



**THE BLOG** 10/03/2011 12:14 pm ET | Updated Dec 03, 2011

## Occupy K Street



By Marty Kaplan

It's premature to give the Nobel Peace Prize to those Occupy Wall Street kids. But it also may be too soon to blow them off as clueless hipsters "with nowhere to go," as *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow did, calling the two weeks "a festival of frustrations, a collective venting session with little edge or urgency."

But there *is* somewhere for them to go — for us all to go — and it really does have enormous urgency.

Campaign finance reform.

I know. Dream on. Can you think of three words less likely to ignite a movement?

Even if you give it a snappy name — the *Times*' editorial page called it "sewer money" for a few years — it always polls way down on the list of issues that voters care about.

There's a lot of noise, but Occupy Wall Street sort of has a message. It's unfair that our generation has to pay for the mess Wall Street made. They have us over a barrel. If the banks screw up again, they can just hold the world financial system hostage, and we'll have no choice but to bail them out again. And then they'll give themselves more billion-dollar bonuses just to stick it to us. While the rich get unbelievably richer, the rest of us are struggling. We can't find jobs. Our prospects are bleak. This isn't how America is supposed to work. Something's got to change.

It's good that some people who are not in the Tea Party are also getting their voices heard. The more talk about reining in the excesses of a runaway financial services sector, the better. But I wish these protesters were more pissed that whatever changes they want, the political system they will task to bring them about is rigged for the rich. It's hard to imagine anything getting better without first ending the insane, obscene money chase at the heart of our democratic institutions.

But politicians know that as issues go, getting big money out of Washington, and out of state capitals, too, is about as sexy as steamed broccoli.

The \$6 billion it will take to run for office in 2012 has to come from someone, mainly in big bundles, and that someone isn't you or me. Those contributions come with strings attached. It's illegal to trade money for votes, but few politicians are stupid enough to get caught doing that. There's nothing illegal about privileging your big donors and their lobbyists with access to you and your staff. It's perfectly understandable that you say, and even believe, that you make decisions by weighing the merits, not the wallets.

But wouldn't it be bizarre if the insurance companies, securities and investment firms, real estate interests and commercial banks shoveling money into campaigns were doing so without expecting to get something for it? Drug companies, energy companies, telecoms and agribusiness aren't in it for generic good government; they're in it to get the legislative and regulatory outcomes they want. The same is true for labor. This is the interest-group system we have, and anyone too pure to play it is committing unilateral disarmament.

The money politicians raise, and the money raised by "independent" super PACs, doesn't go for golf trips or tanning beds. (Not usually, anyway.) Nor does what campaigns pay for travel, field staff and events amount to much. The paid media budget is what counts. It's the ads, stupid.

Campaigns spend three out of four dollars on media, which is a huge bonanza for TV and radio stations, and for political consulting firms. The latter not only get paid to produce the ads, they also take a nice slice for buying the airtime from the stations.

The stations, in turn, have a monopoly on the broadcast spectrum, which we — the owners of the spectrum — license to them in exchange for zero dollars, plus their straight-faced promise to serve the public interest.

For years now, conservative judicial activists on the Supreme Court have been striking down every legislative attempt to check the power of big money in politics. Their argument is that money is speech, so you can't restrict it.

Other democracies guarantee free airtime to candidates and put limits on ads and contributions. Not us.

Madison and Hamilton and the rest of the Constitution's framers created a genius of a system that has withstood the ages. But they could not have foreseen that there would one day be a de facto fourth branch of government, powered by big money in politics, and so they did not check that power with other power.

The Founders could not have imagined how technology and mass media could hypnotize a free people, and how the imperative to buy as much of that juju as you can would throw the whole system they created out of whack.

They could not have anticipated Karl Rove, Dick Armev or the Koch brothers. Or the National Association of Broadcasters, Roger Ailes, media illiteracy, civic illiteracy, entertainment-*über-alles*, the flight from reason, the collapse of moral consensus, and a Supreme Court confirmation process during which nominated Justices pledge allegiance to settled law without meaning it in the slightest.

Without campaign finance reform, the future belongs to the big dogs in the money game. I wish Occupy Wall Street would connect the dots between whatever their issues are and the mother of all issues.

Sure, there are slackers, tourists, naïfs, nutcases, opportunists and superannuated hippies among the people being pepper sprayed, dragnetted, or just showing up to say there's something's really wrong. That's the beauty of spontaneity — real democracy is messy. But something connects Occupy Wall Street with last summer's protesters in Madison, Wisconsin: the embryonic notion that the right does not own dissent in America.

No one knows if this whole thing will fizzle, or be the start of something. But if those kids turn their attention from how much money there is on Wall Street to where that money goes, they won't be called kids for long.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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