

The “scramble for Hollywood:” the Democratic Party and entertainment industry liberals

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The squabble that erupted this week between the camps of Democratic Party senators and presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois might best be described as a skirmish in the “scramble for Hollywood.”

The dispute brought to the foreground a sordid reality of contemporary American politics: the general hustling for cash from corporate contributors and wealthy donors that dominates US election campaigns, and the role, in particular, of studio executives and other major figures in Hollywood in funneling tens of millions of dollars to the Democratic Party.

Clinton and Obama, along with the other Democrats, are presently battling over Hollywood’s treasure trove of campaign funds.

As everyone in America knows and the media brazenly acknowledges, winning the presidential nomination of one of the two major parties depends in large measure on collecting more money than any of your rivals. Success in fund-raising is the principal indication that you are a “serious” candidate. It both confirms that you have the backing of powerful corporate and financial figures, the people who count, and encourages further support from these circles.

American politicians spend the bulk of their time raising cash for their campaigns. The chairman of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) predicted in December that the 2008 presidential race would cost \$1 billion. FEC Chairman Michael E. Toner told the *Washington Times*, “The 2008 presidential election will be the longest and most expensive in United States history.”

Toner told the newspaper that the “entry level” for getting into the presidential nomination campaign as a serious contender would be \$100 million by the end of 2007. “A candidate who hasn’t raised that much by then will not be taken seriously by potential major donors or by the press,” he said.

During the Presidents’ Day recess of Congress this week, many politicians found themselves fund-raising in southern California. Democratic House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland, Senator Barbara Boxer of California, Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois and Senator Joseph Biden, another presidential hopeful, were among those who held one or more events in the Los Angeles area.

Obama’s campaign grabbed the spotlight by organizing a \$2,300-per-ticket Beverly Hills reception Tuesday evening, the most significant event this month, attended by film stars, studio executives and others. The affair raised some \$1.3 million.

Jennifer Aniston, Ben Stiller, Eddie Murphy, Morgan Freeman, George Clooney, Barbra Streisand, Ron Howard and Dixie Chicks’ lead singer Natalie Maines were reportedly among those who attended. Obama, according to press reports, told the mostly film industry crowd, “Don’t sell yourself short. You are the storytellers of our age.”

The Hillary Clinton-Obama dispute broke out the following day after remarks made by the host of the event, film and recording mogul David Geffen (along with Steven Spielberg and Jeffrey Katzenberg, one of the founders of DreamWorks SKG), appeared in Maureen Dowd’s column in the *New York Times*. Geffen, who raised \$18 million for Bill Clinton during his presidency, has thrown his support and considerable influence behind the Illinois junior senator and rival of Hillary Clinton. Geffen asserted that Hillary Clinton was “overproduced and overscripted,” according to Dowd. He criticized her for not apologizing for her 2002 vote in support of the Iraq war.

Dowd wrote that relations between Geffen and the Clintons ruptured in 2001, when the president, during his last hours in office, pardoned international commodities trader Marc Rich while refusing to free political prisoner Leonard Peltier, the American Indian Movement leader who was framed up for the deaths of two FBI agents in 1977.

Geffen commented, “Yet another time when the Clintons were unwilling to stand for the things that they genuinely believe in. Everybody in politics lies, but they do it with such ease, it’s troubling.”

The Clinton camp quickly shot back and the battle of press releases was on.

Bill and Hillary Clinton have raised enormous amounts of money in the past decade or more in Hollywood, and the prospect of Obama narrowing their share of the available cash obviously created concern. The Clintons, with longstanding relationships to many figures in the entertainment industry, are not about to be elbowed out.

On March 24, supermarket billionaire Ronald Burkle is holding an event for Hillary Clinton at his forty-room, twenty-six-bathroom Beverly Hills mansion, which may well exceed the Obama event in the amount of money raised. (The *Washington Times* article quoted one Democratic Party official who said, “Hillary can raise \$350 [million] for the primary [campaign] and another \$250 [million] for the general [election].”)

The loyalties of numerous Hollywood executives and producers are currently being tested. Many are writing checks for both Obama and Clinton, and, in some cases, for other candidates as well, including former Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards. Spielberg (who helped Geffen host the Obama party, but who will organize an event for Clinton too), Streisand and Norman Lear, for example, apparently fall into that category.

The stakes are high for the Democratic candidates. According to Eric Alterman in the September 2004 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*, “During the 2000 election cycle, zip-code areas on average yielded slightly more than \$35,000 in political contributions, while residents of Beverly Hills, 90210, ponied up slightly more than \$6.2 million. In the same year Pacific Palisades, Bel Air, and Brentwood were each good for \$1.7 million to \$3.3 million.

"In 2002 entertainment ranked first among all industries funding Democratic Party committees, and roughly 80 percent of the industry's party contributions went to Democratic candidates and committees; just 20 percent went to the Republican Party. From 1989 up to the start of the current election cycle Hollywood had given the party nearly \$100 million for federal elections alone—close to the \$114 million Republicans received from their friends in the oil and gas industries. Together with organized labor and the trial bar, Hollywood is now one of the three pillars of the Democrats' financial structure."

Figures released by the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) suggest that the television, film and music industry contributed some \$56 million to the two major parties during the 2004 and 2006 election cycles, two-thirds of which (some \$37 million) went to the Democrats. The entertainment industry ranked 11th in donations in 2004 and 2006 among the 80 industries analyzed by the CRP, down from 7th in 2002.

The Hollywood elite is not a monolith. Film studio and entertainment industry executives, leaders of the handful of enormous conglomerates that largely determine what Americans and much of the world see on cinema and television screens and listen to on CD and radio, belong to the same financial-corporate oligarchy that has a stranglehold over every aspect of American life. These are multi-millionaires and billionaires who have a very large say in determining who should hold political office and protect their interests.

The Center for Responsive Politics notes that the film industry has specific issues which it pursues with the politicians it helps bankroll, including "trade, copyright protection and free speech concerns." The CRP continues, "While many of the big-name stars give mainly for ideological reasons, the corporate executives who run the industry take a more pragmatic view in dispensing their campaign dollars. Foreign trade—including trade with controversial countries such as China—is crucial to the industry's long-term success, as entertainment has become one of the nation's biggest exports.

"A perennial concern of the industry is copyright protection, particularly as it concerns the practice of sharing music and video files via the Internet. The Motion Picture Association of America, whose members are fed up with the illegal distribution of movies via the Internet, has been a key player in the push to toughen anti-piracy laws."

The film industry executives lean toward the Democrats for cultural and political reasons. The success of their business in this day and age depends on a certain "permissiveness" in the social atmosphere. The dominance of the Christian Right, for example, would not be helpful to those often attempting to market violence and sexual suggestiveness, nor would it accord with the temperaments and lifestyles of writers, directors, actors and musicians by and large.

The issues of foreign trade and anti-piracy are not small ones. The Democratic Party, which includes the trade union bureaucracy as one of its constituent elements, tends to be more sympathetic to protectionist and economic nationalist policies.

In early February, a delegation from the film industry, including Clint Eastwood and Will Smith, appeared in Washington to lobby the new Democratic-controlled Congress, according to the *New York Times*, on behalf of "its agenda of fighting piracy, obtaining new tax advantages and reining in movie and television production from going abroad."

Typical of the day's events, the *Times* reported, "was Representative Charles Rangel [of New York], the new Ways and Means chairman, promising to press the Bush administration to take a tougher line in trade talks with Russia, China and other countries concerning rampant piracy or barriers to Hollywood movies."

The economic concerns of studio chiefs and their general political inclinations merge and overlap with the outlook of the extremely well-heeled layers who make up the upper echelons of the film and music industry in Hollywood and organize support for the Democratic

Party—figures like Geffen, Spielberg, Streisand, Rob Reiner, Laurie David (producer-comic Larry David's wife) and others.

No doubt, in many cases, a sincere desire to see social reform and improve the general conditions of life motivates such people in supporting liberal politicians, as well as environmental and charitable causes. The war in Iraq and the criminality of the Bush administration have clearly disturbed many in Hollywood. There has been a certain change in the tone of American filmmaking over the past several years.

However, this is a privileged layer that sees the world and the political process in the US through a thick haze. Its particular brand of liberalism is shaped by a terrible distance from the working population and its concerns, the degree to which it is shielded from everyday life *in general* by managers, assistants and intermediaries of every sort, and its essential satisfaction with its own lot.

Fairly typical was the response Streisand posted on her web site to the November 2006 electoral victory of the Democrats, in which she thanked the population "for raising your voices by coming out to vote." She continued, "My faith in the American public has been restored. Harry Truman once said to the people 'I wonder how many times you have to be hit on the head before you find out who's hitting you.' Well, on November 7, 2006 the people finally found out. Our great country showed that it has the power to correct itself through the election process. Our votes changed the unequal and unhealthy balance of power that has led this country astray for the past 6 years. The public is tired of the ugliness and the mean spiritedness. The American people want to come together and they want our leaders to work together to finally accomplish the people's business."

For such individuals, the US population is essentially a mystery, most often a malevolent or menacing one. Pleased with their own economic situation, they have no real sense of the devastation that has been wrought by the closure of factories, the destruction of decent-paying jobs and the gutting of social programs—often at the hands of Democratic politicians like Bill Clinton—and the resulting levels of frustration and outrage with both Republican and Democratic politicians that widely prevail.

The hypocrisy, emptiness and anti-working class character of Democratic policy over the past several decades, which has stunned or even driven into the arms of right-wing demagogues considerable numbers of people, is a closed book to the film and entertainment industry liberals. How else to explain the attraction of a Clinton, an Obama or an Edwards, who promise more of the same?

The continued flow of Hollywood cash to the Democrats, whatever the motives or intentions of its organizers, is a deeply reactionary fact of American political life.



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