

The justices and the scramble for cash

Over many years both inside and outside Congress, I saw very little outright corruption. But frequently I saw money's disproportionate influence on the decisions of government.

Many trends in American politics and government today make me worry about the health of our representative democracy. These include the decline of Congress as a powerful, coequal branch of government, the accumulation of power in the presidency, and the impact of money on the overall political process.

Recently, the Supreme Court's five-member majority declared that it's unconstitutional to limit the aggregate amount an individual can give to candidates, political parties and political action committees.

Campaign contributions amplify free speech, these justices maintain, and campaign finance laws violate the First Amendment: any limit on the ability of individuals to contribute to candidates is a restraint of free speech. The only legitimate cause for the government to step in is to fight blatant, obvious corruption; it should not act to limit access and influence by well-to-do donors. The result of this decision will almost certainly increase the impact of money on the political system.

The problem is, money doesn't have to be handed over in an envelope filled with \$100 bills to be harmful. The Supreme Court decision seems to be insensitive to what money is doing to the political system.

Big money is here to stay in politics. Those of us who wish it were otherwise have lost that argument at least for the near term.

But we weren't mistaken about the impact of free-flowing campaign cash on the system. Politicians need large sums of money to run for office, and they spend a lot of time raising it. They are keenly attuned to generous donors. Inevitably, this gives more political influence to the relative handful of wealthy donors (only a few thousand at best) who choose to "invest" in politics and often, though not invariably, get what they want. The influence of voters without the financial means to command attention is diminished.

Lawmakers, of course, insist that big donors get nothing in response for their contributions except, perhaps, for a little face time. I am skeptical of that claim. Money buys access that people without money don't get, and access is nothing less than an opportunity to affect legislation.

It is a rare politician who can remain entirely uninfluenced by large political contributions to his or her campaign. After all, members of Congress seek assignments to committees that are known to be useful for fundraising, and those wealthy individuals and interests spend large sums on wooing and electing politicians for a purpose: to get public policy favorable to their views and interests.

Over many years both inside and outside Congress, I saw little outright corruption, but on a frequent basis I could see money's disproportionate influence on the decisions of government and its distortion of our representative democracy. With their decision the justices may have expanded personal liberty, but they've done so lopsidedly: boosting the liberty of ordinary individuals who cannot afford to give to political campaigns gains them nothing in the way of political influence.

The Court's decision further empowers a few rich people and disempowers many ordinary people. This is not a desirable direction for our representative government. Our system should encourage a government responsive to all citizens, not just a few.

What can we do? I would prefer that the president and Congress step in and design rules of campaign finance that would reverse the growing influence of money on our campaigns, but that does not appear likely to happen. Indeed, even now opponents of campaign finance laws are preparing challenges to the remaining limits on individual contributions and to the easily-avoided disclosure laws we already have. I'm certain they'll get a sympathetic hearing in the Supreme Court.

Paradoxically, this may be our best hope. Because I also believe that Americans are growing tired of the outsized impact that great wealth enjoys in politics, and that a backlash to the Court's decisions is taking shape. My sense is that growing numbers of ordinary voters are recognizing that money is a poison in our system. I fervently hope that support for public financing and for muscular disclosure laws will grow with time, because our politics will be more democratic, more honest, and more free if we reduce the impact of money on elections.

Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.



The joy of cooking for a loved one

Just because I sometimes throw some vegetables and chicken into a Chinese wok, Jim thinks I'm a gourmet cook. I'm certainly no chef, but I do like to cook.

Before we married I overheard him tell someone, "Yeah, not only can she cook - but she will."

Cooking for my family or friends is one of my pleasures. I'm not an artist nor a musician, but cooking and/or baking is my artistic expression. Call me traditional, but it baffles me when I hear women say they hate to cook.

Eating is a necessity. Can't live without it. You could exist on nothing but raw fruits, vegetables and nuts which are good for you, of course. Truth be known, you could even keep drawing breath on processed bologna, soda pop and TV dinners. The question is: why would you?

With a little effort (and a good recipe) you can take those same raw ingredients, add spices, heat and probably butter for something incredibly palatable and pleasing to the eye. Empty serving bowls is your stamp of approval.

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



Oh, I have had some miserable culinary failures. Just ask Jim. To his credit, though, he will try anything I sit before him. His reaction to a new concoction might be, "You don't have to fix that again." Hopefully, my "hits" have outnumbered my "misses."

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All this talk of food reminds me of my new toy.

Jim gets excited over a new hammer-drill. I feel the same way about my new meat grinder attachment for my stand-up mixer, a gift from my cousin, Christine.

Two weeks ago when I drove my sister to Denver to catch a plane back to Florida, we spent the night with our

cousin, Christine, her husband, Jim, and our Aunt Bernice. Now, Chris is a gourmet cook and she just happens to work part-time at Williams Sonoma. She served a lovely meal of fresh green salad, her homemade oil and balsamic vinegar dressing, baked broccoli florets, pasta and chicken ragout, raspberry iced tea, and tangy lemon squares for dessert.

Conversation, of course, turned to food. I had admired her industrial size stand-up mixer and shared that my Jim had gifted me with a regular sized one for Christmas a year ago. "I've been shopping," I told her, "for the meat grinder attachment. I would love to make my own hamburger."

Last week, I almost tripped on a box set just inside my front door. The return address was not familiar and, at first, I thought it was some car part Jim had ordered. But no. It was addressed to me. I tore open the box and there was a brand new meat grinder attachment, compliments of my cousin.

Fair warning. If there is a roast on sale, anywhere, hands off! It's mine.

Silent testimony to the human cost of war

Few experiences are more powerful or moving than a visit to a cemetery on Memorial Day. Unlike a military cemetery where rows upon rows of graves give silent testimony to the human cost of war, in most Kansas cemeteries the stories of the dead - young, old, male and female - tell a story about the community.

But like their battlefield counterparts, cemeteries that dot the Kansas countryside are the resting place for veterans. Some of these graves are filled with young men who barely reached adulthood when they died. Their stories tell of dreams unfulfilled, of promises and potentials cut short.

When visiting these places, it is possible to be overcome with a sense of yearning. It is also possible to feel something larger, a sense of finality and rest, and a sense of peace.

The soldiers from World War I, World War II, the Korean conflict, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom and Afghanistan are at rest in these cemeteries. They live on in the memory of their families and friends and, in a larger sense, in the memory and gratitude of the nation they gave their lives for. Lingering among the memories is always the nagging question: Did they die in vain?

On Memorial Day, Kansans will once again gather in cemeteries in

Insight

John Schlageck



Iola, Valley Falls, Meade, Washington, Hoisington or Grinnell to recall and reassure themselves that the lives and deaths of these young men and women had meaning.

When we think of our liberties this Memorial Day, remember that some gave all. Remember those veterans who died so we could remain free.

Only a handful of those who served in World War I remain, and the number who served in World War II dwindle daily. Vietnam veterans have reached middle age and today's young men and women are the veterans of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

For many their story remains the same. They grew up as farm kids in the Midwest or some other region of our country. Those from the Midwest grew up with the feel of the prairie earth beneath their feet, the wide-open sky overhead and the rhythm of the seasons in their blood.

At an early age, most of the young men and women learned to cultivate

the soil, plant crops and harvest the bounty with their parents. Like many farm boys and girls, they understood machinery and the use of tools. They developed self-reliance and initiative.

Soon, many found themselves in another field far from home. This field was a battlefield in Europe, the Far East, Vietnam or the Middle East. These veterans become the unsung heroes of war.

But these young men and women were not repairing a combine in a harvest field or operating a small business on Main Street. Instead, they were patching up a tank under enemy fire, threading their way through the jungles of Vietnam, avoiding anti-personnel mines in Iraq or keeping an eye peeled for snipers in Afghanistan.

This Memorial Day, mothers, fathers, families and friends will travel to cemeteries across Kansas and our country. Once on those hallowed grounds, they will pause to remember and pray for the young men and women who did not return from war. For many, visiting a cemetery on Memorial Day somehow eases the pain and loss of loved ones.

At the same time let's give thanks and remember those veterans who are still with us. Let's not forget those serving around the world today in the armed forces.

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OFFICE HOURS:
8 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Mon.-Thur.
8 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Friday
Phone: (785) 877-3361
Fax: (785) 877-3732

STAFF

Dana Paxton..... General Manager
Advertising Director
dpaxton@nwkansas.com
Dick Boyd..... Blue Jay Sports
nortontelegram@nwkansas.com
Michael Stephens..... Reporter
Managing Editor
mstephens@nwkansas.com
Shylo Paxton..... Society Editor
spaxton@nwkansas.com
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I would like to give a thumbs up for Gabe and Zach Bird for getting their high school diplomas. Congratulations boys for a great achievement. Emailed in.

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