

"We're all corrupt," says Republican contender in the US election sweepstakes

Martin McLaughlin
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Last week Elizabeth Dole announced she was ending her bid for the Republican presidential race because she could not compete financially with Texas Governor George W. Bush or publishing heir Steve Forbes. The withdrawal of this long-time fixture within the Republican Party, whose right-wing politics are virtually indistinguishable from those of the other presidential aspirants, is significant only for what it says about the transparent process by which big money purchases candidates, manipulates elections and propels its hirelings into office.

The departure of Dole, wife of the 1996 Republican nominee and herself a cabinet secretary under both Reagan and Bush, means that half of the announced Republican candidates for the presidential nomination have withdrawn from the contest months before the first primary election. In addition to Dole, three other candidates—Congressman John Kasich, former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander, former Vice President Dan Quayle—have quit the race citing the insurmountable fundraising lead of the son of former President Bush.

Two others, New Hampshire Senator Robert Smith and media pundit Patrick Buchanan, have bolted the Republican Party on the grounds that it is insufficiently right-wing. Buchanan has set an October 25 speech to announce his plans to seek the presidential nomination of the Reform Party.

Dole was running second to Bush in national opinion polls, although well behind, and led Vice President Gore in polls testing a possible general election contest. But since January 1 she had raised a “mere” \$4.7 million, while Bush had accumulated \$56 million. With the compressed February-March primary campaign fast approaching, she was left with \$860,000 in cash, compared to Bush's \$37.7 million war chest, the biggest ever, and Forbes' essentially unlimited access to his private fortune, estimated at over \$600 million.

The winnowing of the Republican field, months before any voter has a say, is one indication of the degree to which the political process in America has become divorced from any semblance of democracy. Democratic and Republican politicians have always competed for the favor of corporate interests, and have been committed to defend the profit system as a whole. But the corporate domination of both parties has become increasingly shameless. As the *New York Times* admitted, in its report on Dole's pullout: “Her withdrawal came before a single ballot had been cast—in itself a searing statement about the overriding importance of money in politics.”

Big money rules in the Democratic nomination contest as much as in the Republican. Former Senator Bill Bradley is being promoted as a credible challenger to Vice President Gore, not because of any surge in popular support—no votes will be cast until late January—but because of a surge in his fundraising. The Bradley campaign has collected \$19 million in campaign contributions this year, compared to \$24 million for Gore, and each candidate has about \$10 million in cash to expend on advertising during the first month of primaries.

On the same day as Dole's announcement, the Senate voted to kill the McCain-Feingold bill, which would have banned “soft money” contributions to political parties. The vote concluded a three-day debate that even by the standards of the US Senate reached new heights of cynicism.

Soft money contributions, which are unregulated, have become one of the principal means of evading limitations on campaign contributions adopted in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s. Corporations, wealthy individuals and union political action committees can legally give no more than \$1,000 apiece to specific candidates, but can funnel unlimited amounts of money to the Republican National Committee, its Democratic counterpart, and the rival House and Senate campaign

committees of each party.

In 1996 some \$262 million in soft money flowed into the six major committees of the Republican and Democratic parties, a sum which is expected to double in the 2000 campaign. Republican and Democratic committees more than doubled their fundraising in the first half of 1999, compared to the same period in 1995, during the last presidential election cycle. The largest contributions came from the telecommunications industry, investment banking, real estate, insurance, transportation and the drug industry.

In the course of the Senate debate, opponents of McCain-Feingold, led by Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, a longtime front man for the tobacco companies, sought to posture as defenders of "free speech." They opposed any limitation on the right of "corporate citizens" to "communicate" with the public and with elected officials.

The Democrats supported the bill, while at the same time intensifying their own efforts to raise as much soft money as possible. The House Democratic Campaign Committee, headed by Rep. Patrick Kennedy of Rhode Island, has launched a \$100,000 club to honor donors who give that amount or more to fuel their campaign to retake control of the House of Representatives next year. Soft money donations to the Democrats are up 373 percent over the last two years, although the Republicans still collect the majority of such campaign funds.

Senator John McCain, the bill's cosponsor, called the current system of campaign financing "nothing less than an elaborate influence-peddling scheme in which both parties conspire to stay in office by selling the country to the highest bidder." McConnell took umbrage. "The question is, who is corrupted?" he asked. "How can there be corruption unless someone is corrupted? You can't say the gang is corrupt but none of the gangsters are." McCain declined to name any names, but his admission that "we're all corrupt" is a noteworthy acknowledgment of the state of affairs in American politics.

McCain has centered his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination on the issue of unregulated campaign contributions, and has drawn generally admiring notices in the media for his efforts, although he still trails Bush by a wide margin. His efforts and the hue and cry by such newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reveal a growing concern in ruling circles that the American political system is becoming increasingly discredited in the eyes of the public.

The McCain-Feingold bill is itself nothing but the thinnest of fig leaves. It would ban one particular form of

corporate influence-buying, while leaving the overall system of big business domination of politics untouched. Indeed, the purpose of such gestures of political "reform" is to make cosmetic improvements which bolster illusions in the two capitalist parties.

In the meantime, instances of congressional votes in return for cash donations are reported in the press virtually every week. In one case detailed in the *Washington Post* on October 22, the airline industry blocked a threatened "Airline Passengers Bill of Rights." McCain himself watered down legislation which had been proposed in response to growing complaints of overbooking of seats, after large campaign contributions were made to both the Republican and Democratic Senate campaign committees.

The connection between the political system and the interests of the giant corporations and banks transcends the specifics of campaign contributions. Both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party developed historically as defenders of the interests of the capitalist class. Whatever the promises made to other social layers to obtain their votes, both parties remain unalterably committed to the defense of the profit system and the privileged elite which owns the vast bulk of society's wealth.

Under conditions of extreme social inequality and the dismantling of government-run social programs, the pretense that a political system controlled by the wealthiest 1 percent represents the American people is becoming increasingly threadbare.

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