

# The Passy Press

## Letter to the Editor

To Nick Gardiner [enpg@thepassypress.com](mailto:enpg@thepassypress.com)  
From: Richard Smernoff [rsmernoff@undisclosed.com](mailto:rsmernoff@undisclosed.com)  
Date: February 12, 2016 - 06:45PM EST

Dear Sir,

### The 2016 Presidential Election: An Historical Perspective

Few will dispute that there is an enormous disparity between the wealthiest 1% in this country and the rest of the population. This inequality has become a sound bite for Bernie Sanders and for the many young voters who see in their candidate a champion of change and justice. On the other end of the spectrum is Donald Trump, a billionaire who counts among his supporters many who feel as disenfranchised from Washington and their elected officials as those who favor Sanders. Although laws limiting the amount of money that may be contributed to a candidate by a single individual have been passed and there have been efforts to reverse Citizens United, it is estimated that the total cost of the 2016 presidential election may reach a staggering five billion dollars.

The haves, predictably, have been intent on protecting their assets by blocking tax reform whereas the shrinking middle class and the poor have found their voice in tea party initiatives, protests and vigorous support for anti-Establishment candidates. Money may indeed be a gateway to influence and power, but it is not the sole root of all evil. The pervasive economic imbalance in this country is integrally related to racism, sexism and other injustices and will impact future changes in immigration, national security and America's position in a global world. I suggest that the current status of this country reflects the process whereby it evolved from being a handful of states located in the east to a vast nation stretching from sea to sea.

The concept of a "city on the hill" to describe the United States as an exemplary nation, a godly society, can be attributed to the Puritan leader, John Winthrop. Although the ideals of an insular self-contained society that would serve as a model for all nations were subverted by material enterprises and demographic changes in the settlements, the image of America as a symbol of freedom and equality, a safe haven for the oppressed and persecuted has persisted through the centuries. Huge waves of immigrants have looked to the New Colossus as their last hope of securing a better future.

The establishment of the Electoral College in the eighteenth century as a vehicle for electing the American president reflects a duality in the psyche of this country that has pervaded its political, financial and cultural landscape. Fearing that the masses were incapable of choosing a wise leader the founding fathers turned to a federalist form of government in which power would be shared by a union of states and a central authority. In addition, the structure of the Electoral College expanded the power of the smaller states. We tend to want to romanticize the motives of our early leaders through the prism of more than two centuries of distance from them but it is clear that the "inalienable rights" of the Declaration of Independence did not include the right to count the vote of every citizen for the office of President of the United States.

Paradoxically, it was a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, who, in his landmark 1835 work, Democracy in America, offered the most insightful analysis of the inherent contradictions in the American experiment. Extolling the religious freedom and the ideal of equality that the first settlers wished to preserve, Tocqueville saw a schism between the independent spirit of the early colonists and the rise of a capitalistic society that would spur a small ruling class at the very top of the financial ladder. He went on to describe the contradictory forces at play in American life as "two channels that flow in the same basin".

In no other country in the world is the love of property keener or more alert than in the United States, and nowhere else does the majority display less inclination toward doctrines, which in any way threaten the way property, is owned.

What is most important for democracy is not that great fortunes should not exist but that great fortunes should not remain in the same hands. In that way there are rich men, but they do not form a class.

In the nineteenth century the great expansion of the young country, in keeping with the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, created both a geographical and psychological distance from Washington. The vastness of the developing country conferred on it the status of a continent. Iconic figures such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and ultimately the cowboy all shared a fiercely independent spirit, which formed the core of a frontier mentality

This breed of American was a loner who survived by pitting his skills against the laws of nature and who viewed with suspicion those who attempted to impose their laws upon him. Those who see any kind of gun control as an attack on their Second Amendment rights and the organizers of the standoff in Oregon share an antagonism toward Washington, the seat of government that characterized their nineteenth century predecessors.

At the same time that the west was being developed a transformation was occurring in big cities. The advent of the railroad and the inventions and technology that marked the Industrial Revolution resulted in a growing class of entrepreneurs who amassed great fortunes, lived lavishly and came to be a quasi-official ruling class in the cities where they lived. Because these captains of industry profited from a system, which did not impose an income tax on individuals until 1913, they were antagonistic to any move from Washington that would lessen the control they enjoyed over their assets.

The American presidential elections bring out the worst in both the candidates and the electorate. The eighteen month process whereby individuals evaluate their level of support and financial resources, declare their candidacy, raise money, engage in debates and attempt to influence voters in caucuses and primaries is a never-ending circus in which filling one's coffers and demonizing one's opponents take precedence over substantive conversation.

There is clearly no single solution to curbing the influence of money in American politics. Bernie Sanders' signature reference to the nefarious practices of Wall Street billionaires along with his calling for breaking up the big banks is simplistic. I view the Electoral College itself, as a major impediment to democracy primarily because it feeds the practice of controlling the outcome of elections through the power of money but also because the very reasons it was initially implemented no longer hold true.

The elimination of the Electoral College would be a long and arduous process requiring a constitutional amendment. It might never get the requisite vote, but a move to abolish this relic could underscore how some of the most serious problems facing the country could be resolved. In my ideal scheme of things the American president would be elected directly by the people and the timeframe for campaigning would be limited to no more than six months after all conditions for being on the ballot have been fulfilled. The candidates in each party would agree on how many debates there would be and each debate would center on one topic only from a list that might include immigration, health care, tax reform, education, gun control, national security, and repairing our infrastructure. And no longer would the price tag for the presidential election hover around the five billion dollar mark.

Joe Novitski's call for national service struck a chord with me. I will never forget an experience I had in 1992 when, as director of the SUNY/Paris Program I had just brought the thirty-two students in my charge to their foyer and walked to my nearby hotel on the Rue des Ecoles in the heart of the Latin Quarter. Explaining to the proprietor that I was tired from jet lag and was looking forward to getting settled in my room, I was astonished to hear him say that he couldn't understand why people would want to travel to be with others who are not like them. Needless to say I was appalled by his provincial, xenophobic attitude. National service would do much to eradicate such potentially dangerous insular thinking.

Interns for Democracy could effect real change in the national psyche. Young adults mentoring students of diverse socio-economic backgrounds, tutoring minority students, doing construction work and landscaping to restore blighted neighborhoods, serving as intermediaries for those who don't understand the medical and social services available to them, teaching English as a second language to newly arrived immigrants...these are but a few of the projects that would broaden the perspective of the Interns for Democracy by enabling them to perceive that we share a common humanity. It might also encourage future politicians to engage in thoughtful discussion with those who don't share their views, to better appreciate diversity and to avoid seeing the world in absolute terms.

The electorate would be able to have representatives who treat their colleagues with respect, are willing to compromise in order to pass legislation and who avoid the embarrassment of another prolonged spectacle in which self-serving behavior is so prevalent and civility so conspicuously absent.

Sincerely,

Richard Smernoff

Richard Smernoff, Professor Emeritus of French at SUNY/Oswego, received a B.A. from Yale University and a Ph.D. from Princeton University. He has a Certificate of Advanced Piano Studies from the Schola Cantorum in Paris, gives concerts every year and teaches piano in his home.