The Man Who Ruined Politics

Wall Street Journal Editorial

This selection first appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, November 16, 1995, p. A20. Reprinted with permission of the Wall Street Journal It is the do-gooders who want to drive money out of politics who are, says this *Wall Street Journal* editorial, doing the most damage—leaving candidates with huge sums to raise in small amounts and taking away the right of wealthy individuals to finance candidates of their choice instead of their own campaigns. A year before the 1996 general elections, significant participants in the electoral process had already been defeated by fund-raising problems and intricacies.

So Colin Powell is not running for president. Neither is Jack Kemp, Bill Bradley, Dick Cheney, Sam Nunn, or William Bennett. Voters are left with the likely choice between two rather tired war horses, Bill Clinton and Bob Dole. No other Democrat is challenging an obviously vulnerable incumbent, and Republican contenders such as Phil Gramm, Pat Buchanan, and Lamar Alexander hover in single digits. In this second rank we now also have millionaire publisher Steve Forbes, who started from nowhere to grab the first rung on the ladder. And, of course, billionaire Ross Perot still haunts the scene.

If you don't like the remaining field, blame Fred Wertheimer and Common Cause, the organization he until recently ran and still animates, the principal architects of the cockamamie financial gauntlet we inflict on our potential leaders. Common Cause is point-lobby for the goo-goos, that is, the earnest folks always trying to jigger the rules to ensure good government. One of their conceits is that money is the root of all political evil, so they seek salvation in the Sisyphean task of eliminating its influence. The chief result of this is a Fred Wertheimer rule outlawing individual political contributions of more than $1,000 and a bureaucracy called the Federal Election Commission to count angels on pinheads in deciding, for example, what counts as a contribution.

A serious presidential campaign is likely to cost $20 million. This means a potential president has to start by persuading 20,000 different people to pony up a grand. Take an arbitrary but probably generous hit rate of 5 percent, and he (or she) has to pass the tin cup 400,000 times. Admittedly these numbers oversimplify, but they give you the idea. Mr. Wertheimer's brainstorm means fund-raising is so consuming that candidates have no time for anything else. Even more important, it is a process virtually designed to drain a potential president of any residue of self-respect.

This may not be the only thing General Powell means when he says running requires a fire he does not yet feel, but it is certainly a big one. His adviser Richard Armitage explicitly said, "Colin Powell going out and asking people for money and then spending all that money wasn't attractive." Mr. Kemp was similarly explicit in not wanting to undertake the fund-raising exercise, and it no doubt inhibited Mr. Cheney as well. On the Democratic side, finding 20,000 donors to challenge an incumbent is an even more daunting challenge; Senator Bradley and Senator Nunn decided to quit rather than fight.

It is no accident that the dropouts are precisely the types the goo-goo crowd would like to keep in politics, which is to say, those motivated by principle instead of sheer ambition. In 1988, to take an earlier example, the exploratory field included Don Rumsfeld, who had been a congressman, White House chief of staff, defense secretary, and a spectacularly successful corporate chief executive. But he threw in the towel rather than run up possibly unpayable debts—"as a matter of principle, I will not run on a deficit."

The doleful effect of such limitations were entirely predictable; indeed, they were predicted right here. As early as 1976, when the Supreme Court partly upheld the 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act, we wrote that the law "will probably act like the Frankenstein's monster it truly is. It will be awfully hard to kill, and the more you wound it, the more havoc it will create." In the face of hard experience, of course, the goo-goos prescribe more of the same, to the point where "campaign finance reform" has become the Holy Grail.

To be fair, the Wertheimer coven hasn't had its way entirely. The logic of the goo-goo impulse is public financing of political campaigns, an idea mostly hooted down by the same taxpayers who eagerly embrace term limits—though in presidential campaigns public finance serves as the carrot getting candidates to accept the FEC nit-picking. And the Supreme Court, while backing away from the obvious conclusion that limiting political expenditures is *prima facie* an infringement of free speech, couldn't bring itself to say someone can't spend his own money on his own campaign.

Thus the millionaire's loophole. Mr. Perot was able to use his billions to confuse the last presidential elections, going in, out, and back in at will. So long as he doesn't accept public money, he can spend as he likes.

Mr. Forbes is an even more interesting case, since he was chairman of Empower America, the political roost of both Mr. Kemp and Mr. Bennett. Who would have guessed a year ago, the latter asks, that the Empower America candidate would be Steve Forbes. On the issues Mr. Forbes is perhaps an even better candidate than his colleagues—backing term limits where Mr. Kemp opposes them, for example—and without his message his money wouldn't do much good. Still, to have a better chance at ultimately winning, it would have been logical for him to bankroll one of his better-known colleagues. But that's against the law, thanks to Mr. Wertheimer, so Mr. Forbes has to hit the stump himself.

With widespread disaffection with the current field, and especially in the wake of the Powell withdrawal, the lunacy of the current rules is coming to be recognized. The emperor has no clothes, think tank scholars are starting to say—notably Bradley A. Smith of the Cato Institute, whose views were published here October 6. Following Mr. Smith, Newt Gingrich said last weekend we don't spend too much on political campaigns but too little. This heresy was applauded this week by columnist

David Broder, which may herald a breakthrough in goo-goo sentiment itself.

Formidable special interests, of course, remain opposed to change in the current rules. Notably political incumbents, who want campaigns kept as quiet as possible and have learned to milk other special interests who want access. So rather than having some maverick millionaire funding his pet candidate on reasons that might relate to ideas and issues, we have all parties funded by Dwayne Andreas and his sisters and his cousins and his aunts, better to protect ethanol subsidies. Finally, of course, we have Mr. Perot and his United We Stand hell-bent for further restrictions on campaign finance, better to protect the political process for billionaires like himself.

Not so, thankfully, Mr. Forbes, who sees campaign spending limits as an incumbent protection device. He recently told an Iowa audience, "If Congress abolished the franking privilege, then I'd be impressed." Lift the caps on giving and spending, but make sure everything is disclosed, he says. "That's real reform."