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DID OCCUPY WALL STREET PICK THE WRONG ADDRESS?

By Haven Pell

April 2015

On September 17, 2011, a group called Occupy Wall Street set up camp in New York City. Their protests against greed-driven financial excesses ultimately focused on the sins of the Top 1%. Though Wall Street was far from blameless in the 2008 financial meltdown, Occupy Wall Street might have found more harm to the country in Washington, D.C. -- Occupy K Street, perhaps?

Like Wall Street, K Street is a business -- one that requires fighting or pretending to fight so long as the combatants are paid to do so. Governance, policy, influence and elections are all components of the lucrative business of K Street, Washington's leading industry.

The business of K Street includes:

- Elected officials, candidates for office, their handlers, spokespeople and staffers;
- Election strategists, fundraisers, flacks, direct mailers and opposition researchers;
- Lawyers, lobbyists, organizers, spinners and coalition builders;
- The two political parties;
- Journalists and commentators who cover them; and
- Think-tankers and academics who develop policies for them -- policies that are often store-bought on behalf of their financial patrons.

According to Opensecrets.com, lobbying was a \$3.23 billion business in 2014, but since many K Streeters are not required to register as lobbyists, this is an undercount. Almost \$3.77 billion was spent on the 2014 elections with almost \$2.35 billion spent on the 2012 presidential election. These are big numbers and the amounts are growing steadily, but the billions of dollars spent annually on K Street pale in comparison to the cost to the nation of the progress foregone by the quest for more money.

Former Defense Secretary, Robert M. Gates, has suggested that political paralysis in Washington is "the most serious threat to U.S. national security." This stagnation is, perhaps, driven by the paradox that the K Streeter's worst enemy is his best friend because, without him, the K Streeter is out of business. Is it any wonder that the political middle has vanished in favor of the hard left and hard right? It is far easier to get yourself paid if the struggle can be portrayed as a Manichean zero-sum game.

For example, a compromise might long ago have solved the immigration problem if the undocumented were allowed to stay but not vote. You won't hear that idea from K Street because the issue is too valuable to allow it ever to be resolved even if the impacted people for whom the battle is being fought might prefer the compromise. Consequently, both sides of the issue would be outraged, but has anyone asked the undocumented?

Despite staggering unpopularity, the Congress, the two political parties, the federal government and individual government leaders appear to carry on largely unscathed by failures obvious to all. Some argue that Washington

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cannot be fixed because of the magnitude of its ineptitude, but what if Washington's failures result not from ineptitude but from motivation of the players?

The Supreme Court Citizens United v. FEC decision has thwarted the efforts of those who would try to restrict campaign contributions in order to solve the problem. Efforts to end Gerrymandering are challenged and obstructed at every turn as well. Even the parties themselves are being overtaken in importance by outside groups that often achieve greater power and influence by raising more money with which to pay more K Streeters.

How might we try to swing the pendulum back from today's extremes? Changing behavior is especially difficult when people's livelihoods are at stake, but we could begin with the 537 elected federal officials who take oaths of office, in one form or another, to support and defend the Constitution and with the candidates who run for those offices. Use public opinion to "encourage" them to make a pledge that elaborates on the meaning of their oath of office for the public good - rather than the benefit of K Street.

Politicians pay attention when three key elements are in place: the voters demand it as a precondition to being elected; there is a watchdog monitoring compliance; and violations will be publicized. Whatever anyone thinks of Grover Norquist and his no-tax-increase pledge, we must acknowledge its effectiveness.

Calling attention to the problem, drafting the pledge, publicizing it, getting candidates to sign it and monitoring compliance will require leadership organization and money, which must come from the private sector. The "pledge" should be an easily understood code of conduct for federal officials and held up as a standard to be espoused by all candidates for federal office. The standards should be compelling enough for universal adoption and simple enough for violations to be tried in the court of public opinion.

If the voters, and perhaps even major donors, were to demand compliance with the new standards, the politicians would be sure to follow because there is nothing they fear more than not being reelected. In so doing, the K Street machine of self-aggrandizing influence could potentially diminish the polarization that is stifling Washington today.

Haven Pell is on version 6.0 as a political blogger. Versions 1.0 - 5.0 were Navy officer, lawyer, investment banker, foundation director and investment manager. His prior career exposed him to the importance of debt in political decision-making. Three dozen years living in Washington have taught him that smartisan creates better solutions than partisan. He was educated at Institut Le Rosey, St. Paul's School, Harvard College and Fordham Law School; he is married with three grown children and two grandchildren.

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