

February 28, 2013

In an article buried in the [NY Times](#), we have another peek at the disgusting pay scales American universities are showering on their execs. You know, the ones who went into academia as a form of "public service."

President Obama's nominee to lead the Treasury Department, [Jacob J. Lew](#), got a \$685,000 severance payment when he left a top post at [New York University](#) in 2006 to take a job at Citigroup.

The payment, which a university official acknowledged on Monday, is considered unusual by outside experts in benefits and raises questions about why a tax-exempt university would give a large exit bonus to an executive who was departing voluntarily.

The payment was not disclosed in the university's publicly available tax records, and it is receiving scrutiny from Senate Republicans as they consider Mr. Lew's nomination, which is expected to come up for a vote in the Finance Committee on Tuesday.

At the time of his departure, Mr. Lew had been executive vice president at N.Y.U. He had typically earned \$700,000 to \$800,000 a year since his hiring in 2001, and sometimes more, according to the university's tax records.

He also received mortgages of roughly \$1.5 million through the school as a perquisite — \$440,000 of which was forgiven by the university over time.

University officials defended the additional lump-sum payment, which was not required by his original employment contract, citing Mr. Lew's role in addressing some of the university's major problems at the time.

While severance payments are not unheard-of among universities, they are more typical when executives of long standing are ushered out. They can also be required by employment contracts, like the \$1.2 million that Pennsylvania State University's former president, [Graham B. Spanier](#), received when he departed amid a child sexual abuse scandal in the football program.

But Mr. Lew's exit was amicable. The revelations about his pay are not the first to raise questions about how tax-exempt, nonprofit groups in the state shower largess on their top officials. ...

Bob Woodward calls Obama's petulance "a kind of madness." [Politico](#) has the story. *The Washington Post's Bob Woodward attacked President Barack Obama on Wednesday, saying the commander-in-chief's decision not to deploy an aircraft carrier because of budget cuts is "a kind of madness."*

"Can you imagine Ronald Reagan sitting there and saying, 'Oh, by the way, I can't do this because of some budget document?'" Woodward said Wednesday on MSNBC's "Morning Joe."

"Or George W. Bush saying, 'You know, I'm not going to invade Iraq because I can't get the aircraft carriers I need' or even Bill Clinton saying, 'You know, I'm not going to attack Saddam

Hussein's intelligence headquarters,' as he did when Clinton was president because of some budget document?" Woodward added. "Under the Constitution, the president is commander-in-chief and employs the force. And so we now have the president going out because of this piece of paper and this agreement. 'I can't do what I need to do to protect the country.' That's a kind of madness that I haven't seen in a long time."

The Pentagon announced earlier this month the U.S.S. Harry Truman, which was supposed to leave for the Persian Gulf, will remain stateside due to budget concerns. The sequester, which will cut billions in defense spending, is scheduled to hit on Friday.

Woodward has become an unlikely conservative hero in recent days for calling out the administration over whether Obama had "moved the goal posts" in negotiations over the sequester.

Craig Pirrong at [Streetwise Professor](#) has more on the administration's negotiating style.

Obama is playing the sequester game for all it is worth, by regaling the country with horror stories of what will happen if the sequester goes into effect. All he needs is a flashlight held under his chin while sitting by a campfire.

The prudent response to a need to cut spending due to a tightening of a budget constraint is to find the least important things, and cut those first. But Obama is not interested in being prudent. He is interested in being political. He is using the sequester as part of his war to the knife with House Republicans, and hence is going with the Washington Monument Strategy on Steroids, and focusing cutbacks on the most visible and vital services. For instance: furloughing TSA personnel. I am scheduled to fly to visit my parents on the day the sequester kicks in. Oh freaking joy. I say furlough them all. Forever. But no, we'll get all of the stupid procedures with fewer people to implement them-and no doubt they will be under orders to work to rule to make the process as inefficient and painful as possible. Another for instance: releasing illegal aliens detained in prison. I could go on. But you get the point. It's all about making the most painful and most visible and most inconveniencing cuts, all for political advantage. The man has no shame. This is not about executive leadership or stewardship. It is about Goebbels-esque propagand theater. ...

[Marty Peretz](#) expects little good will come out of the president's trip to Israel.

Last week President Obama announced he will finally visit Israel. But there's no guarantee that it will be a pleasant trip. And it certainly will not be if he lectures the Israelis yet again about what they owe the Palestinians. After all, the Arabs of Palestine could have had, like the Jews, a state pursuant to the 1947 U.N. Partition Plan (which sanctioned for the Arabs a bigger state than the Jewish one that was offered) and then again after the 1967 Six-Day War. Instead the Arab League responded to Israeli peace overtures with the Khartoum declaration of the "three nos" of the Arab Solidarity Charter: "no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it."

Comparisons will inevitably be drawn between Obama's 2009 trip to Cairo and his impending one to Jerusalem. His fanciful Cairo speech—delivered with no evident recognition that each and every one of the Arab countries was at that moment on the precipice of chaos—was a shoddy and slippery job, historically so misleading on so many matters that one can hardly attribute it to innocent error. Granted, some of this had to do with the president's own ignorant romanticization of Islam and the Arabs. Some of it was sheer invention, like his treatment of U.S. diplomacy during the late-18th- and early-19th-century Barbary Wars as a prelude to a long-term peace between Muslim principalities and America and his taking on for the American people sins against Muslims, like prohibiting the wearing of the hijab, which are actually not issues in the U.S. Largely, the speech could have been not an oration but an indictment of the United State before the International Court of Justice. Does the Internal Revenue Service really discriminate against Islamic charities, as he claimed?

It is not even four years since Obama's counterhistoric discourse. But already two years back, with the beginning of the dreamily named Arab Spring, his version and vision of these societies had degraded into real human and social wreckage. Of course, the happy chimera still holds as a liberal canonical truth. ...

Even the NY Times is throwing up over the president's \$500,000 sale of access.

Jonathan Tobin has the story.

To say that Barack Obama has never practiced what he preached about campaign finance reform is the understatement of the century. The president rode to office and then was re-elected with the help of a massive influx of private cash, all the while saying that money was the root of all political evil. He routinely denounces the wealthy and the influence of big business while taking their money and selling access to the White House to the same Wall Street moguls to whom he accuses Republicans of being in thrall.

Even when practiced at such Olympian levels, hypocrisy is not against the law. Thus the news that a new pro-Obama 501(c)(4), organized by the rump of the Obama re-election campaign, is gearing up to not only advocate for the president's policies but to reward donors with access to the White House and the president himself is not so much a question of legality but a matter of setting a new low in ethical standards. As even the New York Times [noted in an article published this weekend](#), the access sale being conducted by the president's Organizing for Action group crosses a line that most groups that similarly label themselves as educational rather than political don't:

"Giving or raising \$500,000 or more puts donors on a national advisory board for Mr. Obama's group and the privilege of attending quarterly meetings with the president, along with other meetings at the White House. Moreover, the new cash demands on Mr. Obama's top donors and bundlers come as many of them are angling for appointments to administration jobs or ambassadorships. ...

Many traditional advocacy organizations, including the Sierra Club and the National Rifle Association, are set up as social welfare groups, or 501(c)(4)'s in tax parlance. But unlike those groups, Organizing for Action appears to be an extension of the administration, stocked with alumni of Mr. Obama's White House and campaign teams and devoted solely to the president's second-term agenda." ...

More on this from [Ed Morrissey](#).

... Clearly, the White House and President Obama object to having the wealthy influence elections with their cash. When it comes to influencing the government, however, that's a different story. [The New York Times' Nick Confessore](#) reported over the weekend that Obama's former presidential campaign-turned-activist group, Organizing for America (OFA), has begun a fundraising drive and wants to attract big donors. And it has something to sell — access to the president and seats on an advisory panel.

Half of the funding for OFA is expected to come from wealthy donors, each pledging to raise and/or donate \$500,000 to kick into the tax-exempt "social welfare group." Obama's aides will appear at fundraising events for OFA, which should raise eyebrows on its own. But the benefit of the big-ticket donations should drop jaws as well as raise eyebrows:

"Giving or raising \$500,000 or more puts donors on a national advisory board for Mr. Obama's group and the privilege of attending quarterly meetings with the president, along with other meetings at the White House," Confessore reports. "Moreover, the new cash demands on Mr. Obama's top donors and bundlers come as many of them are angling for appointments to administration jobs or ambassadorships."

There is nothing new about selling ambassadorships, not in this administration or that of any American president in recent memory. Ambassadorships have long been a perk for donors and cronies, especially to countries with lower strategic value. The outright sale of seats for meetings at the White House is something very new, however, and amounts to a form of simony at the Church of Hope and Change. ...

NY Times

[Obama's Treasury Nominee Got Unusual Exit Bonus on Leaving N.Y.U.](#)

by Danny Hakim

President Obama's nominee to lead the Treasury Department, [Jacob J. Lew](#), got a \$685,000 severance payment when he left a top post at [New York University](#) in 2006 to take a job at Citigroup.

The payment, which a university official acknowledged on Monday, is considered unusual by outside experts in benefits and raises questions about why a tax-exempt university would give a large exit bonus to an executive who was departing voluntarily.

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But Mr. Lew's exit was amicable. The revelations about his pay are not the first to raise questions about how tax-exempt, nonprofit groups in the state [show largess on their top officials](#).

Less than a year after Mr. Lew went to Citigroup, the company agreed to pay \$2 million as part of a settlement reached with the attorney general at the time, Andrew M. Cuomo, over Citigroup's role as a preferred lender to students at N.Y.U. and other colleges. The case focused, in part, on what were basically kickbacks being paid by preferred lenders to universities; N.Y.U. paid \$1.4 million to [reimburse students](#) as part of the same settlement.

The university chose Citigroup as a preferred lender during Mr. Lew's tenure, a subject that has arisen during [questions to Mr. Lew](#) from Senate Republicans.

"I do not recall having any conversations with Citigroup officials regarding Citigroup's selection or actions as a preferred lender for N.Y.U. students," Mr. Lew told senators. "Also, I do not believe that I approved the selection of Citigroup as a preferred lender for N.Y.U. students."

[Senator Charles E. Grassley](#), an Iowa Republican and member of the Finance Committee, has a history of scrutinizing how nonprofit groups spend money.

"Mr. Lew's track record of getting well paid by taxpayer-supported institutions raises questions about his regard for who pays the bills," Mr. Grassley said in a statement on Monday. "The problem of colleges that always seem to find money for the executive suite even as they raise tuition is not unique to New York University."

"However, New York University is among the most expensive, has a well-funded endowment, and has high student debt loads. It should explain how its generous treatment of Mr. Lew and other executives is necessary to its educational mission."

An administration official working on Mr. Lew's confirmation said, "Mr. Lew reported all income earned from his position at N.Y.U. on his tax returns and paid all taxes due."

In a statement on Monday, John Beckman, a spokesman for N.Y.U., said: "It is not uncommon for large organizations to make payments to senior officials on their departure, as happened in this instance."

The spokesman added that Mr. Lew “was instrumental in resolving the structural budget deficit N.Y.U. faced when he arrived, putting in place our current budgeting process, addressing N.Y.U.’s deferred maintenance backlog and — in collaboration with other senior colleagues — addressing the complex challenges of unwinding N.Y.U. Medical Center’s merger with Mount Sinai Medical Center.”

Outside consultants expressed surprise at Mr. Lew’s exit bonus.

“It’s pretty unusual to get severance payment upon a voluntary departure,” said Daniel Boyer, a senior consultant at Marts & Lundy, which advises higher education organizations. “There are long-serving presidents, whether it’s at a big Ivy, that will get severance upon retirement. But that’s different from voluntarily leaving to get a ton of money anyway.”

John J. McGowan Jr., a partner at the Cleveland firm BakerHostetler who specializes in employee benefit plans, offered a similar assessment.

“Why are they doing that when he’s moving on to bigger and better things?” he said. “It’s the type of thing that might raise eyebrows.”

Politico

[Bob Woodward blasts President Obama ‘madness’](#)

by Kevin Robillard

The Washington Post’s Bob Woodward attacked President Barack Obama on Wednesday, saying the commander-in-chief’s decision not to deploy an aircraft carrier because of budget cuts is “a kind of madness.”

“Can you imagine Ronald Reagan sitting there and saying, ‘Oh, by the way, I can’t do this because of some budget document?’” Woodward said Wednesday on MSNBC’s “Morning Joe.”

“Or George W. Bush saying, ‘You know, I’m not going to invade Iraq because I can’t get the aircraft carriers I need’ or even Bill Clinton saying, ‘You know, I’m not going to attack Saddam Hussein’s intelligence headquarters,’ as he did when Clinton was president because of some budget document?” Woodward added. “Under the Constitution, the president is commander-in-chief and employs the force. And so we now have the president going out because of this piece of paper and this agreement. ‘I can’t do what I need to do to protect the country.’ That’s a kind of madness that I haven’t seen in a long time.”

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Streetwise Professor

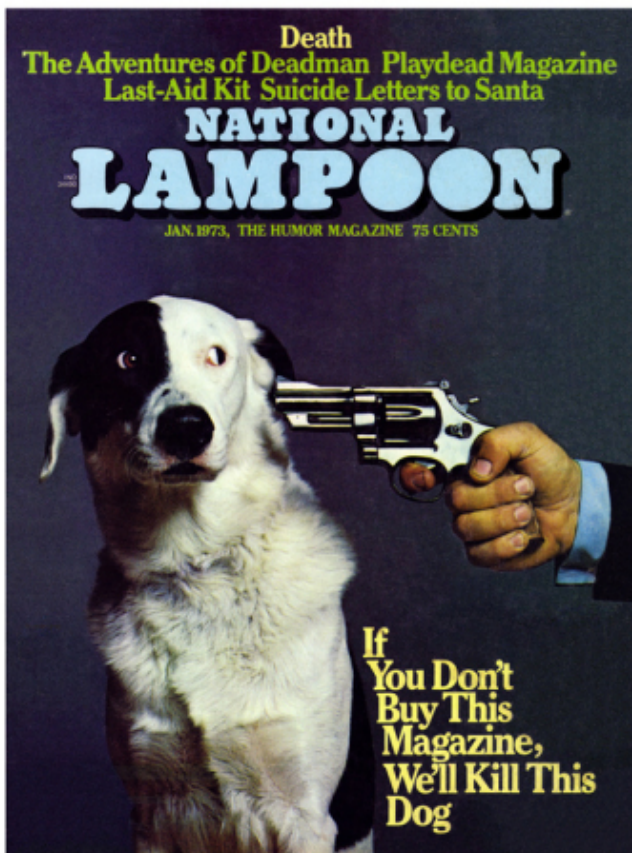
Obama's Latest, Greatest Example of Executive Stewardship

by Craig Pirrong

Obama is playing the sequester game for all it is worth, by regaling the country with horror stories of what will happen if the sequester goes into effect. All he needs is a flashlight held under his chin while sitting by a campfire.

The prudent response to a need to cut spending due to a tightening of a budget constraint is to find the least important things, and cut those first. But Obama is not interested in being prudent. He is interested in being political. He is using the sequester as part of his war to the knife with House Republicans, and hence is going with the Washington Monument Strategy on Steroids, and focusing cutbacks on the most visible and vital services. For instance: furloughing TSA personnel. I am scheduled to fly to visit my parents on the day the sequester kicks in. Oh freaking joy. I say furlough them all. Forever. But no, we'll get all of the stupid procedures with fewer people to implement them-and no doubt they will be under orders to work to rule to make the process as inefficient and painful as possible. Another for instance: releasing illegal aliens detained in prison. I could go on. But you get the point. It's all about making the most painful and most visible and most inconveniencing cuts, all for political advantage. The man has no shame. This is not about executive leadership or stewardship. It is about Goebbels-esque propaganda theater.

Looking at Obama's strategy brought this classic National Lampoon cover to mind:



Or, in the Obama version: if you don't cave on the sequester (and everything else) we'll . . .

The ultimate mendacity, moreover, is that Obama insisted on the sequester during a budget standoff in 2011, and signed it into law. He's daddy, but is denying paternity: indeed, he's asserting the Republicans did the deed. Oh, for a political DNA test.

But the problem is that even if such a test existed, it wouldn't matter. The media knows the truth, but is so in the tank for Obama that they refuse to flog him over his hypocrisy and dishonesty: hell, they (Bob Woodward excepted) even refuse to acknowledge Obama's insistence on including the sequester in the 2011 deal. A good portion of the populace is also indifferent to Obama's duplicity. Further evidence of the degraded condition of our Republic.

Daily Beast

Barack Obama's Cairo Speech, and His Israel Problem

If the president hopes to accomplish anything important while finally visiting a key U.S. ally, he'll need an attitude adjustment.

by Marty Peretz

Last week President Obama announced he will finally visit Israel. But there's no guarantee that it will be a pleasant trip. And it certainly will not be if he lectures the Israelis yet again about what they owe the Palestinians. After all, the Arabs of Palestine could have had, like the Jews, a state pursuant to the 1947 U.N. Partition Plan (which sanctioned for the Arabs a bigger state than the Jewish one that was offered) and then again after the 1967 Six-Day War. Instead the Arab League responded to Israeli peace overtures with the Khartoum declaration of the "three nos" of the Arab Solidarity Charter: "no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it."

Comparisons will inevitably be drawn between Obama's 2009 trip to Cairo and his impending one to Jerusalem. [His fanciful Cairo speech](#)—delivered with no evident recognition that each and every one of the Arab countries was at that moment on the precipice of chaos—was a shoddy and slippery job, historically so misleading on so many matters that one can hardly attribute it to innocent error. Granted, some of this had to do with the president's own ignorant romanticization of Islam and the Arabs. Some of it was sheer invention, like his treatment of U.S. diplomacy during the late-18th- and early-19th-century Barbary Wars as a prelude to a long-term peace between Muslim principalities and America and his taking on for the American people sins against Muslims, like prohibiting the wearing of the hijab, which are actually not issues in the U.S. Largely, the speech could have been not an oration but an indictment of the United State before the International Court of Justice. Does the Internal Revenue Service really discriminate against Islamic charities, as he claimed?

It is not even four years since Obama's counterhistoric discourse. But already two years back, with the beginning of the dreamily named Arab Spring, his version and vision of these societies had degraded into real human and social wreckage. Of course, the happy chimera still holds as a liberal canonical truth. Try raising the matter of Arab or Muslim essentialism at a Harvard Square dinner party.

But for all his romance with the Muslim world, the president has a tick about Israel. Why does he find Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, so much more congenial than Israel's Bibi Netanyahu? Experts tell us that the American president is on the phone with the Erdogan more than with any other foreign leader. Why? After all, Erdogan is leading his country resolutely in a strident Islamic direction, he has picked endless and dogmatic fights with Israel, and his country has more journalists in prison than any other. Moreover, Erdogan has intensified the internal war against the Kurds and, after much ballyhoo, has done about zero for the rebel Syrians, with whom he pledged solidarity many months ago. He also is proposing constitutional changes to the Turkish judiciary. Under this plan, eight of 17 appointments to the constitutional tribunal would be designated by the president. One quarter of the new supreme court would also be appointed by him. And who is "him"? Oh, yes, Erdogan is running for president. Obama has had nothing to say about the demolition of Turkish secularism or about Erdogan's authoritarian bent. Nor has he stood up for the cause of political freedom and pluralism now under attack in practically all—no, all—Middle Eastern lands other than Israel, where an increasingly moderate center is setting the parameters of its politics and society.

Yet, Obama somehow can't resist telling the Israelis how misguided they are in reading their own neighborhood. He makes no secret about this. Jerusalem, which the administration insists is not factually located in Israel, will now have to deal with Chuck Hagel, who is likely to be confirmed this week as secretary of Defense and who has rarely even disguised his antipathy to the Jewish state. With Hagel waiting to run the Pentagon, all our allies now have a heads-up on America's impending strategic withdrawal from their world. No one can honestly deny this, and almost no one tries.

After all, we already lag far behind socialist France in the protection of human life and dignity against militant Islam. This is quite an achievement. So Israel will no longer be dealing with a Defense secretary who has real-life commitments to it and to the free world, in general, but with one of those cool "realists"—actually more than a bit ruffled, as we saw at his confirmation hearings—who thinks that we have no determined enemies, only rational and flexible adversaries. We have yet to experience what John Kerry believes about this, although his optimism about peace between Israel and the Palestinians suggests that he may not have seen the handwriting on the wall. We are about to see what we shall see. Iran is a test of this argument. I believe the case is settled.

Yet it has been Syria, because of the loss of nearly 70,000 lives in the civil war, that has already shown the fatuousness of American policy over time. The president was apparently convinced that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad could be lured away from his inheritance as a tyrant's son, from the corrupt interests and brutalizing habits of his tiny Shia sect and from the by now ingrained manner of a military, which like North Korea's, brooks neither questioning nor dissent. We have been treated in these last weeks to panegyrics about Hillary Clinton's performance as secretary of State. The apotheosis of anyone is almost always false, and the apotheosis of a pretentious pol is also wicked. The fact is that she has accomplished *nothing* except giving speeches and spreading preposterous illusions, like her belief that Assad had the makings of a reformer.

The administration had argued that arming the rebels would strengthen the rebel *ultras*. As it happens, not arming the rebels was what strengthened the extremists among them. And believe it or not, now that they are triumphant, the administration is contemplating arming them anyway. We are about to witness a witches' Sabbath, which neither Obama nor Clinton did anything to impede—although both General Petraeus and Leon Panetta did, to no avail. The truth is now

out. If you look back to the president's Cairo speech, you will find that he hadn't an inkling that the world of Araby was about to collapse in blood and fire—sacred blood and fire, some would say. Amid this pan-Arab bloodshed and aside from the intra-Muslim wars where not a day goes by without some mass killing of Shia or Sunnis, there is also the remorseless persecution of Christians, especially in Egypt. This grim reality was also something the president's Cairo address overlooked, reflecting either ignorance or cynicism. I suspect the latter.

This is the world with which Israel is being asked to reconcile. For the present, it is the Palestinian Authority—itsself splintered into factions rough and rougher—that would be the recipient of Jerusalem's West Bank concessions. After all, it is Mahmoud Abbas who sits in Ramallah, relatively prosperous and also the capital of what there is of modern Palestine. But there is scant guarantee that its powers would not soon be in the hands of Hamas, a cohort of murderers more gruesome than the P.A. and which already reigns in Gaza.

In any case, Arab politics is bloody and raw, and no agreement with or among its parties has ever held for long. The territory in dispute is grand in the imaginings of history and infinitesimal in geography. This is a volatile mix, and with the Arab penchant for glory, no contention can be discussed truthfully.

That mix is a standing temptation for mischief and atrocity. Or the invention of atrocity, as in the Palestinian tale of a massacre in Jenin more than a decade ago and many times since elsewhere from Dan to Beersheba. No one can be trusted to patrol any agreement honestly as, for instance, the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon, in existence since 1978, proves. What about the United States guaranteeing a peace agreement? Being obsessed with Palestine, Obama might just agree. But Americans, both idealists and realists, should not permit our armed men and women into such perils. Now there is the other Obama habit: pour our troops in, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, and pull them out when they are being shot at in intolerable numbers. There is still John Kerry's immortal question asked of a Congressional committee oh, so long ago, and actually apt for our imperiled men and women in Afghanistan now: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

The irony of Obama's confidence in his mission of peace for the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs is that he has been proven demonstrably ignorant of the region. The irony of his hauteur toward Netanyahu is that it is applicable to the Israeli center, as well, and even to parts of the left, which also is not eager to open the country to new rounds of terror. The mass of Israelis do not want to govern Arab life. They do not want to run Palestinian foreign policy, if the other Arabs will allow such to be. But neither are they ready to admit unto Zion untold numbers of "refugees" into the fourth generation, and they won't. Nor can they pretend that Arab insistence on a return to the armistice lines of 65 years ago is realistic or just. The march of time now runs faster than ever before. The "Arab state" envisioned along side the Jewish state by the General Assembly in 1947 is no more.

Barack Obama will be welcomed in Israel, for the pro-American sentiments run deep in that country. But if he comes to Israel to save it from itself or to browbeat its governing coalition, he is sure to return empty handed. Israelis know their neighborhood, and they can see laid before them the erosion of American power and authority in a region they understand much better than foreign visitors in a hurry.

Contentions

Obama's Hypocritical Access Sale

by Jonathan S. Tobin

To say that Barack Obama has never practiced what he preached about campaign finance reform is the understatement of the century. The president rode to office and then was re-elected with the help of a massive influx of private cash, all the while saying that money was the root of all political evil. He routinely denounces the wealthy and the influence of big business while taking their money and selling access to the White House to the same Wall Street moguls to whom he accuses Republicans of being in thrall.

Even when practiced at such Olympian levels, hypocrisy is not against the law. Thus the news that a new pro-Obama 501(c)(4), organized by the rump of the Obama re-election campaign, is gearing up to not only advocate for the president's policies but to reward donors with access to the White House and the president himself is not so much a question of legality but a matter of setting a new low in ethical standards. As even the *New York Times* [noted in an article published this weekend](#), the access sale being conducted by the president's Organizing for Action group crosses a line that most groups that similarly label themselves as educational rather than political don't:

"Giving or raising \$500,000 or more puts donors on a national advisory board for Mr. Obama's group and the privilege of attending quarterly meetings with the president, along with other meetings at the White House. Moreover, the new cash demands on Mr. Obama's top donors and bundlers come as many of them are angling for appointments to administration jobs or ambassadorships. ...

Many traditional advocacy organizations, including the Sierra Club and the National Rifle Association, are set up as social welfare groups, or 501(c)(4)'s in tax parlance. But unlike those groups, Organizing for Action appears to be an extension of the administration, stocked with alumni of Mr. Obama's White House and campaign teams and devoted solely to the president's second-term agenda."

The intermingling of money and power is nothing new. Indeed, the myth that campaign finance reform laws can eliminate this nexus is itself a problem because it has led to more and more such legislation that has only made the problem worse, as donations have become less accountable and transparent.

The hypocrisy of a president and an administration that continues to portray itself as being as pure as the driven snow is bad enough. The stench of this sort of brazen behavior ought to shock both the press and the public, but the double standard by which the president always seems to be given a pass for everything he does seems to apply to this as well.

But the problem with selling access to this particular White House is that for all of its high-flown rhetoric about ethics, it seems as malleable to the whims of big contributors as any of its less highly regarded predecessors. A quick look at the list of companies that benefited from the president's first-term stimulus boondoggle reveals a roster of Obama campaign contributors. We should expect that this latest example of administration venality would increase the number of Solyndra-style "investments" by the Treasury.

This is not the first White House for sale, as both Republicans and Democrats have often played the same game. But the industrial level of this kind of access sale makes the use of the Lincoln Bedroom in the White House as a motel for Democratic cash cows and celebrity donors by the Clintons look tame.

The solution to this sort of thing is not more laws that will only create ever more subterfuges and even less accountability, just as past efforts have done. What is needed is a vigorous press keeping close watch on the administration and prepared to treat future Solyndra-type scandals as major stories—as they would were George W. Bush playing such a cynical game—rather than footnotes. But given the president's ability to play puppet master to the press, that is about as likely to happen as Laura Bush being asked to announce the Best Picture Oscar.

The Week

[Simony at the Church of Hope and Change](#)

Selling political favors and access — that's change no one can believe in

by Ed Morrissey

Ever since Watergate, the political class in Washington — and those who want to make it to Washington — has promised to clean up politics, end corruption, and reduce the bitter partisanship that plagues the Beltway.

Barack Obama's first presidential campaign explicitly included those pledges as part of the "hope and change" he would usher in, while his second presidential campaign relied on populist scolding of the wealthy for not paying for their "fair share" of American government. When the Supreme Court struck down part of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA, better known as McCain-Feingold) in the *Citizens United* decision, President Obama castigated the Supreme Court during the State of the Union speech in 2010, with the justices present, for not preventing the wealthy from perverting American politics and choosing to defend free political speech instead.

As recently as [July of last year](#), Obama was still demanding that Congress pass the DISCLOSE Act as an antidote to the *Citizens United* decision, and wagged his finger at Senate Republicans for not supporting it. "Republicans in the Senate had the chance to change it," Obama said in an official White House statement. "They had the opportunity to support a bill that would prevent the worst effects of the *Citizens United* decision and require groups or special interests who are trying to influence elections to reveal their donors so the public will know who's funding their political ads."

Clearly, the White House and President Obama object to having the wealthy influence elections with their cash. When it comes to influencing the government, however, that's a different story. [The New York Times' Nick Confessore](#) reported over the weekend that Obama's former presidential campaign-turned-activist group, Organizing for America (OFA), has begun a fundraising drive and wants to attract big donors. And it has something to sell — access to the president and seats on an advisory panel.

Half of the funding for OFA is expected to come from wealthy donors, each pledging to raise and/or donate \$500,000 to kick into the tax-exempt "social welfare group." Obama's aides will

appear at fundraising events for OFA, which should raise eyebrows on its own. But the benefit of the big-ticket donations should drop jaws as well as raise eyebrows:

"Giving or raising \$500,000 or more puts donors on a national advisory board for Mr. Obama's group and the privilege of attending quarterly meetings with the president, along with other meetings at the White House," Confessore reports. "Moreover, the new cash demands on Mr. Obama's top donors and bundlers come as many of them are angling for appointments to administration jobs or ambassadorships."

There is nothing new about selling ambassadorships, not in this administration or that of any American president in recent memory. Ambassadorships have long been a perk for donors and cronies, especially to countries with lower strategic value. The outright sale of seats for meetings at the White House is something very new, however, and amounts to a form of simony at the Church of Hope and Change.

It's especially egregious considering the context of other presidential advisory boards. Obama launched the Simpson-Bowles commission (officially the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform) and then apparently [only met with them once](#) to discuss their deficit-cutting efforts. Obama also formed a "Jobs Council" in early 2011 to defend himself against criticism for having too few advisers with real-world business experience and losing focus on the economy. In the two years of the council's existence, it officially met a total of four times, only one of which was with Obama, and [hadn't held an official meeting in the year previous to its expiration](#) at the end of January 2013.

Big donors to OFA, however, will get much more attention. Instead of a cursory single briefing on piddling issues like the explosion of national debt and the dearth of job creation in the Obama recovery, OFA donors get quarterly sessions with the president to discuss ... "social welfare." Forget what this says about integrity in governance; what does it say about the priorities of the president?

"This just looks bad," remarked NBC's Chuck Todd on MSNBC's *Morning Joe*. "It looks like the White House is selling access.... If you believe money has a stranglehold over the entire political system, this is ceding the moral high ground."

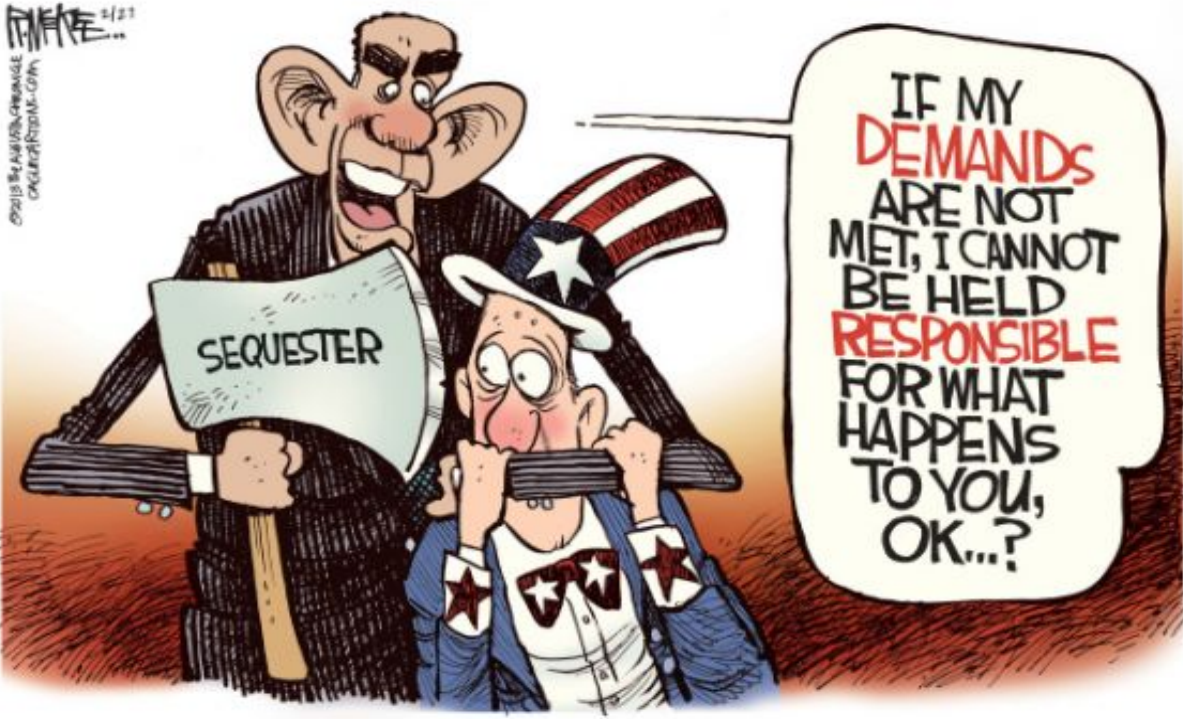
It cedes a lot more than that. While no one should be surprised by a politician from Chicago innovating new ways to sell political power, the entire exercise demonstrates just how misguided campaign-finance efforts have been for the last several decades. In attempts to impose artificial restrictions and definitions on money (hard money, soft money, super PACs), we have created such a byzantine labyrinth of organization that it all but eliminates accountability for messaging and ethics. Without those "reforms," an organization like OFA wouldn't exist, because those donors would send their money directly to candidates and political parties, who would then be accountable for the cash they received from their donors and the messaging and policies that resulted.

This is just another reminder that the only real reform that will improve the political process is the end of all these artificial distinctions and limits, replaced instead by a requirement for immediate transparency. It's also another reminder that the politicians that scold the most about transparency and integrity are the ones that provide the least amount of both

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"Aw, jeez. It's Obama's sequester spokesman."





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