

Washington inaugural celebrations: corporate America welcomes Bush

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20 January 2001

Corporate America has shelled out nearly \$40 million—the largest amount ever—to pay for the lavish festivities in Washington surrounding Saturday's inauguration of George W. Bush. The list of corporations and wealthy individuals which have given donations of \$100,000 reads like a who's who of the industries whose huge financial interests will be directly affected by government decisions and regulations issued over the next few years.

The corporations involved in this shameless buying of political influence include auto companies pressing for relief on fuel efficiency and safety regulations, energy giants pressing for new drilling opportunities on public lands, and companies facing anti-trust problems, such as Microsoft, America Online and American Airlines.

With the result of the election delayed by the disputed outcome in Florida the Presidential Inauguration Committee was forced to raise more than \$30 million in 31 days, leaving, as committee officials said, no time for fooling around with small-dollar fundraising. Most of the cash came from corporations and wealthy individuals who donated over \$100,000 each for "Inaugural Underwriter" packages that include 10 tickets to each of several events—the candlelight dinner, the swearing-in, the parade, the nine balls and the Sunday service at the National Cathedral.

The celebrations began Thursday night with General Motors, Ford and several Washington law firms holding lavish private parties for incoming administration officials. GM hosted a party on the rooftop terrace of the Kennedy Center to honor Andrew Card, Bush's new chief of staff and the former chief Washington lobbyist for the world's largest car company. Ford Motor Company will put on its own party Saturday night at the Phillips Collection, hosted by CEO Jacques Nasser.

For the US automakers—whose claims they could regulate themselves on safety have been discredited in the recent Ford-Firestone recall—the incoming Republican administration has arrived none too soon. Though the industry gave campaign donations to both Bush and Democratic candidate Al Gore, contributions went more

than 10-1 to Bush, who received \$1.2 million.

"There's a sense that Bush is going to understand how much the industry has done in the way of safety and environmental advances and be sensitive to not overburdening us," Gloria Bergquist, an auto industry spokesperson told the *Wall Street Journal*. Bush, she said, "is going to understand that cost is going to have to be one of the factors in deciding regulations."

More than 45 corporations wrote five-digit checks, including BP Amoco, Enron and Texaco, for events honoring Texans. This includes Friday night's "Black Tie 'N' Boots Inaugural Ball" put on by the Texas State Society and featuring performers Lyle Lovett and Tanya Tucker and Dallas Cowboy quarterback Troy Aikman. The official news release boasts that it will be "the only inaugural ball where guests can have their picture made with a 2,500-pound Brahmin bull or sitting in the cockpit of a fighter jet." The caterers estimate they will serve "7,000 pounds of Texas brisket, 6,000 pounds of smoked ham, 60,000 pieces of jumbo shrimp and 1,200 pounds of peach cobbler."

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, 168 individuals or corporations donated \$100,000 each to the inauguration. A number of corporations circumvented the Inaugural Committee's \$100,000 cap on donations by making contributions both in the name of the corporate entity, as well as from individual executives or subsidiaries. The single biggest contributor to the Bush inaugural committee is the Marriott Corporation, which gave \$750,000 through a series of corporate bodies.

Enron, a major energy company, donated \$100,000 to the committee, as did its chairman Kenneth Lay, who is coincidentally a Bush transition adviser. The company gave a total of \$310,000 to the Bush campaign. Other energy companies, anxious to push their agenda of utility deregulation, tax relief and oil drilling in Alaska, also donated \$100,000 each, including Conoco, Hunt Oil, Chevron, ExxonMobil and the Southern Energy Company.

Donald Carty, CEO of Texas-based American Airlines, which is seeking administration approval for its merger with

TWA and US Airways, gave \$100,000 to the inauguration and \$5,000 to the Bush Florida recount effort. Carty is also one of the Bush Pioneers, an exclusive club of individual donors who give at least \$100,000. Several other corporations each gave \$100,000 or more for the festivities. This included a group of sports team owners from the Los Angeles Dodgers, the Washington Redskins, the New Orleans Saints, as well as Major League Baseball, who are looking for public subsidies for sports arenas or to protect their favorable tax status.

Executives from Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Phillip Morris and US Tobacco each gave \$100,000 as did pharmaceutical companies Abbott Laboratories, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Pfizer and others concerned over a Medicare drug program. Also included in this club were General Electric, AT&T and Alcoa. Paul O'Neill, Bush's nominee for treasury secretary, is the former CEO of Alcoa and recently departed from the aluminum company with \$59 million in stock options and salary.

The financial security and investment industry gave the most towards the inauguration, with over \$2 million in donations. This industry has made hundreds of billions during the past stock market boom and seeks to make billions more out of the Bush tax cut plan.

In addition to the balls, the inauguration committee will be the host of several nightly dinners at exclusive restaurants where corporations will pay \$25,000 a table. "This is the cost of doing business in Washington," James Albertine, president of the American League of Lobbyists, told the *New York Times*. "It is very important to get an introduction to the new members of Congress and the new administration and to get in front of them. You can send your money to the inaugural committee or you can throw your own reception. It's whatever gets the biggest bang for your buck."

One of the biggest donors was Najad Fares, who with his company, the Houston-based Link Group, gave \$200,000. Fares is the son of the deputy prime minister of Lebanon, Issam Fares, who has close ties to the elder George Bush and officials from his administration, like James Baker, who pursued business interests in the Middle East after the Gulf War. The Fares family also financed a pre-election lecture by General Colin Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the war against Iraq.

Many of these same corporations contributed to the Clinton and Gore administration over the last eight years. The Clinton inauguration in 1993 raised \$33 million and \$23.7 million in 1997. Commenting on the similarity of the donors' list for both Democratic and Republican administrations, Larry Makinson from the Center for Responsive Politics said, "These are not new faces. They have left their fingerprints from Day 1 and they are people

that George W. Bush and his administration will take care of in the next four years." The center's Steve Weiss told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The general public, which cannot give these large donations, does not have access to the next president or his advisors. Money buys you access to the president and those who are shaping the policies."

In addition to the balls and private parties there are other amenities for the wealthy elite partying in Washington this weekend. The most privileged will get to stay at the Four Seasons hotel, which is offering its "Classic American Liberty Package." For \$150,000 two guests get to spend five nights in the hotel's presidential suite plus two other five-night stays at its hotels in Philadelphia and New York.

The Ritz Carlton-Washington is also offering a \$150,000 package. The deal begins before the traveler leaves when a butler arrives at your home to fold and pack your cloths in \$20,000 worth of new luggage included with the deal, before you are taken to an airport in a limousine and flown on a private jet to Washington.

For others, a stay at the St. Regis is only \$100,000, of which half is tax deductible. The St. Regis package includes limousine service for the entire stay and breakfast with TV personality Larry King.

For those on a tighter budget, who are just attending a formal dinner and ball, the combined cost of hotel, air travel, limousine service, gowns, tuxedos, 10-gallon hats and yellow roses can be \$10,000-20,000 for the weekend, an amount equal to or more than the yearly wages of thousands of low-paid workers in Washington, DC.

The corporate executives, lobbyists and big business politicians celebrating Bush's ascension to power will be cordoned off from the social misery that surrounds them in the nation's capital, one of the poorest city's in the US. In preparation for the inauguration police have driven away homeless people, four of whom have frozen to death on the city's streets this winter.

One of the largest single costs for this weekend's events—over \$9 million—is going for security, including the massive police operations designed to isolate and contain the thousands of protesters expected on Inauguration Day. These protests, however, will only be a small expression of the social anger and political opposition that will inevitably develop against this government and the wealthy elite it speaks for.



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