



From *The K Street Gang: The Rise and Fall of the Republican Machine* (Copyright 2006 Matthew Continetti):

“One wonders what Nietzsche would have thought of the American capital, which continually experiences cycles of scandal and reform. One party runs to clean up the other party’s mess, staying in power only to make a mess of things themselves. In 1974, Democrats enjoyed a spate of congressional victories as voters reacted to President Nixon’s Watergate scandal. Twenty years later, Republicans enjoyed a landslide as voters reacted to the Democratic Congress’s and President Clinton’s own scandals and disagreeable policies. The ground shifts quickly beneath our feet. These cycles go far back into the past, beginning with the reform movements led by Jefferson and Jackson in the early days of the Republic, and they will undoubtedly continue far into the future. “The paradox, of course, is that each epoch of reform plants new seeds that sprout during the next season of scandal.

“A common reaction to the exposure of Abramoff’s crimes is to ask, Why did this happen? For some Democratic partisans, the answer lies in what they see as the natural and self-evident malevolence of conservative Republicans. But this is an explanation that fails to explain. The truth is that the Abramoff case, and the other major bribery scandal in Washington—involving convicted former representative Randy ‘Duke’ Cunningham—are the outgrowth of a system of politics constructed in the aftermath of the last great political scandal.

“The liberal majorities elected to Congress in 1974 drew several incorrect lessons from Nixon’s wrongdoing. First, they focused most closely on how the president and his staff manipulated campaign finances to criminal ends, placing blame not on the activities themselves, which were already illegal, but on the very idea of money in politics. Second, they saw Watergate not as an isolated criminal incident but rather as an example of an ‘imperial presidency,’ which required them to place constraints on its power. And third, their fury was so great that they also wanted to reform Congress and, as it’s said, ‘change the way business is done in Washington.’

“Our politics is still conditioned by the laws those reformers enacted. There was Title VI of the Ethics in Government Act, otherwise known as the independent counsel statute, enacted in 1978 and allowed to die a quiet death in 1999. There were the Church Committee reforms of the U.S. intelligence services, which gutted the CIA’s human-intelligence capabilities. In 1974, Congress passed comprehensive campaign finance reform, regulating donations to candidates and candidate expenditures. A Supreme Court decision two years later rescinded the regulations governing expenditures, but the strict limits on giving remained. An individual could donate only \$1,000 to a political candidate. Political Action Committees, or PACs, could donate only \$5,000. Those

amounts changed over time. But the idea that the means of politics were subject to regulation by politicians did not.

“These reforms did nothing to stop the flow of money in politics. Remember that political campaigns are expensive. Congressional campaigns can cost \$1 million or more—much more if you are running for the Senate, a governorship, or the presidency. Raising that much money in \$1,000 increments is difficult and time-consuming. You need help. And so you turn to lobbyists, who have the resources and connections to provide maximum individuals contributions, and can also ‘bundle’ money from many different individuals. “This has led to to some unintended consequences. The Watergate reforms increased the demand for lobbyists, and in the late 1970s the numbers of them in Washington began to rise. The reforms also gave an advantage to incumbents—who, since they were already in Washington, knew more lobbyists, and could spend more time at fund-raisers held in sports arenas and chic restaurants—and also to the wealthy, who could finance their own campaigns without restriction. ‘Reform’ further changed the nature of the relationship between the electorate and the elected. When campaigns were financed in a variety of ways, and lawmakers had more time for politics as opposed to fund-raising, there was more of an opportunity for them to consider the interests of those they represented. The constant money-grubbing of today acts as an isolation chamber, closing off the avenues through which lawmakers are able to see beyond their donors. Finally, the reforms increased the importance of unregulated ‘soft money,’ which often came from shady places, including foreign agents and even foreign governments. (Soft money was banned in 2002, which led to the use of unregulated 527 groups. Nothing changed.)”

--From the Epilogue: “The Cure: Spectators to an Orgy of ‘Reform.’”