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November 27, 2010

Still the Best Congress Money Can Buy

By FRANK RICH

SO America's latest crisis — until it wasn't — was airport screeners touching our junk. As this long year lurches toward its end, we all agree that something has gone wrong in America, and we're desperately casting about for a coherent explanation for our discontent, if not a scapegoat. Alas, the national consensus that the T.S.A. and full-body scans might be the source of all evil fizzled in less than a week. Most everyone got to Grandma's house for Thanksgiving without genital distress.

The previous transient scapegoat was the Democrats. They were punished in yet another "wave" election — our third in a row — where voters threw Washington's bums out. But most of the public remains bummed out nonetheless. In late October, [the NBC News-Wall Street Journal poll](#) found that only 31 percent of respondents believed that America was on the right track. When the survey asked the same question after the shellacking, the percent of optimists jumped to ... 32. Regardless of party or politics, there's a sense a broken country can't be fixed. Few have faith that even "wave" elections are game-changers anymore.

The larger explanations for this dysfunction are well-worn by now, [from the impotence of the filibuster-bound United States Senate](#) to the intractable polarization of an electorate divided more or less 50-50 since Bush v. Gore. Such is the bipartisanship of the funk that Jon Stewart and Glenn Beck each succeeded in bringing off well attended rallies in Washington to commiserate over the country's

political and governmental stagnation — with each rally offering its competing diagnosis.

For Stewart, the hyperpartisanship of the modern news media remains the nation's curse. "The country's 24-hour politico pundit panic conflict-onator did not cause our problems," he told the throngs at his rally to "restore sanity," but it "[makes solving them that much harder.](#)" At Beck's rally to "restore honor," the message seemed to be that America's principal failing is [a refusal to recognize that God "is our king."](#) If Stewart's antidote was more civility, Beck's was more prayer.

Stewart's point is indisputable as far as it goes. Beck's, not so much: If prayer hasn't cured this highly prayerful nation by now, it may be because our body politic has long since developed an immunity to it. But both rallies, for all the commotion they generated, have already faded to the status of quirky historical footnotes. The reason is that neither addressed the elephant in the room — or the donkey. That would be big money — the big money that dominates our political system, regardless of who's in power. Two years after the economic meltdown, most Americans now recognize that that money has inexorably institutionalized a caste system where everyone remains (at best) mired in economic stasis except the very wealthiest sliver.

The Great Depression ended the last comparable Gilded Age, of the 1920s, and brought about major reforms in American government and business. Not so the Great Recession. Last week, as the [Fed's new growth projections](#) downsized hope for significant decline in the unemployment rate, the Commerce Department reported that [corporate profits hit a record high.](#) Those profits aren't trickling down into new jobs or into higher salaries for those not in the executive suites. And the prospect of serious regulation of those at the top of the top — the financial sector — is even more of a fantasy in the new Congress than it was in its predecessor.

Wall Street is already celebrating the approach of bonus season by partying like it's 2007. In The Times's account of [this return to conspicuous consumption](#), we learned of a Morgan Stanley trader, since fired for unspecified reasons, who went to costly ends to try to hire a dwarf for a Miami bachelor party prank that would require the dwarf to be handcuffed to the bachelor. If this were a metaphor — if

only! — Wall Street would be the bachelor, and America the dwarf, involuntarily chained to its master's hedonistic revels and fiscal recklessness with no prospect for escape.

As John Cassidy underscored in a [definitive article titled “Who Needs Wall Street?”](#) in The New Yorker last week, the financial sector has paid little for bringing the world to near-collapse or for receiving the taxpayers' bailout that was denied to most small-enough-to-fail Americans. The sector still rakes in more than a fourth of American business profits, up from a seventh 25 years ago. And what is its contribution to America in exchange for this quarter-century of ever-more over-the-top rewards? “During a period in which American companies have created iPhones, Home Depot and Lipitor,” Cassidy writes, the industry reaping the highest profits and compensation is one that “doesn't design, build or sell a tangible thing.”

It's an industry that can buy politicians as easily as it does dwarfs, which is why government has tilted the playing field ever more in its direction for three decades. Now corporations of all kinds can buy more of Washington than before, thanks to the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision and to the rise of outside “nonprofit groups” that can legally front for those who prefer to donate anonymously. The money laundering at the base of [Tom DeLay's conviction by a Texas jury last week](#) — his circumventing of the state's post-Gilded Age law forbidding corporate campaign contributions directly to candidates — is now easily and legally doable at the national level.

There are plenty of Americans who don't endorse Stewart's indictment of cable news; there's even a reasonably large group that doesn't buy Beck's perceived shortfall in American religiosity. But seemingly everyone is aggrieved about the hijacking of the political system by anonymous special interests. The most recent Times-CBS News poll found that [an extraordinary 92 percent of Americans want full disclosure](#) of campaign contributors — far many more than, say, believe in evolution. But they will not get their wish anytime soon. “I don't think we can put the genie back in the bottle,” said David Axelrod as [the Democrats prepared to play catch-up](#) to the G.O.P.'s 2010 mastery of outside groups and clandestine corporate corporations.

The story of recent corporate political donations — which we may never learn in its entirety — is just beginning to be told. Bloomberg News reported after Election Day that the United States Chamber of Commerce’s anti-Democratic war chest **included a mind-boggling \$86 million contribution** from the insurance lobby to fight the health care bill. **The Times has identified other big chamber donors** as Prudential Financial, Goldman Sachs and Chevron. These are hardly the small businesses that the chamber’s G.O.P. allies claim to be championing.

Since the election, the Obama White House has sent signals that it will make nice to these interests. While the president returns to photo ops at factories, **Timothy Geithner has already met with the chamber’s board** out of camera range. In a reportorial coup before Election Day, the investigative news organization ProPublica wrote of the **similarly behind-closed-doors activities** of the New Democrat Coalition — “a group of 69 lawmakers whose close relationship with several hundred Washington lobbyists” makes them “one of the most successful political money machines” since DeLay’s K Street Project collapsed in 2007. During the Congressional battle over financial-services reform last May, coalition members repaired to a retreat on Maryland’s Eastern Shore to frolic with lobbyists dedicated to weakening the legislation.

Such is the ethos in his own party that Senator Jim Webb, Democrat of Virginia, complained this month that he “couldn’t even get a vote” for his proposal for a one-time windfall profits tax on Wall Street bonuses. Republicans “obviously weren’t going to vote for it,” **he told Real Clear Politics**, but Democrats also demurred, “saying that any vote like that was going to screw up fund-raising.”

Roughly two-thirds of the New Democrat Coalition’s House contingent won re-election on Nov. 2. Now they’ll have more Republican allies in both houses of Congress. Tea Party populists — **already being betrayed by one Senate leader, Jon Kyl**, on the supposed pledge against earmarks — may soon be as disillusioned as those Democrats who had hoped Barack Obama’s economic team wouldn’t look like Wall Street.

For all the McConnell-Boehner rhetorical pandering to Tea Partiers, the health care law will not be

repealed by Congress — and certainly not any provisions that benefit the G.O.P. establishment's friends in the health care industry. Over at FreedomWorks, Dick Armey's Tea-Party-organizing group, there's **much belligerent talk of retribution against corporations** seen as too friendly to Obama policies — most notably General Electric. It's all hot air: G.E.'s political action committees **gave a total of \$1.6 million to politicians in both parties in 2010**, and **one of its former high-powered lobbyists**, Dan Coats, is the newly elected Republican senator from Indiana and a probable member of the Senate Finance Committee.

America needs a rally — or, better still, a leader or two or three — to restore not just honor or sanity to its citizens but governance that's not auctioned off to the highest bidder. When it was reported just days before our election that Iran was protecting its political interests in Afghanistan's presidential palace by **giving bags of money to Hamid Karzai's closest aide**, Americans could hardly bring themselves to be outraged. At least with Karzai's government, unlike our own, we could know for certain whose cash was in the bag.



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