's milk of politics" (at least in the U.S. political system). The need to raise money at every level, from city to state to federal offices, pollutes and perverts the democratic process.

The corruption is bipartisan; at present, the Republican Party enjoys greater favor with the corporate paymasters than the Democratic Party, but both parties are "on the take." It does little to assuage one's concern for democracy that one party gets 55%-60% of the paymasters' money and the other only 45%-50%. In a country that prides itself on being democratic, private money peddles its influence across the political spectrum.

To cite one illustrative example, Tyson Slocum of Public Citizen, an energy industry watchdog, reports that Big Oil & Gas doled out \$55 million to various campaigns for legislative and executive seats since 2001. And why not, ExxonMobil alone made a profit of \$36.1 billion in 2005, the most profit ever recorded by a U.S. corporation in a year, and a rate of return on investment of 46%-59%. And what did these donations buy the industry? Among other things, when the executives of the top five oil and gas companies were called before Congress to testify about possible price-gouging and the prospect of a windfall profits tax, the five company representatives were not required to testify under oath!

I suspect that everything I have just recounted is entirely by design of Big Money interests. The role of money ensures that only the wealthy and well-connected have any chance of influencing the political process or holding elected office at a significant level. In the 2004 election campaign, 549 people each raised \$100,000 for Bush's re-election, and John Kerry, too, relied on big donors on his side of the political equation. Thus, it was not by sheer coincidence that, in the 2000 presidential campaign, voters were given a choice between a Yale graduate, whose father had been President and grandfather a Senator, and a Harvard graduate whose father was a Senator. And in the 2004 presidential contest, the choice was even more narrow, between a multi-millionaire Yale 'Skull & Bones' man and a billionaire Yale 'Skull & Bones' man. Nepotism, like corruption, discourages most good Americans from participating in elections, to say nothing of running for office!

In 1968, I hung a poster on my bedroom wall that read: *Wanna Be President of the United States? First Find \$25 Million!* Today, that wouldn't buy a Senate seat or even a New York City Mayor's job. I was shocked when John Corzine spent \$63 million for a New Jersey Senate seat, but I was aghast when Michael Bloomberg spent \$70 million to become the Mayor of New York City. Corporations give money to both parties in staggering amounts, and what they do not give directly to their favorites, they spend on advertising to shape the public mind. The result is a net loss both for the public good and for democracy. It costs the corporations only a small fraction in contributions for what they gain through their wheel-greasing (which they are able to deduct from their taxes). I wonder how much the oil and natural gas lobby paid to secure that \$9 billion in windfall profits they stand to gain from the Bush administration's plan for "royalty relief." And that million dollar donation by the UAE to the Bush Library in Crawford, Texas was surely just a down-payment for the ports deal they hoped to get!

It seems quaint nowadays to reflect back on the corporate culture of the 1960s. John Kenneth Galbraith (who died April 29 at age 97) wrote the following description in his 1967 book, *The New Industrial State*, as quoted by Paul Krugman in his excellent October 20, 2002 New York Times Magazine article, "For Richer":

"Management does not go out ruthlessly to reward itself — a sound management is expected to exercise restraint...With the power of decision goes opportunity for making money...Were everyone to seek to do so...the corporation would be a chaos of competitive avarice. But these are not the sort of thing a good company man does; a remarkably effective code bans such behavior. Group decision-making insures, moreover, that almost everyone's actions and even thoughts are known to others. This acts to enforce the code and, more than incidentally, a high standard of personal honesty as well."

Does anyone believe such a self-policing culture exists today? If the corporate scandals of the 1990s taught us anything it is that corporations no longer even aim to stay in business, a goal that used to temper their penchant for excess and bridge-



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burning. The cases of Enron, Tyco, Adelphia, WorldCom, Global Crossing, and many more perpetrators, should have made abundantly clear that there's no limit to corporate excess or insatiable greed, and, in the absence of federal and international regulations, it is usually the stockholders and the public at large who end up underwriting the thefts, cleaning up the pollution, and dealing with the displaced workforce. Most of this is not new. In fact, the seeds of corporate rule over America were sown by the 1971 *Powell Memorandum*. And we need only to think back to the Savings & Loan scandal of the 1980s, to recall another half a trillion dollar boondoggle that taxpayers had to underwrite. There have been plenty of books written about such scandals (William S. Grieder, *Who Will Tell the People?*, Arianna Huffington, *Pigs at the Trough*, Jim Hightower, *Thieves in High Places*, and David K. Johnston, *Perfectly Legal*, for starters). Yet despite the recurrent malfeasance, little has been done to curb corporate excesses and outright frauds.

What is more, transnational corporations need have no allegiance to the United States of America. They have offices in many countries and on many continents, and most of them have already shipped their profits offshore to avoid the patriotic duty of paying their fair share of U.S. taxes.

Several commentators have recently reminded us of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's January 17, 1961 farewell address, warning of the threat posed by the "military-industrial complex." Usually omitted from Eisenhower's warning is the not very well known fact that, until the final version of the speech, he used the phrase, "military-industrial-congressional complex." He is said to have deleted the reference to Congress from his final version to avoid offending legislators. But Eisenhower regularly referred to "the triangle" and even to "the iron triangle" consisting of the military, the industries that profit from war, and the Congress, which is charged with declaring war, appropriating funding for wars (and everything else the federal government spends money on), and for exercising oversight functions of various kinds. According to University of Washington Emeritus Professor of engineering, public affairs, and social management, Edward Ward Wenk, Jr.:

"These three cornered fellowships coupled hungry defense contractors, ambitious military officers whose promotions rested on husbanding new defense systems, and members of Congress eager to steer new funds and job opportunities to their district."

Eisenhower might have added "educational institutions" to the list, since universities conducted research for the Manhattan Project, and institutions such as University of California at Berkeley, which managed the Los Alamos laboratory (which produced the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) from its inception until last year, when the university put Los Alamos on the auction block and Bechtel secured the management contract. President Eisenhower's speechwriter — whom Professor Wenk revealed to be Malcom Moos — recalled that Eisenhower feared a "pathological influence of the military-industrial coalition beyond a healthy arm's-length relationship, especially if the national psyche was prodded artificially by fear. A future chief executive might exploit political energies of the coalition to further a narrow and dangerous agenda." (Italics mine.)

Professor Wenk, who served in the administrations of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, and who was the first incumbent in the post of science advisor to Congress during the Eisenhower administration, draws this conclusion in his March 7 article, "Ike's Warning Reverberates Today" by saying: "I see coalitions increasingly entrenched. Failed weapons systems are seldom canceled. Auditing is cursory for moving and feeding troops; malperformance is accepted in the fog of war, and penalties for fraud uncollected...Influence of coalitions also has grown with the cost of political campaigns. Members spend half their time raising funds, rather than forging policy...In the absence of strong vigilance, their concern about a corporate state hatched by stealth might yet happen."

Indeed, it may have already taken place.

It appears glaringly obvious these days that Congress has failed miserably in oversight, appropriation and war-declaration functions. This lack of oversight is apparent not only with respect to the Administration's reckless adventure in Iraq, but also with regard to the passage of the Patriot Act (and its renewal), the muted response against policies condoning torture, suspension of Habeas Corpus, the practice of "extraordinary rendition," the warrantless wiretapping of American citizens, and the insuring of free and fair elections with verifiable ballot-counting. What we have now is a military-industrial-Congressional complex, indeed!

I nonetheless believe that most public officials begin their careers with a desire to serve the people and to make America better. I do not believe that members of Congress, or members of state legislatures, for that matter, run for office merely to enrich themselves. No, I think that most of them begin their political careers as genuine and sincere people. But the systemic role of money, as I have said, pollutes and perverts processes and people. It is a bit like boiling a frog. If you drop the frog in boiling water, it will immediately jump out of the kettle; but if you drop the frog in lukewarm water and slowly increase the temperature, the frog will never jump out of the kettle nor croak anymore.

And that is just what happens to far too many of our public servants and to the citizenry as a whole. It is ironic that Big Business tries to insure that government stays on the sidelines and pursues laissez faire policies, until Big Business needs the government (usually aided by the U.S. military) to make some country or region "safe" for its business interests. From making Cuba safe for the United Fruit Company, to securing access to Persian Gulf oil and South Asian gas, Big Business is always ready to have the government protecting its interests. One notes again and again, however, that such security is paid for by taxpayers, while the profits go straight into the corporate coffers. But beware, Big Business; for as Bigioni warns: "Just as monopoly is the ruin of the free market, fascism is the ultimate degradation of liberal capitalism."

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SONS OF LIBERTY

Two hundred and thirty years ago, on July 2, 1776, a small group of terrorists betrayed their country and voted to commit any and all acts of terror and treason which they claimed would be necessary to separate from their government. Two days later, on July 4, they publicly declared their intention of betrayal and categorically stated their reasons for turning against their country—and threatened to murder or otherwise terrorize all who did not join with them.

They began their terrorist acts several years earlier. They burned, looted, tortured, murdered, kidnapped and held hostage representatives and supporters of their government. They ambushed and killed soldiers and policemen.

Several attempts at negotiations only increased their demands and brutality, until finally the previous year, in April 1775, they committed open rebellion by attacking government forces that had been sent to protect loyal citizens from their terrorism.

The terrorists cloaked their atrocities and treachery with a specious document that claimed the sanction of God and the sympathy of humanity. They named their perfidious document a Declaration of Independence.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER