

## POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

### *Making Money Do Good*

“Bad Contribution” by Norman Ornstein, in *The New Republic* (June 10, 1996), 1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Political campaigns for national office have become more expensive than ever, even though good-government reformers have largely succeeded, over the last two decades, in imposing drastic regulations on the flow of money to political candidates. The results of their earnest efforts, argues Ornstein, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, have been perverse. While most candidates are forced to scramble for cash in unseemly ways, extremely wealthy—and otherwise unlikely—contenders, such as Steve Forbes and Michael Huffington, can spend freely and so dominate, or at least distort, contests for the nation’s high offices.

Despite reformers’ hopes, Ornstein observes, the 1971 ban Congress imposed on political contributions by corporations and the strict limits on what individuals and political action committees (PACs) can give “have not . . . rooted out corruption, ended incumbent advantages, or reduced candidates’ obsession with raising money.” Now reformers are urging another dose of the same kind of medicine, in the form of a bipartisan proposal backed by President Bill Clinton. The measure would ban PACs, put a cap on spending by congressional candidates, require candidates to get at least half of their money in-state—and in the end, Ornstein argues, only make matters worse. “Temptations to corrup-

tion will increase—hitting up business and labor officials and their families one by one to replace PAC contributions (in a fashion much less amenable to disclosure), laundering out-of-state funds into the state, finding ‘in-kind’ ways to spread the message without directly spending money. And, of course, reforms that make it harder to raise money will benefit multimillionaire candidates who do not need to.”

Running a modern congressional campaign is necessarily expensive. “Rather than trying, quixotically, to drive money out of politics,” Ornstein says, “campaign laws should create incentives for candidates to raise the right kinds of money.” Among his suggestions: federal income tax credits for people who make small individual contributions, giving them in effect a dollar-for-dollar rebate, with a tax on PACs (say, 50 cents for every dollar they contribute) to defray the costs. Ornstein also proposes matching vouchers for broadcast time to candidates who raise \$25,000 in small (\$100 or less), in-state, individual contributions. Potential challengers to incumbents ought to be allowed to raise a certain amount of “seed money” from individual contributors who give up to \$10,000, 10 times the current limit. Instead of trying to render money impotent, Ornstein suggests, reformers should harness its power to serve their ends.

### *How to Settle the Character Question*

“Duelling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel” by Joanne B. Freeman, in *The William and Mary Quarterly* (Apr. 1996), Box 8781, Williamsburg, Va. 23187-8781.

On the morning of July 11, 1804, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr stood opposite each other on the heights of Weehawken, New Jersey, each with a pistol in hand, waiting for the command to fire. Hamilton, whose own son had died in a duel, was “strongly opposed” to the illegal practice, and, while Burr was sure his rival had privately attacked his character, his only hard evidence of an insult was a letter writer’s vague reference in an Albany newspaper to a “despicable opinion” about Burr that Hamilton had uttered. Why, then, were the two



*The Burr-Hamilton duel, 1804.*

men dueling? Emotional excess has been historians' usual answer: Hamilton was suicidal and Burr malicious and murderous. Freeman, a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Virginia, argues that there was a great deal more to it than that.

In this era before full-fledged national political parties, she observes, a politician's personal honor was perhaps his most precious political asset. Duels "were intricate games of dare and counter-dare, ritualized displays of bravery, military prowess, and, above all, willingness to sacrifice one's life for one's honor." From the first "notice" of an insult to the final acknowledgment of "satisfaction" (which might be weeks or even months later), politicians considered themselves engaged in an affair of honor. The ritualized negotiations were an integral part of the duel. Often, shots were never fired.

These contests, Freeman says, "did not result from a sudden flare of temper; politicians timed them strategically, sometimes provoked them deliberately. Often, the two seconds published conflicting newspaper accounts of a duel, each man boasting of his principal's bravery and mocking his oppo-

nent's cowardice. Fought to influence a broad public, synchronized with events of the political timetable, political duels conveyed carefully scripted political messages."

Hamilton (who had served as treasury secretary under President George Washington) looked upon Burr as a dangerous man. One was a Federalist, the other a Democratic-Republican, but their differences ran deeper. When the presidential election of 1800 was thrown into the House of Representatives, Hamilton managed to tip the balance to Thomas Jefferson, whom he merely hated, rather than see victory go to Burr, whom he despised. When Burr ran for governor of New York, Hamilton worked against him, and did indeed privately make "extremely severe" attacks on Burr's character. Six weeks after his humiliating defeat, Burr wrote to Hamilton about the letter in the Albany newspaper, demanding an explanation. If Hamilton again apologized (as he had twice before for remarks about Burr), Burr could brand him a coward. Either an apology or a duel would let Burr keep the support of his followers.

When Hamilton pointed out the inquiry's

## *The Power of Words*

After serving as an assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services from 1992 to '94, David T. Ellwood has a new appreciation for the importance of campaign rhetoric, he writes in *The American Prospect* (May-June 1996). He is now academic dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

*Governing requires a powerful political message as well as good policy. Consider the phrase, "If you work, you shouldn't be poor," which [Bill] Clinton used during the campaign. That simple but powerful concept compelled action when he became president. When I first arrived in Washington, advocates pointed out that in spite of the president's promise, the earned income tax credit that was about to be introduced in the budget was too low to raise the working poor out of poverty. As a result, we added more than \$1 billion to the EITC in an afternoon. It was the last easy billion I found in Washington.*

*The president's famous promise to "end welfare as we know it" was the most potent sound bite on welfare. It came up so often that we referred to it as EWAKI. Yet while implying that welfare is a massive failure and conveying seriousness of purpose about reform, EWAKI only vaguely suggests that we can replace the current system with something better. Even more destructive was the phrase "two years and you're off." Our pollsters told us that "two" was the single most memorable number of the 1992 campaign. The problem, of course, is that "two years and you're off" seems to imply no help at all after two years. That is never what was intended. Nonetheless, this phrase gave real impetus to plans now before Congress and in the states that call for time limits followed by nothing—no welfare, no jobs, no support—even if the person is willing to work and genuinely cannot find any job.*

vagueness, Burr forced the issue by demanding an apology for any derogatory rumors that any remarks by Hamilton might have inspired during their long rivalry. Refusing, Hamilton accepted Burr's challenge, thus complying with what he called the "public prejudice" regarding honor and preserving his "ability to

be in future useful" in public affairs. At the same time, however, he resolved to adhere to his principles and withhold his fire in the field. Though Hamilton was mortally wounded in the duel, Freeman writes, Burr lost the subsequent battle for public approval. He became "a failed duelist."

## *Congress on the Big Screen*

"Hollywood Goes to Congress" by Tom Rosenstiel, in *Media Studies Journal* (Winter 1996), Columbia Univ., 2950 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10027.

The conviction that there is something rotten in Congress is nothing new. Consider Hollywood's first major movie about the institution, Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), in which a Boy Scout leader (Jimmy Stewart) is named to fill a vacancy in the Senate and finds mostly corruption and greed there. Although usually remembered as a celebration of naive idealism, notes Rosenstiel, a congressional correspondent for *Newsweek*, the film endures "because it depicts the subtle and credible humanity of the hack reporters, the bad senator, the overly partisan opposition leader, and the taciturn vice president." Capra's Senate is corrupt, but it also is finally honorable, and the film is "an appeal for people to aim high and not compromise too easily." In the decades since, Rosenstiel contends, the "take" on Congress in this most American of popular art forms has changed, tracing a disturbing arc from hope to despair.

*The Senator Was Indiscreet* (1948), written by Charles MacArthur (co-author of *The Front Page*) and George S. Kaufman, is a sophisticated farce in which a senator is undone by his diary, filled with Senate secrets. The film "describes a political world filled by hacks and phonies rather than bright but misled men," Rosenstiel notes. But it's all harmless fun: politics "doesn't much matter in people's lives."

The Cold War changed that. Otto Preminger's *Advise and Consent* (1962), based on

the Allen Drury novel, portrays the Senate as it grapples with the controversial nomination of a liberal intellectual for secretary of state. For all the film's melodramatics, Rosenstiel says, it "celebrates the subtle, cold pragmatism of the Kennedy age. . . . The film admires the subtle and complex dimensions of Congress—the friendships between political enemies, men who lead with their minds rather than their emotions."

Fast-forward to the post-Watergate era. Hollywood provided *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979), "a cautionary tale about what happens to a decent senator when he begins to become a national figure," Rosenstiel says. Power (and a beautiful civil rights lawyer) seduce a senator played by Alan Alda. But ultimately, the senator's private sins are forgiven. His country needs him.

That is definitely not the outlook of the most recent film about Congress, *Distinguished Gentleman* (1992), in which a smalltime Florida con man, played by comedian Eddie Murphy, is elected to Congress, where his crooked skills serve him well. The corruption, Rosenstiel points out, now involves not ideology or power but money: "The whole system is rigged, voters are idiots, and campaign rhetoric is laughable. . . . The film is pure anger against a system that seems unredeemable." What is new, in both the public mood and the films that reflect it, Rosenstiel laments, is this sense of "utter hopelessness."

## FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

### *The Limits of Global Compassion*

"Distant Compassion" by Clifford Orwin, in *The National Interest* (Spring 1996), 1112 16th St. N.W., Ste. 540, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Ever since the United States sent 28,000 soldiers to Somalia in 1992 to avert mass starvation in that unhappy African country,

there has been talk about the "CNN factor" in foreign policy—that is, the influence of TV images of the suffering of distant inno-