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"A Few Thoughts on Political Action Committees"

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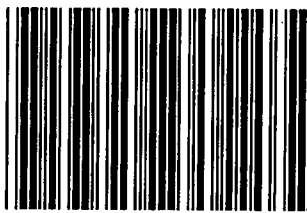
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BAUCUS

DRAFT

A FEW THOUGHTS ON POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEES

STEVE BROWNING

MARCH 11, 1980

There is a strong emerging view among political cynics and pundits that political action committees are increasingly taking over Congressional campaigns. To support this conclusion, some cite the fact that contributions by political action committees nearly tripled (\$12.5 million in 1974 to \$35.1 million in 1978) over the past two elections. Additionally, the number of PACs also rose dramatically during that period. For example, in 1974, there were only 89 corporate PACs, but in 1978, 646 corporate PACs contributed to federal candidates. Indeed, I saw somewhere an observation that the number of PACs is growing daily.

Despite all this hoopla and doomsdaying, I believe the impact of political action committees has not been nearly as significant as the above facts suggest. I did a quick calculation of my own and discovered on a percentage basis the impact of PACs on Congressional campaigns has been relatively unchanged over the past four years. According to my calculations, PACs contribute 17 percent of the funds received by Congressional candidates in 1974 (\$12.5 million of \$74 million received), and that percentage increased only a single point to 18 percent in 1978 (\$35.1 million out of \$194.8 million received).

I don't mean to suggest by all of this that just because the emerging view about the "controlling" effect of PACs is wrong that PAC officials themselves should ignore that view. Indeed, anyone trained in politics knows that perceptions are reality no matter how distorted or erroneous the perceptions might be.

I would like to suggest in this essay a few thoughts on what PACs can do to improve their images. But before I do, I should make a clean breast of my own personal views about PACs.

To begin with, I do not see political action committees as a sinister force in politics. To the contrary, I am reminded of Woodrow Wilson's famous quote that "I believe in democracy because it releases the energies of every human being." It is this release of energy by channeling the interests of individuals that I see as the most reassuring developing with PACs.

Political action committees have been with us nearly this entire century. It wasn't until the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974 which severely restricted individual contributions that greater political action committee activity emerged. In some ways, then, PACs have begun to replace the really large individual contributors that formerly served as the "sugar daddies" of Congressional candidates.

I also maintain the view that Congressional candidates are, on the whole, men and women of high integrity who can't be bought, which leads me to the conclusion that political action committees and any other lawful contributors do not and will not control the political process.

I am also reminded of the old Mark Twain anecdote when, at a dinner party, the subject of eternal life and future punishment came up at a lengthy conversation in which Twain took no part. A lady turned to him suddenly and exclaimed, "Why do you not say anything? I want your opinion." To which Twain replied gravely, "Madam, you must excuse me; I am silent of necessity, I have friends in both places." While I, too, have friends in both places (that is, the heaven of public scrutiny and the hell of Congressional campaign staffs, political action committee members, and Federal Election Commission officials), I think I can walk the tight line without disgruntling too many of them.

Perhaps the best place for me to start would be to focus on the campaign with which I was most recently associated. In 1978,

Congressman Max Baucus ran for the United States Senate from the State of Montana. Montana is a state that historically has been exploited by out of state corporate interests. For example, the Standard Oil Company was once the principal economic force in extracting copper, the number one economic activity in Montana during the nineteenth century. Congressman Baucus' view of these matters was no different than his constituents and he laid down strict orders that contributions by out of state interests, be they individuals or political action committees, should never predominate the campaign.

The Baucus rule about out of state interest was never violated. I must say, however, I was surprised at how distorted some views were about the source of our political funds. For example, our opponent challenged that many of our funds were coming from out of state. He pointed to contributions by the national PACs of realtors, carpenters, doctors, steelworkers, farm groups, rural electric cooperatives, teachers, and dozens of other political action committees with national offices located outside of Montana. All of this struck me as quite curious, because each of those PACs had very active memberships in the State of Montana. Nevertheless, there is a lesson to be learned from all of this and that PACs should develop a better technique for letting the public know that their contributions to Congressional candidates reflect a grass roots concern within any given state or Congressional district.

I believe that political action committees need to improve their image and to expand their mission. They need to understand the growing paranoia of the individual voter about the so-called "special interest" that allegedly control government. They need, in other words, to let all the people know that each of them maintains and is represented by various special interests of their own. In short, much more political education is needed and it is up to the PACs to provide that education. I'm reminded of the old Jeffersonian

axiom that democracy is only as good as the bond between the elected representative and the people who elected him. In my view, it is up to the PACs to insure that their officials spend the time to let the public know that the mission of PACs is to improve the Jeffersonian bond not weaken it. Thus, the "gimme gimme" image of PACs as special interest contributors should be a number one priority of PACs to avoid.

I think, too, that PACs need to improve their image with candidates. There is an old Latin proverb that it is easy to be generous with other people's property, and, unfortunately, that view is becoming all too prevalent among Congressional candidates toward PACs. My experience with PAC officials is that they are not cavalier about how contributions are calculated and distributed to candidates. Yet, much more can be done to let the candidates know how much the PAC has been in touch with the candidate's constituents.

Some of the new PACs need to be better apprised of the role they are playing in Congressional campaigns. Not only must they observe all of the detailed public disclosure and campaign spending laws, but they must understand that they are not "buying votes." Those days are over and we from Montana understand that perhaps better than others, for it was the famous Senate races of William Andrews Clark, the multi-millionaire mining magnate from Butte, Montana that helped bring us such things as bans on campaign contributions by corporations and the direct election of Senators. When Clark ran for the Senate, the electorate was the State Legislature, and he campaigned for votes by offering \$25,000 to each of them, a campaign promise he filled by handing out large envelopes full of cash.

It wasn't too many years ago that one Senator went to prison because he accepted campaign contributions from a political action committee that appreciated the way he had voted and expected him to

continue to do so. The moral of the story is clear: It is okay to contribute on the basis of votes, but don't expect or ask for a commitment by a candidate. Or, as one old Republican official put it, "In politics, you can't be true to all of your friends all of the time."

PACs should be more respectful of candidate's time, particularly when the candidate is an office holder and is duty bound to serve the public. My personal view is that the more respect PACs show to candidates, the more respect the candidates will have for PACs.

Another thought about campaign contributions, be they PAC or individual, is that the earlier they are received, the more they are appreciated by candidates. Which reminds me of Ben Franklin's old adage that there are only three faithful friends -- an old wife, an old dog, and ready money. For anyone who has embarked upon a Congressional campaign knows well that you can't run them on credit; they take early money, and whoever contributes that early money will be a friend for life.

I note an increasing trend occurring among the contributing philosophies of PAC officials away from the "defensive" giving of the past (i.e., "Let's give to the candidate although we don't necessarily agree with his views, because we may need to talk to him again in the future if he is elected ") to a more positive posture (i.e., "Let's give to the candidate who we know will best represent our views in Congress"). I think that view is misguided and fails completely to understand that PACs alone have not and will not control the political electoral process. I think PAC officials would be well advised to remember Thomas Jefferson's wisdom that "an injured friend is the bitterest of foes."

I don't always agree with Jefferson. Too often he was too cynical. For example, he once said that "Politics is such a torment

that I would advise everyone I love not to mix with it." As I recall Gordon Straughn in the Ervin Watergate hearings spelled out such a message to the youth of our nation. I disagree with such cynacism and I see great hope in expanding the participation by PACs and people in the democratic process of electing Congressional candidates.

The recent increased turn out at the Presidential primaries and caucuses for the 1980 Presidential election reconfirms my view that all of us have a great stake in insuring freer fuller elections.