
The King's Protection

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This selection first appeared in *Newsweek*, January 12, 1998, p. 72. In this article Greenfield argues that campaign contributions are tribute that attempts to buy safe passage, not bribes. Campaign contributions have grown, in her view, because the powers held by government officials have grown.

Much of 1997 in Washington was spent looking for the elusive *quid pro quo*, as in *quid pro quo*, and meaning the payoff. What did all those industries and individuals get or expect to get in return for their hefty campaign contributions to incumbents in both parties? Why, both at home and abroad, did they respond with such alacrity and largesse to the big shots' solicitations? As usual, the search for evidence of specific rewards for the money has been largely unavailing, as has been true in many political bribery criminal cases for years. There have been a few demonstrable examples of particular official favors granted directly for money. But, to the frustration of prosecutors and investigators and media sleuths, there have not been very many—and surely not in numbers commensurate with the widespread suspicions and charges. This is taken as vindication, as evidence of innocence by whichever party is being charged. “You can't prove,” they say, “that Old Moneybags got *anything* from the Republican Congress or the Democratic White House in return for his gargantuan contributions to both.”

And in this they are, most of the time, right. But they are right because the investigators and accusers so often have a skewed idea of the “system” they deplore and are looking for the wrong thing—a single, identifiable payoff such as one-shot legislative relief of a problem or a personal tax break or something like that, which was given in undeniable return for the money.

If the pervasiveness of the enormous campaign donations by single industries and individuals to incumbents of both parties should tell us anything, however, it is that we are not dealing with a system of old-

fashioned bribes here. We are dealing with something else: what has been familiar since ancient times as a tributary system. Those who pay tribute are (or believe they are) buying the right to function as they wish, to be left alone, not to be set upon by those with official power to harm them, a right to be treated with special consideration, to be allowed to cross the king's terrain in peace. They are under the king's protection and marauders and bandits thwart them at their own peril.

In antiquity and also in medieval times this idea was well understood. The patronage and high regard of the potentate were invaluable coin, as useful to commerce as they could be essential to personal security. It struck me as oddly provincial last year, when people were expressing doubts that all those foreigners would pay so much for nothing more than a photograph with the president, that one response was that we didn't understand the importance closeness to the leader had in their cultures. Surely from our own mob protection rackets to the influence-peddling claimers of close association with the powerful to the profit-seeking publicity hound who also benefits from *seeming* to be in special favor with the leader, Americans have not been slow to understand the return they get for the tribute they pay. At the local level in old-style, big-city party patronage politics nothing was more dearly understood. Likewise in gang turf struggles and other unsavory enterprises with which we are familiar. It is security at a price.

Yes, it is true that in the campaign-funding world, the benefits are sometimes identifiable and concrete and that many more of them than we know have always been tucked into obscure legislation and bureaucratic rulings, to become apparent only when, by accident or snitching, one of them drops out. And even if you cannot prove the causal connection between the money given and the business break received or political position changed—and many such pairings have been uncovered—that does not mean there was no causal connection. But even without them our newly enlarged and all-encompassing bipartisan tributary system would continue to exist and flourish. People would persist in trying to buy goodwill or at least an environment that is not hostile from those with the power to grant them.

But, you say, we don't have a king. And you are right. Between the White House and the Congress and all the agencies under their control as incumbents, we have many kings who can grant or deny you safe passage. Campaign contributions in our tributary system are meant to propitiate them all and to discourage attack by those who are beholden to or afraid of them. They do not, of course, have monarchical power. But the reason this particular campaign-contribution form of tribute has burgeoned in recent years is that their powers have grown enormously. Over the past two decades, starting roughly with enactment of the Great Society legislation, the federal government has acquired an ever more expansive role in the affairs of business, industry, professions, and institutions than it began to have before. Its power in these realms is neither monolithic nor unchecked. But it is surely large and potentially very consequential to most of those who make the huge donations.

As in most such systems, the receivers of the tribute are hardly passive or unaware participants in the transactions. They may pretend not to understand how the system works, but they do. And they also, as we know, do their best to see that everyone ponies up the price of safe passage. I know there are other reasons that the size of campaign contributions has increased so much. And I know there are vast numbers of people who give (much more modestly usually) on the basis of wanting to see the party representing their political views prevail. But there is something else at the core of the outpouring of huge sums of money into the parties' coffers from all around the world these days. The Republicans who are beneficiaries of the money have, oddly, left it out of their familiar complaint about the way-too-big size of the federal government. So have the Democrats, whose leader, Bill Clinton, said in 1996 that "the era of big government is over." Not even close. You will know that the era of big government is over in Washington when the campaign-financing tributary system has closed down, and people are no longer proffering their checks with the message, less traditionally defiant than newly defensive, "Don't tread on me—please."