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The Real Shakedown to Apologize for



By Marty Kaplan

If Barack Obama's extraction of \$20 billion from BP was — as Texas Republican Joe Barton called it — a “shakedown,” then what would Barton call the \$14.4 million he has extracted during his career from oil and gas interests, electric utilities, the health sector, chemical manufacturers, finance and all the other industries forking over cash to him?

Barton is the top Republican on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which has jurisdiction over drug companies, telecom, the automotive industry, mining, Hollywood and more. Both Republicans and Democrats on that committee rushed to distance themselves from Barton's “shakedown” apology. Yet in the 2010 election cycle alone, members of that committee have already received \$42 million from PACs and individuals. Their haul totaled \$66 million during the 2008 cycle. Is it any wonder that the nickname for the committee, on the Hill and on K Street, is “the honey pot”?

The day before Barton said it, the 115 House members of the Republican Study Committee gave Barton his talking points; in a statement, they denounced the \$20 billion escrow account that Obama forced BP to set up for the Deepwater Horizon disaster as a “Chicago-style political shakedown.” I wonder how they — or the 420 other members of Congress, of both parties - would label the Washington-style mutual extortion that goes on daily between members and lobbyists. Already more than \$800 million has poured into congressional PACs and campaign committees during this off-year election cycle. How many of those checks would be solicited, offered, written and bundled if the Capitol didn't harbor a legal protection racket?

Though some members of Congress may blow some of those Benjamins on the high life, or stuff them in the freezer, the irony is that they and their contributors are in turn the marks of yet another shakedown. The principal reason our lawmakers and candidates have to dial for dollars, suck up to contributors and teeter on the brink of quid pro quo is that they need the dough to buy campaign ads on television and radio.

The broadcast industry will take in more than \$4 billion this year for running political and issue ads. That money is as tainted by its dependence on the campaign finance system as the money flowing to narco cartels is by its dependence on drug addiction. Yet because our political system, unlike many other democracies, requires campaign airtime to be paid for by candidates rather than being provided to them for free, we practically guarantee that those candidates will be vulnerable to pressure from special interests and terrified of the consequences of committing random acts of integrity.

But it's even worse than that. The airwaves that the candidates are forced to rent, with money they are forced to humiliate and indenture themselves to acquire, are actually owned by the public. Television stations are licensed — for no fee — to act as the public's trustees, and what the stations do with that trusteeship is to propagate and profit handsomely from the congressional shakedown machine.

So we give television stations our broadcast spectrum for free, and they sell those airwaves to our political representatives, who in turn sell us out to special interests, in exchange for the money to pay for the deceitful, insulting and effective ads that put them and keep them in office.

Thanks to the judicial activists that George W. Bush put on the Supreme Court, the 2010 campaign season will be more awash than ever with money. Overturning a century of precedent, the court seized on the *Citizens United* case as an opportunity to declare that corporations can spend without limit on campaign ads. So not only can corporations threaten to withhold their contributions unless congressmen do their bidding, they can also intimidate our lawmakers by threatening to pay for their own ads attacking them.

I'm not ignoring the Democratic candidates and office holders complicit in and entrapped by this system, nor the donors who support their side of the aisle. The best that can be said about the bipartisanship of this dysfunction is that progressive organizations and individuals — and not just corporate and right-leaning funders and pressure groups — have a piece of the action. I'll also gladly stipulate that there are decent members of Congress — such as Russ Feingold, and the John McCain of yesteryear — who struggle against this racket and periodically mount quixotic attempts to reform it. But the iron triangle of money, media and special interests has so far resisted every challenge to its hegemony.

Watching the corrupting influence of that power during the 1990 election cycle, I was so enraged that I wrote a movie about it. Unaccountably, I managed to convince Disney to make and release it in 1992. I pitched it as the reverse of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, with Eddie Murphy in the anti-Jimmy Stewart role. It was about a smalltime con man who runs for Congress because, as Willie Sutton said when asked why he robbed banks, that's where the money is. Plus in Congress, the scams are legal. No matter how mercilessly you and your contributors shake down one another, in Washington they still call you *The Distinguished Gentleman*.

Elected to Congress, the Eddie Murphy character makes a bee line for the honey pot and scams his way onto the Energy and Commerce Committee. (Disney lawyers made me rename it Power and Industry, for fear of alienating the committee with jurisdiction over Hollywood.) By the end of the story, he inconveniently discovers a conscience and exposes how special interest money corrodes democracy. I know, I know — fat chance. But it's a studio comedy. It had to end happily. I only wish that were true of the real farce in Washington.

Cost of campaign '08

\$4,000,000,000

Who's paying for this election? Spending by candidates, parties and issue groups.

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