

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

Even a state...plundered and mauled, stripped of moral armor, might be tolerable if only the activity of government were confined to its ancient bounds. But modern populations, upon whom a popular press bestows presumption without knowledge, are resolved to extend the functions of government immeasurably beyond its old duties of defense and maintenance of internal order; for the public is now fascinated with the possibility of obtaining necessities and comforts through action of the state, even to the exclusion of those liberties which once were so resounding a rallying-cry. Economic appetites, now the masters of all classes, incline the public to demand a paternalistic regime; they encourage a variety of cheap Utopian fancies, as popular as they are gross; they lead almost invariably to manipulation of the value of money by the state, with its consequent inflation and insecurity; they are an excuse for profuse public expenditure; they make the labor question doubly dangerous; and the delusion, already dismayingly general, that prosperity depends upon the action of government, must lead to socialism, if wholly triumphant – to a common poverty of body and mind which masquerades as common gratification....Corrupt and stupid governments may be tolerated when their activities are confined by prescription to a small and certain sphere; in this age of aggrandizement, however, corrupt and stupid governments deliver us up precipitately to class warfare and international anarchy.

Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 1953.

THE IRON BIANGLE, REDUX.

Eight years ago, when George W. Bush was running for president against then-Vice President Al Gore and battling rumors and insinuations about his past alcohol use, everyone, it seemed, was looking for smoking-gun evidence of the Texas governor's drunken debauchery, preferably photographic evidence. Rather than squelch such a quest, we actually thought the Bush team should aid the search, if not join it enthusiastically. If there were no pictures of George W. dancing naked on a bar table with a lampshade on his head, we suggested, then the campaign should have the good sense to have some taken. Running a serious campaign against the notoriously wooden and incredibly dreary Gore was bound to be a downer, and we thought that Bush would do well if he made a little effort to liven things up.

After all, Bill Clinton had run in 1992 fighting off multiple "bimbo eruptions" and had been elected. He had run again in '96 as the "willing-to-break-any-rule-necessary-to-win" candidate. And again he won. Finally, he was preparing to leave office as one of the most popular presidents in recent history, in large part because, if

In this Issue

The Iron Biangle, Redux.

Subscriptions are available by contacting:

The Political Forum LLC 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Phone 540.477.9762 Fax 540.477.3359 melcher@thepoliticalforum.com www.thepoliticalforum.com

nothing else, he was immensely entertaining. Between the trysts in the oval office, the brazen attempts to define copulative verbs, and the incessant swirl of rumors, half-truths, and implications, all of which at least seemed believable, Bill was better entertainment than anything the brain-dead Marxists in Hollywood could ever dream up.

A few years earlier, Father Richard John Neuhaus wrote that people were mesmerized by the Clintons because watching the two of them was sort of like watching “with fascinating disgust as an unstoppable toilet backs up into their living room.” And he was right, ooooooh so right. Of course, his was just a more colorful way of saying what we ourselves wrote last week, namely that “politics has become one of the leading forms of spectator entertainment in the United States, rivaling professional sports and celebrity vulgarity....”

All of this, naturally, brings us to John McCain, who, as almost everyone knows by now, was the subject/victim of a *New York Times* exposé last week on his “relationship” with a blonde lobbyist, thirty-one years his junior. *The Times*, which throughout the Clinton years insisted that character was an overrated characteristic in a politician, nonetheless was keenly interested in the type of behavior in which this *Republican* politician did or did not indulge on this young blonde’s behalf (if you know what we mean, *wink, wink*).

Now, the conventional wisdom on the right is that for all their effort to smear the GOP nominee in the very week in which he unofficially sewed up the nomination, the folks at the *Times* actually did McCain a favor and unintentionally made it easier for him to rally all of the various Republican factions to his side and to unify the party heading into the general election campaign.

For starters, McCain appears to be the victim here of shoddy, agenda-driven journalism at best, and a nasty left-wing media smear at worst, a smear which even many liberal editors, including those at the *Boston Globe*, a paper wholly owned by *The New York*

Times, condemned as unseemly. Impossible though it might have seemed, the *Times* actually made the curmudgeonly McCain appear sympathetic.

Additionally, the entire episode gives the right an opportunity to rally in opposition to a common enemy – in this case the dastardly left-wing media, led by the truly loathsome “Gray Lady.” As the *Chicago Tribune* columnist Steve Chapman noted, the *Times* made it possible for the conservative base to echo the supporters of Grover Cleveland, who in 1884 rallied to their man based on the premise that “We love him most for the enemies he has made.” Certainly the *Times* couldn’t have intended such an outcome, but the paper’s exposé has produced nothing but positive effects for the McCain campaign.

For our part, we won’t dispute the conventional wisdom on this issue. Thus far, the McCain team has made the most of this. We would, however, note that if the Senator and his campaign staff let the story drop here, they will miss an even greater opportunity to score political points and to exploit the *Times*’ blunder to the fullest. In our opinion, if McCain plays this correctly and prudently, he can actually amplify the benefit to his campaign, turning this incident into a public relations triumph that eases concerns about his age and health. More to the point, he can also use the story to justify a significant shift in policy, one that will make perfect sense, will allow the Senator to win back some of those who have been angrily alienated by his previous policy positions, and will make it possible to unify the conservative movement behind the vision and leadership of a man willing to admit when he is wrong.

Public relations is the easy part of this, of course. McCain doesn’t actually have to do anything here, since the *Times* did it all for him. We’re not sure whether the reporters and editors at that august institution thought they were being clever or thought they could bring back the heady days of what Democrats used to call “sexual McCarthyism,” but whatever their motivation, it backfired. McCain quickly and emphatically denied the alleged affair, and most of the *Times*’ fellow mainstream media-types

decried the paper's slide into tabloid journalism. In retrospect, even some of the big shots at the *Times*, namely public editor Clark Hoyt, have criticized the paper for offering no proof of a sexual relationship between McCain and the lobbyist in question (Vicki Iseman) and for having to rely on the word of some *anonymous disgruntled former McCain aides* who *at one time* thought that *maybe* the Senator was involved in something *inappropriate*. Not exactly Pulitzer material, to say the least.

At the same time, the fact that the *Times* even linked McCain with a sexual misconduct story has the potential to help his campaign by making the candidate seem more human, more ordinary, more entertaining, and yes, younger. As we said of George Bush some eight years ago, if McCain's campaign didn't dupe the *Times* into running this story purportedly smearing the Senator for getting too cozy with the help, they should have. Suddenly the old, cragged, policy-obsessed scold has a human side. What more could he ask for? As the *National Review's* Andrew Stuttaford wrote last week, this episode "brings to mind one of the classic anecdotes about [British Prime Minister Benjamin] Disraeli":

The background to it was that the Tory leader's principal political opponent, the 70-something Lord Palmerston had (as a writer in the *Daily Telegraph* put it a couple of years ago) "been caught with a chambermaid on a billiards table in a stately home in Suffolk" (as it happens, I've read other, marginally less colorful versions of what it was that Lord Palmerston had been doing, but let's just say that all of them would have been disappointing to Lady Palmerston). One of Disraeli's advisers then suggested that the story be spread around, to which the great man replied: "Good heavens, no! If this gets out, he will sweep the country!"

As one could have guessed, given the negative reaction to the *Times's* sexed-up piece, a secondary approach to this story has been favored by the rest of the

mainstream media (e.g. *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, the *AP*) and others on the left, including the Obama campaign, an approach that plays down the "sex" angle of the story and insists that the aspect of this tale that really matters is McCain's involvement in the unseemly intersection of politics and lobbying. St. John of Phoenix, the scourge of lobbyists and campaign contributors everywhere, has been caught doing favors and pulling levers for lobbyists who have contributed to his campaign and with whom he has a friendly relationship. For shame!

Now, never mind that none of what McCain is accused of doing is illegal or even unethical by Washington standards. It is, we are told, unethical by McCain's standards, which, according to his new critics, means he's a hypocrite. And as every schoolboy knows, to the leftists, Republican hypocrisy is the greatest, most common, and least forgivable sin of all.

Certainly, we understand why the left would think that this would be the best and most painful place to hit McCain. On matters of money in politics, he is, to put it delicately, a preening, moralistic, self-righteous gasbag. Thus, the fact that he has been just as susceptible to the lures of campaign cash and wiles of shiny blonde lobbyists as any other politician, would appear a natural source of criticism. Of course, contrarians that we are, we tend to see things a bit differently. We actually believe the intersection of money and politics is the point at which McCain has the greatest chance to score politically and to solidify his support among the various factions of the Republican base.

Consider for a moment what this must look like from John McCain's perspective. Here he has dedicated a large part of his political career to eradicating the influence of moneyed interests on the political process. Early in his career he had a close call with real estate developer Charles Keating, and he used the second life given to him when he was, for all intents and purposes, exonerated from the most heinous charges made in the "Keating Five" scandal to make amends for his missteps. He absolutely and unquestionably dedicated himself to making it more

difficult for other unwitting and erstwhile honest politicians to fall into the same trap he did. He has been as scrupulous as possible in his personal dealings with lobbyists and was almost single-handedly responsible for enacting a new and complicated set of rules intended to lessen the deleterious effects of money in politics. He should, by all rights, be a hero to those who agree with the great American political scientist Theodore Lowi that the influence of “special interests” on politics has distorted expectations of government and deligitimizes public policy. But he’s not.

After all his work, all his blood and sweat, and all the animosity of his GOP colleagues earned by betraying them and siding with the Democrats and the mainstream media, the Democrats and the press still come after him. He has been as honest and conscientious as any politician in the last quarter century. But still he is answering questions about what lobbyists he did or did not do favors for and whether there was any *quid pro quo* involved in his friendships with various big-time political and business players. What is a man to do?

The answer, we think, is simple, though we can’t guarantee that anyone in the McCain camp would agree. The answer here is simply to accept reality. And reality is that “special interests” are as much a part of the American political system as the bureaucracy, the Congressional committee system, or any other political institution not explicitly defined by the Constitution but nevertheless crucial to the functioning of government. As we noted almost exactly eight years ago in an article entitled “The Iron Biangle,” “special interests,” are one of the three most important players in the legislative/regulatory process. To wit:

The iron triangle or “sub-government” model of public policy, was “popularized” in the 1960s by Theodore Lowi. . . who discussed the idea at considerable length in his classic 1969 book (revised in 1979), *The End of Liberalism*.

In a nutshell, Lowi’s thesis is that the triangular connections between special interests, legislators, and bureaucrats has rendered obsolete the old liberal-conservative dialogue that had dominated American politics for so many years, slowly replacing it with a system he called “interest group liberalism.”

Briefly stated, this sub-government/iron triangle theory describes a situation where interest groups throw money at legislators, who, in turn, lean on bureaucrats over whom they have oversight authority. Bureaucrats, for their part, seek to maximize their utility and their budgets by favoring special interests well-represented by powerful legislators. They also restart the cycle over and over again by proposing an endless stream of regulations. These proposed regulations rankle special interests, who throw money at legislators . . .

The fact of the matter is that lobbyists have become an indispensable part of the American political system. Dastardly lobbyists represent nearly every component of American society, from union laborers and trial lawyers to Wall Street analysts and hedge fund managers to meat cutters and snack food distributors to the elderly and the infirmed. It is most likely true that the system is distorting and tends to favor the well-heeled over the Average Joe. But there’s no denying that the “special interests” against whom politicians like John McCain like to rail are, by and large, a solid cross-section of the American public.

Moreover, in the advance of the “administrative state,” in which bureaucrats and government functionaries possess highly technical and specialized knowledge not generally available to the general public, special interests serve as a separate, alternative repository of data, stats, and figures, most of which will be as biased against state intervention as their bureaucratic equivalents will be in favor of government action. So in this sense too, special interests, i.e. lobbyists and moneyed interests, serve the public interest.

Allan Cigler, a prominent expert on interest group politics, a professor of political science at the University of Kansas, and, as such, the long-ago undergraduate advisor to one half of The Political Forum staff, was quoted in *the Washington Post* a couple of years back noting the necessity of lobbies and special interests in the age of the administrative state. “Much of lobbying today is watching all the change that’s going on in Washington,” Cigler told the *Post*’s Jeffrey Birnbaum. “Companies need more people just to stay apprised of what regulators are doing.” He’s right, of course. Companies need to stay apprised. Union members need to stay apprised. Taxi drivers need to stay apprised. Farmers need to stay apprised. *Everyone* needs to stay apprised of what the ever-growing bureaucracy is doing, saying, and regulating. That’s the way it works in the face of the perpetually expanding Leviathan.

And that brings us back to McCain. If McCain truly wants to make this story work for him, if he truly wants to negate the impact that the charges against him might have and, at the same, time, strengthen his appeal to both informed voters and conservative voters (who, it should go without saying, are also informed voters), then he should simply acknowledge reality. “Yes,” he should say, “I have both helped and been helped by lobbyists. But I have done so in the interests of the American people and only in those circumstances where the lobbyists’ interests coincided with the public interest.” He should concede that money and special interests play a significant role in the system and that to try to bar moneyed interests from affecting government behavior would violate the First Amendment’s guarantee “to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

He doesn’t have to say that he welcomes any and all contributions or that he thinks every politician should grab as much cash as he can. No, he simply has to say, “If someone as honest and trustworthy as I still finds a need to consort with special interests, then special interests clearly have a vital role to play in our government.” And that would set him up to make the most important and radical declaration of all.

You see, given the importance of special interests to the federal government, the fact of the matter is that the only way to lessen the impact of special interests is to lessen the impact of the federal government. The problem, as we have long noted, is not the money chasing power in Washington, it’s the power in Washington that the money is chasing. Or to turn Allan Cigler’s formulation on its head: if the companies (and unions, and meat packers, etc.) did not have to stay so apprised of what regulators are doing, then much of the lobbying today would be unnecessary.

All of this, of course, is just a long-winded way of stating a corollary to Lord Acton’s dictum: if power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, then the way to reduce corruption is to reduce power.

Can you imagine what the Rush Limbaughs, Sean Hannities, and Mark Steyns of the world would do if McCain were simply to follow this alleged scandal to its logical conclusion and thus to decide that the only *real* way to reduce the corruptive capacity of money in Washington is to reduce the size and power of the government in Washington? Needless to say, the currently despised Republican nominee would quickly become the *formerly* despised Republican nominee in many, if not all, conservative circles.

The real question, naturally, is whether this is something that one could expect or even consider a possibility. And to be perfectly honest with you, we’re not entirely sure. Our instincts tell us that McCain is too stubborn, too ignorant of the realities of American politics, and too involved in his media-legacy of “good government” even to think about altering course and accepting reality.

At the same time, it’s hard to see how he weasels his way out of this mess without doing something extreme. The bottom line here is that McCain has made his personal reputation, his integrity, and his immunity to the temptations that befall other politicians the central themes of his campaign, and even of his entire political persona. And whether or

not he had any sort of “inappropriate” relationship with Vicki Iseman or anyone else, he has, essentially, been caught violating his own principles, which may well have the effect of undercutting his personal narrative and his campaign themes.

As things stand right now, the *New York Times*' smear of John McCain has actually strengthened the Senator's candidacy and made him appear a more viable candidate. But we suspect this boost will be short-lived. If the Senator is truly going to capitalize on this misstep by the liberal establishment, then he is going to have to figure out a way to reconcile his personal narrative with reality. We think that such reconciliation is not only possible but could be rather simple. The sticking point, of course, is McCain's world-renowned pride. Does he have the good political sense to set aside his pride to advance a greater cause? Or would he rather fail and be remembered as a beaten, broken, but nevertheless proud man who was too stubborn to see reality?

Copyright 2008. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved.

Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.