

The World Wrestling Federation Comes to D.C.



There's a hot new restaurant in downtown Washington called the Caucus Room. Very chic. Power lunches abound as lobbyists, members of Congress, and media types sip from oversized wine glasses and cut into tender filets. Two of the major investors in the Caucus Room are Tommy Boggs and Haley Barbour. Boggs, son of the former Democratic House majority leader, is a principal in the powerful Democratic law and lobbying firm of Patton & Boggs. Barbour, former head of the Republican National Committee, is a principal in the powerful Republican lobby-

ing firm of Barbour Griffith & Rogers.

Hence, the Caucus Room. Turns out that, for all the partisan bickering that goes on in this town, most everybody gets along pretty well. Boggs and Barbour are pals, not enemies. Why should they be? Washington is, for the most part, about power, not ideology. And there's plenty of power to go around. Most of the partisan shouting matches that take place on Capitol Hill are for the benefit of the rubes outside the Beltway. Got to keep those contributions rolling into the RNC and the DNC.

But ideology? The "philosophical" battles between the Republicans and the Democrats these days remind me of nothing so much as the World Wrestling Federation. Get red in the face, question the integrity of the representative across the aisle, verbally body-slam him on C-SPAN, and then take him out for a nightcap at the Caucus Room. That's how Trent Lott can feign frustration that the Republican Congress can't work out a deal with the Democratic White House when "only \$30 billion in a \$2 trillion budget" separates the two. We don't have a Republican Party and a Democratic Party. We have an Incumbent Party.

The political system in Washington, particularly in the House of Representatives, is so rigged that, writing this the day before the election (honest), I can safely predict the percentage of incumbents seeking reelection who will win: 98 or 99. Only a handful of races are even remotely competitive. Which is a disgrace, because outside the Beltway people really do want the government to get off their backs. That's why more than two-thirds of Americans support Social Security privatization. It's why a Gallup Poll taken just two weeks before the election showed this remarkable result: When asked which posed the greatest threat to the future of the country, 7 percent said big labor, 22 percent said big business, and an overwhelming 65 percent said big government.

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Cato Board member Howie Rich came close to shaking up this incestuous situation with his group, U.S. Term Limits, but fell short by one GOP-appointed vote on the Supreme Court. Competitive House races are essential if we ever hope to see the common sense of the American people once again manifest itself in Congress. The single most effective way to do that today is to repeal the absurd limit of \$1,000 on contributions to federal candidates. Nothing disturbs an incumbent more than a well-funded challenger. To an incumbent, the ideal contribution limit is zero--the less money in the campaign, the better his chances. It's no coincidence that these sky-high reelection rates began when the Supreme Court ignored the First Amendment and upheld the contribution limits contained in the Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments of 1974. The Court did, however, strike down the draconian spending limits Congress tried to slip through. Still, the effect of contribution limits is spending limits.

We are told that the political system is awash in "obscene" amounts of money. This cycle we'll see close to \$3 billion spent on federal races. A lot? Not really. Considering the \$2 trillion budget Mr. Lott and Mr. Clinton have worked up, it's not a lot at all. In fact, it amounts to about \$15 per eligible voter. And if you consider money as a proxy for information, a strong case can be made that voters need more spent on these campaigns. A 1996 survey by the Establishment itself (the *Washington Post*, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard) found that two-thirds of those interviewed could not name their representative, and half didn't know whether he or she was a Democrat or a Republican. Three of four didn't know that a senator is elected for a six-year term.

Of course, the conceit is that money is not a proxy for information but rather a bribe for politicians. I asked a Senate committee chaired by Phil Gramm if someone could name a politician in Congress who was on the take. After all, if this corruption is so endemic that our First Amendment liberties should be in jeopardy, names should be named. But names are never named in this sham crusade.

There are two groups that benefit by keeping money out of politics. The first is the Incumbent Party. The second is the media. They become a much more important gatekeeper of information when private contributions are restricted. It is not for nothing that Washington politicians and the national media are the biggest cheerleaders for so-called campaign finance reform. They're probably raising their glasses to the idea right now over at the Caucus Room.

—Edward H. Crane