

Pol's Line Up at Big Money Trough

Money remains the nourishing milk of politics and both parties are lining up to get their fill by hobnobbing with the plutocrats who have the most to share. Whether the Koch Brothers or Vernon Jordan, the process of political corruption shows no sign of ending, Bill Moyers and Michael Winship lament.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

There shall be eternal summer in the grateful heart, a poet wrote, and as this year's summer winds toward its end and elections approach, gratitude is indeed what our politicians have flowing from that space where their hearts should be.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell is grateful to his friend Rick Anderson, the CEO of Delta Airlines. In late July, a week after McConnell treated him to breakfast in the Senate Dining Room, checks for McConnell's super PAC came winging their way from Anderson and his wife, as well as Delta's political action committee.

"This is the kind of rare access that most of us will never experience." That's Sheila Krumholz, executive director the Center for Responsive Politics, the campaign finance watchdog. She was talking to *National Journal* about Delta's boss dining in first class with McConnell: "Who makes a good enough breakfast companion for a sitting senator in a highly competitive reelection campaign to take time out of their busy day? It never hurts if the person can follow up with a donation, and all the better if it can be a sizable one."

McConnell's even more grateful to the Brothers Koch, and so are some other conservative Senate candidates, Tom Cotton of Arkansas, Joni Ernst of Iowa and Colorado's Cory Gardner. All of them gave command performances at the Kochs' secret annual retreat and strategy conference in June. Billionaires, millionaires and the officeholders and seekers who love the cash the superrich can offer gathered to celebrate the privileged.

By now you've heard about the surreptitiously recorded audiotape of remarks about campaign finance reform that McConnell made at that cozy confab. Thank goodness the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision leveled the playing field for corporate speech, he said: "The worst day of my political life was when President George W. Bush signed McCain-Feingold into law."

As Lauren Windsor at *The Nation* noted, "To put that in perspective, Mitch McConnell's thirty-five-year career in the Senate saw the 9/11 terrorist attacks that killed thousands of Americans, the 2008 housing meltdown that threatened the entire economy and Barack Obama's election, to cite a conservative bÃte

noire. But it was McCain-Feingold, the bill that banned soft money and unlimited donations to party committees, that constitutes the worst day of his political life.”

Yikes. But lest you think the largesse and gratitude are only piling up on the GOP side of the ledger, note that in July, Democratic fundraising committees raised more money than Republicans, this in the face of fears about dire results for Democrats come November. And whilst resort vacationing amongst the grandees on Martha’s Vineyard in August, President Obama had time amidst a world of crises to hang out and show his gratitude at an intimate birthday party for 150 nearest and dearest that Washington’s premier rainmaker and fixer Vernon Jordan threw for his wife, Ann, at the Farm Neck Golf Club.

Jordan, who like the Quakers of Philadelphia came to do good and did well, very well, has had a distinguished career in Washington as a civil rights leader and friend to presidents.

But the man who worked his way through college as chauffeur to an Atlanta banker and former mayor has become rich selling his influence in DC: Jordan is senior counsel at the powerful law firm of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, which recently became the most lucrative lobbying operation in America, earning \$8.6 million in the second quarter of 2014 and for the first time nosing out its closest K Street competitor, Squire Patton Boggs. (They did this by poaching many of Squire Patton Boggs’ health care industry clients.)

Akin Gump handles Beltway business for everyone from Amazon and AT&T to UPS and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (ah, that champion of the people!), along the way making generous campaign contributions hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth, to candidates of both parties.

Sadly, when it comes to lobbying and the lucrative lifestyle it affords, Barack Obama and his White House have devolved from an alleged zero-tolerance policy to acquiescence, an attitude of freewheeling *laissez-faire* that’s already lining the pockets of administration and campaign alumni and to hell with principle.

Campaigning in 2008, Obama proclaimed, “Make no mistake about what we’re up against. We’re up against the belief that it’s all right for lobbyists to dominate our government, that they are just part of the system in Washington. But we know that the undue influence of lobbyists is part of the problem, and this election is our chance to say that we are not going to let them stand in our way anymore.”

When he took office the following year, an executive order was signed banning registered lobbyists from the administration. But then exceptions were made, and

exceptions and exceptions. Just a couple of weeks ago, Politico calculated that “the Obama administration has hired about 70 previously registered corporate, trade association and for-hire lobbyists. And many of these former lobbyists work at the highest levels of government.”

What’s more, Mark Felsenthal at Reuters recently reported that, “President Barack Obama is loosening restrictions on lobbyists who want to serve on federal advisory boards.” There are more than a thousand such committees, room for plenty of mischief.

Now the revolving door has started spinning in the other direction, as the Obama campaign and administration insiders hear the siren call of green (and we don’t mean the environment). The website BuzzFeed pointed to Obama adviser and campaign manager David Plouffe’s deal with Uber, the on-demand car service doing its best to please yuppies while breaking the taxi unions.

Former White House press secretary Robert Gibbs and 2012 campaign press secretary Ben LaBolt are being paid to run a PR campaign against the teachers unions and Obama campaign manager Jim Messina is working for the re-election of Britain’s anti-union Prime Minister David Cameron and his Conservative Party. Talk about betraying your base!

“The key staff from Obama for America are translating their political success into personal economic success,” Communications Workers of America President Larry Cohen told *Buzzfeed*. “If anything this points to the need for the rest of us to build a movement that gets big money out of politics so the change we voted for in 2008 can become real.”

But how do we get that change when the candidate who promised it embraces the status quo of the well-heeled elite? After all, there were the Obamas and Bill and Hillary Clinton at Vernon Jordan’s party on the Vineyard, cheek to cheek with the CEOs of Xerox and American Express.

Chances are there were no working people at that shindig to present an opposing viewpoint (except for the hired help serving the pasta and surf and turf). But there were both wings of the Democratic Party: the corporate-center right-Wall Street-lobby wing (the Clintons and Jordan) and the putatively progressive wing (the President) hobnobbing in splendid surroundings with corporate poobahs as police battled residents in Ferguson, Missouri, refugees were being bombed in Iraq, fatal disease plagued West Africa and drought in America dried up 63 trillion gallons of water.

As the world burns, our political class whoops it up with the plutocracy, whether in Martha’s Vineyard or at the Kochs’ posh retreat in southern

California. They raise their champagne toasts, quietly reinforce their networks and connections, and then return to the “mainland” and the pretense of once again attending to the people’s business, all the while servicing the accounts that pay the campaign bills and nourish all those inside deals, tax breaks, subsidies, contracts, that many would call corruption but Chief Justice John Roberts says are merely gratitude.

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