

# Panicked Over the Trump Phenomenon

America's conservative establishment is in panic mode as renegade billionaire Donald Trump continues to dominate the Republican presidential race and thumb his nose at the GOP donor class, which is alarmed that all its money might not dictate the outcome this time, as Bill Moyers and Michael Winship write.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

David Brooks is a worried man. Like many establishment Republicans, the conservative columnist for *The New York Times* sees the barbarians pouring through the gates and fears for both his party and the republic. Hail, Trump! Hail, Cruz! It's enough to send a sober centrist dashing through the Forum in search of a cudgel.

There was Brooks on a recent edition of the *PBS NewsHour*, his angst spilling out across the airwaves like fog from a nightmare: "I wish we had gray men in suits," he told Judy Woodruff, conjuring in some nostalgia-minded the courtly cabal of well-heeled businessmen who drafted war hero Dwight D. Eisenhower to run for president as a Republican.

"We don't have that," Brooks continued. "But the donor class could do something."

Ah, yes. The donor class! Those deep pockets flung open even wider by the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision just six years ago, permitting the richest of the rich to pour even more of their fortunes into control of our electoral process. Brooks was saying openly what many of them are thinking privately: Only we can save the party from the megalomania of Donald Trump and Ted Cruz and protect our precious status quo.

How best to do this? Brooks suggested that panicked "state legislators who are Republicans, congressmen, senators, local committeemen" should join with the donors "so they don't send the party into suicide."

Makes sense, many of those very same folks already are deep in hock to the donors, their contributions often laundered via entities with high-falutin' names ALEC, for one, the American Legislative Exchange Council that lends a helping corporate hand to legislators eager to write favorable laws, provide tax breaks, dismember public employee unions and privatize government services.

As Brooks' vision of a coup unfolded, the donors and their allies would handpick their candidate, "winnowing the field." He reiterated his *NewsHour* lamentations with a *New York Times* column headlined "Time for a Republican Conspiracy!"

So let's get this straight: One of the most prominent of Republican elites in the country, who has even been touted as President Obama's "favorite pundit" (we're not making this up!), is calling on the donor class to rescue the party from the rabble. Game's over, voters: The oligarchs will decide this election.

For that's what they are: a small, unbelievably wealthy group of the powerful and privileged who already have a tighter grip on our nation, its government, politics and economy than the rapacious robber barons of our first Gilded Age. Brooks and like-minded elites believe they must be trusted to do the right thing. Let them be the Deciderers.

Count billionaire Charles Koch among them. He recently told Stephen Foley of the *Financial Times* that he was "disappointed" by the current crop of Republican presidential candidates and especially critical of Trump and Cruz. "It is hard for me to get a high level of enthusiasm," he said, "because the things I'm passionate about and I think this country urgently needs aren't being addressed."

Koch said that he and his well-oiled machine had given each of the candidates a list of issues it wants addressed but "it doesn't seem to faze them much. You'd think we could have more influence." In other words, if you're going to spend \$900 million on this election, as Koch and his cronies plan to do, shouldn't you get what you paid for?

Yes, we know: money can't always buy an election. If it could, Mitt Romney would just be finishing his first term as president. Or Jeb! Bush, whose super PAC runneth over with \$100 million in cash, would be leading the pack. So far he's not even been able to get his silver foot on the first rung of the ladder.

But to the oligarchs, bankrolling an election campaign isn't all that it's about. They contribute now for the day when the electioneering is over and the governing resumes. That's when their investment really begins to pay off.

In the words of the veteran Washington insider Jared Bernstein, senior fellow at the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities and former chief economic advisor to Joe Biden, "There's this notion that the wealthy use their money to buy politicians; more accurately, it's that they can buy policy."

Environmental policy, for example, when it comes to energy moguls like the Kochs. And tax policy. Especially tax policy.

Bernstein was quoted in one of the most important stories of 2015 an investigation by *The New York Times* into how tax policy gets written. Unfortunately, this complex but essential report appeared between Christmas and New Year's and failed to get the attention it deserves. Here's the heart of it:

“With inequality at its highest levels in nearly a century and public debate rising over whether the government should respond to it through higher taxes on the wealthy, the very richest Americans have financed a sophisticated and astonishingly effective apparatus for shielding their fortunes. Some call it the ‘income defense industry,’ consisting of a high-priced phalanx of lawyers, estate planners, lobbyists and anti-tax activists who exploit and defend a dizzying array of tax maneuvers, virtually none of them available to taxpayers of more modest means.

“Operating largely out of public view, in tax court, through arcane legislative provisions and in private negotiations with the Internal Revenue Service, the wealthy have used their influence to steadily whittle away at the government’s ability to tax them. The effect has been to create a kind of private tax system, catering to only several thousand Americans.”

That “private tax system” couldn’t have happened without compliant politicians elected to office by generous support from the donor class. As the right-wing billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife put it: “Isn’t it grand how tax law gets written?”

Sam Pizzigati knows how it happens. He’s been watching the process for years from his perch as editor of the monthly newsletter *Too Much!* Reminding us in a recent report that “America’s 20 richest people, a group that could fit nicely in a Gulfstream luxury private jet, now own more wealth than the bottom half of the American population combined, a total of 152 million people,” Pizzigati concludes that one reason these and other of America’s rich have amassed such large fortunes is that “the federal tax rate on income in the top tax bracket has sunk sharply over recent decades.”

So here’s the real value of all that campaign cash and lobbying largesse: underwriting a willingness among legislators and government officials to bend the rules, slip in the necessary loopholes and look the other way when it comes time for the rich to hide their fortunes.

This is the status quo to which the donors cling so tightly and clutch their pearls at the prospect of losing. But now, with Trump seemingly ascendant, some of those who might have been relied on to support a donor revolt are betraying Brooks’s call for a coup, weakening in their resolve and beginning to think that maybe the short-fingered vulgarian isn’t such a bad idea. Despite his populist brayings, they hope, he might well be brought into their alliance.

Which brings to mind a line from the movie version of the musical *Cabaret*. In pre-Third Reich Germany, the decadent Baron Maximilian von Heune is talking with the British writer Brian Roberts, explaining why the elite have allowed this

Hitler fellow to get a jackboot in the door.

“The Nazis are just a gang of stupid hooligans, but they do serve a purpose,” he says. “Let them get rid of the Communists. Later we’ll be able to control them.”

We all know how well that turned out.

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