



A Review of Schweizer's "Extortion"

As the days count down to the 2014 midterm  elections, Peter Schweizer's most recent book, *Extortion*, is a powerful reminder that personal interests are often of vastly greater significance to many elected officials than ideological commitments or statesmanship.

Schweizer's book has raised hackles in the leadership of both major political parties because the author offers an unflinching examination of the ethics of elected officials and finds them wanting. Schweizer notes that while there has been a great deal of discussion of the role of lobbyists in corrupting the political system, the truth is that the corruption is often rooted within the offices of the elected representatives:

But a deeper, more sinister problem that has been overlooked better explains the dismal state of our national government: *politics is corrupting money*. While we have focused on the power that contributors have over officials, we have largely ignored the power that officials have over contributors. We have focused on the *buyers* of influence (those outside special interests), but paid little heed to the *sellers* of influence — bureaucrats and politicians.

In short, we have come to believe the problem in Washington is a sort of legalized bribery. If outside interests can only be held at bay, we can and will get better leadership.

But what if we are wrong? What if the problem is not bribery ... but extortion?

Schweizer's analysis of the political process at work in Washington, D.C., is one which contrasts the machinations of the political class with the tactics of organized crime. Throughout the book's 10 chapters, the unifying thread is the similarity between, on the one hand, the legislative and regulatory processes, and, on the other hand, the "protection" rackets often associated with organized crime. In Schweizer's words, "The Chicago Mob (often called 'the Outfit') believed that the best way to extort people was to 'throw fear' at them. In Washington, politicians can throw fear at individuals in a lot of different ways." This system of extortion has developed its own terminology:

There's a lexicon for modern political extortion. Politicians from some parts of the country refer to "milker bills" which are intended to "milk" companies and individuals to pass or stop legislation that will benefit or hurt them. Others call them "juicer bills" because they are introduced largely for the purpose of squeezing money out of the target. Some call them "fetcher bills" because they are drafted and introduced to "fetch" lavish and lucrative attention from lobbyists and powerful interests. Whatever you call them, these bills are designed not to make good law, but rather to raise money. The politicians are not necessarily interested in having the bill pass. Often these bills are very narrow in focus and would do little to benefit their constituents.

Indeed, politicians often don't want these bills to pass because if they do, the opportunity for future extortion is removed.

As noted in a [review](#) of one of Schweizer's earlier books, *Architects of Ruin*, the author has a gift for combining careful research with an accessible style of writing. This is what makes his books so dangerous, from the perspective of those who are doing the extorting. And Schweizer does not hesitate to target some of the biggest names in American politics as so-called masters of extortion, including



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President Barack Obama, Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-Ohio), and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.). Thus, for example, Schweizer notes that Boehner has become the master of a form of extortion known as the “tollbooth”:

Along with milker bills, another popular method of extraction used by a congressman in a position of leadership or the chair of a powerful committee is the “tollbooth.” The Speaker of the House or a powerful chairman will erect one on the eve of an important vote. Donations are solicited days before a vote is scheduled to take place. If the tribute offered by those who want the bill is not large enough, the vote will be delayed. Tom DeLay made an art of this practice. As we will see, Speaker of the House John Boehner has perfected it.

An entire chapter — “The Double-Milker” — is devoted to the Obama administration’s alleged shakedown of both the entertainment industry and the “tech sector” over proposed legislation regarding “antipiracy” bills. As Schweizer notes, between June and September 2011, “President Obama had more fund-raisers in California than in any other state.” And “the milking worked: the tech industry brought in more than \$10 million over the second half of 2011, up from \$1.7 million in the first half. As the Permanent Political Class well knows, panic produces checks.”

The author notes that the actions of the politicians which he deems “extortion” are usually not actually illegal: “The Permanent Political Class does not operate outside of the law. They are not actively breaking laws, and they do not fear jail time. Instead, they use extralegal means to extort their money. It is what makes them so successful, and their ‘family’ so profitable. Their extralegal options even extend to our legal system, which we expect and hope will be impartial and fair.”

Arguably, the doctrine of original sin rests at the heart of Schweizer’s analysis: “We need to start with a simple proposition: bureaucrats and politicians are just like other people.... This is not to say that there are no good, honest, and decent people in politics and government. But by and large, people are people: politicians and bureaucrats are as self-seeking as members of other professions, such as bankers on Wall Street or film producers in Hollywood.” Again, as Schweizer notes in his conclusion:

Dante, in *The Inferno*, placed corrupt politicians in the eighth circle of hell, the penultimate in eternal damnation. Yet as Lord Acton famously said, power corrupts. We must assume that the temptation to corruption is universal in Washington, and we must create earthly punishments to deter it.

Operating from this assessment, Schweizer offers several proposals for reforming the system, including banning the solicitation or receipt of campaign funds while Congress is in session (thus eliminating the ability to “shakedown” potential donors during the process of considering a particular piece of legislation). Whether or not one agrees with such various proposals for reform, *Extortion* offers a helpful analysis of an aspect of the overall corruption which afflicts the body politic. The author’s careful documentation and his evenhanded treatment of the two major political parties make *Extortion* a valuable resource for those readers who wish to better understand the state of our Republic.

Peter Schweizer, *Extortion — How Politicians Extract Your Money, Buy Votes, and Line Their Own Pockets*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013) 250 pages. Hardcover. \$27.00



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