

Republican presidential hopefuls begin the “money primary”

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A series of meetings over four days in Las Vegas, Nevada amounted to the kickoff of the contest for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, with five hopefuls auditioning before billionaire Sheldon Adelson, the single biggest campaign donor in 2012, as well as speaking at the spring meeting of the Republican Jewish Coalition, held at Adelson’s Venetian casino and hotel.

The five presidential hopefuls who attended the Las Vegas event included three governors, Chris Christie of New Jersey, John Kasich of Ohio and Scott Walker of Wisconsin; one former governor, Jeb Bush of Florida, son of President George H. W. Bush and brother of President George W. Bush; and former UN ambassador John Bolton.

Christie, Kasich, Walker and Bolton addressed sessions of the RJC, which despite its grandiose title is essentially a private club controlled by a few dozen multi-millionaires and billionaires, including Adelson and several Wall Street hedge fund moguls. Bush spoke separately at a VIP reception held at the Las Vegas airport hangar that houses Adelson’s fleet of private jets.

The potential candidates vied for personal access to Adelson, the 80-year-old casino mogul who single-handedly kept the campaign of former House speaker Newt Gingrich afloat in the 2012 Republican presidential primaries. Adelson and his family poured in \$20 million to back Gingrich, who finished a poor third, and then added tens of millions more into the Republican presidential and congressional campaigns in the general election. All told, the Adelsons may have spent more than \$100 million, the most ever by a single donor.

That was pocket change for the casino tycoon, the eighth richest individual on the planet, with a fortune of

\$40 billion. His gambling empire that began in Las Vegas with the Sands casino has mushroomed during the past decade in Macao under the auspices of China.

Adelson is of course not the only billionaire using his fortune to manipulate the US political system. Tim Phillips, president of Americans for Prosperity, the front group for the billionaire Koch brothers, attended the RJC meeting as a guest. The Kochs are expected to match or exceed the \$100 million that Adelson gave in the last presidential campaign.

Billionaires are active on the Democratic side of the two-party system as well, including figures like George Soros, Jeffery Katzenberg, Tom Steyer and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. However, given the conventional wisdom that Hillary Clinton has the Democratic presidential nomination for the taking, there is not currently any public spectacle of Democratic presidential hopefuls begging for handouts from the super-rich.

A report by *Politico.com* gives the flavor of the Las Vegas meetings and Adelson’s role in the Republican Party. It describes a gala event where the casino boss joked that he could not grant a request from Matt Brooks, director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, for a \$50 million contribution because Brooks didn’t have change for a billion.

At least four of the five presidential hopefuls had private get-togethers with Adelson. Kasich obsequiously acknowledged the billionaire’s influence in his speech to the RJC, declaring, “Hey, listen, Sheldon, thanks for inviting me,” and bidding both for support in future campaigns and for investment in the state of Ohio.

In their speeches, the candidates vied to be seen as the most right wing and the most hawkish and pro-Israel, in most cases specifically denouncing a growing tendency

towards “isolationism” in the Republican Party. This is a reference to those around Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, who has occasionally criticized the Bush administration and the Obama administration for excessive involvement in conflicts in the Middle East. Paul was invited to speak at the RJC but declined, claiming a “personal conflict.”

In his address, Christie referred in passing to the West Bank and Gaza Strip as “occupied territories,” terminology that ultra-right Zionists like Adelson reject as an undue concession to the Palestinians. He met privately afterwards with Adelson to apologize and reiterate his uncritical support for the state of Israel.

Scott Walker told the RJC that his family had received death threats because of his role in attacking the rights of Wisconsin public employees and pushing through a reactionary anti-labor law in 2011. He also indirectly criticized Christie and Kasich, noting that his state had refused to accept federal funds under Obamacare to expand Medicaid for low-income families, while Ohio and New Jersey had.

Jeb Bush denounced what he called “American passivity” under the Obama administration and attacked the lower level of Army troop strength proposed in the administration’s Pentagon budget—which would still be larger than the next 15 countries in world combined. He also warned against “isolationism” and opposed any expansion of Medicaid.

As always in American capitalist politics, squalid personal interests are commingled with political reaction and drumbeating for militarism. According to a report in the *New York Times* March 27, Adelson is using his political influence to push for a ban on Internet gambling, a prohibition that would mean billions for his casinos.

Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, introduced legislation last week “originally drafted with Mr. Adelson’s lobbyist,” the newspaper reported, that would shut down Internet gambling in the handful of states which have legalized it.

While Adelson is funding the Coalition to Stop Internet Gambling and wooing Christian fundamentalists, the *Times* reported, “Rival casinos and online poker companies are counterattacking through the Coalition for Consumer and Online Protection,” and have hired both Republican and Democratic lobbyists,

including former Obama campaign manager Jim Messina and the Republican former governor of Mississippi Haley Barbour.



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