

# OPINION PACKAGES

## Guest VIEW

### Funny money

*Campaign finance leaves much to be desired*

*From the San Diego Union-Tribune*

Hardly a week passes without yet another cheezy disclosure that the White House was transformed during the presidential election into a drive-through repository for heavy-duty campaign contributors, looking to gain access to the president and the first lady.

Granted, trolling for campaign contributions has long been commonplace among Democratic and Republican presidents alike. But Clinton's crew has perfected — or perverted, depending on one's ethical sensibilities — the procedure of scaring up cash to finance a national campaign.

It seems like only yesterday that we learned of an Indonesian landscaper and his wife who, despite their modest income, managed to contribute several hundred thousand dollars to Clinton's re-election. Or when it came to light that the contribution compliments of the Riady family and their immensely profitable international business conglomerate had been scrubbed nearly clean before it found its way into the Democratic National Committee coffers.

Then we have Pauline Kanchanalak, a citizen of Thailand, megacontributor of questionable donations to the Clinton cause and frequent White House visitor, who arranged for meetings in the Oval Office between the president and several powerful Asian businessmen.

It should be noted that most of the money from Kanchanalak was solicited by the ubiquitous John Huang, the shadowy figure linked to the Riady's international conglomerate, who before going to work for the DNC had been a trade official at the Department of Commerce.

And let's not forget Chinese restaurateur Charlie Trie, who came calling with bags of cash containing more than \$400,000 to help defray the cost of Clinton's legal problem and managed to have the president confer with a Chinese arms merchant with shady connections.

If you are a tad confused at this point, fret not. It's nearly impossible to keep track of these transactions without the aid of a score card.

President Clinton seems no less befuddled by the comings and goings of the money changers as they passed through the White House.

Suffice it to say that the Clinton administration and the Democratic National Committee were very adept at garnering generous campaign donations from people who do business with the United States. It remains to be seen whether these transactions were altogether legal.

Since Attorney General Janet Reno has not seen fit to appoint an independent counsel to look into these and other campaign-finance matters, that responsibility will be assumed, as it should be by Congress.

## Cartoonist's VIEW



Matthew WAITE

### Fries and a politician to go, please

*Money unduly pollutes political process in Nebraska*

In the interest of never letting dead dogs lie — a nasty habit of news reporters — I write this.

In my purest form, I am a reporter, usually one to keep my opinions to myself and those around me out of the public prints. But sometimes, the pull to preach is too strong.

During the fall, I was assigned to cover the political campaigns in our state. More specifically, I was sent to cover the eventual winner of the U.S. Senate race, Chuck Hagel.

Covering a good, competitive race is always more fun, exciting and exhausting than a bad blowout. We were blessed with a good one.

But there was one thing I could never get over — no matter how much fun I was having.

The money.

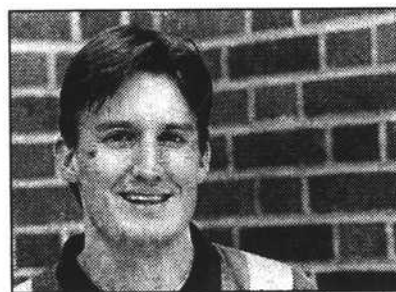
Politics and money, in the modern age, go hand in hand, unfortunately. Some — mostly politicians and their party leadership — argue that without money there would be less and less involvement in politics.

Others say that it is because of the grip that money has on politics that the electorate is ignoring the very system that makes America great.

As Nebraskans, we are lucky. In the state, there are only 1.7 million people — a good sized suburb in Los Angeles, smaller than a New York borough.

In large states like California, Texas, Florida and New York, candidates have to resort to the media to get their message out. Candidates bombard the airwaves, the newspapers and billboards with their messages.

In Nebraska, candidates still go door to door, handshake to handshake, small-town parade to small-town parade. It is not until the last frantic week of the campaigns that candidates have to stick to the airwaves and blister their opponents with critical advertising.



“Ben Nelson could pay my share of the rent — \$200 — with the money he spent for the next 6,070 months, or 505 years.”

It is in small towns like Neligh and Creighton that I have truly enjoyed politics. I rode with Hagel on a campaign tour by bus through northeast Nebraska. In a small-town cafe, staring a voter in the face, is the only place you will see the true ability, character and nature of a candidate.

But money has made its way into Nebraska.

As a small state, many of the Washington money power trusts feel like they can buy Senate seats. The donations to parties and candidates in our state don't have to be as big as those in Texas, California and New York, but a Nebraska Senate vote counts the same as one of those large states.

In Nebraska, the two Senate candidates spent about \$2.10 per

man, woman and child, according to the most recent campaign filings available. That's almost \$4 million.

The money that Chuck Hagel alone spent to win Nebraska's Senate seat would buy 36,323 hours of in-state, undergraduate credits. That's 12,107 three-credit hour classes, enough for 93 people to graduate, with a few credit hours to toss around.

Ben Nelson could pay my share of the rent — \$200 — for the next 6,070 months, or 505 years, with the money he spent.

And he lost.

When you start throwing in the House candidates, things get even more strange.

Jon Christensen, who won re-election in the 2nd Congressional District in Omaha, could buy a bacon double cheeseburger meal-deal lunch at Burger King for 387,053 people, a \$3.93-per-person meal ticket.

Those were just the three big spenders. And we haven't even started on soft-money donations made directly to the party.

Campaign finance reform is the root of a voter resurgence. If an 18-year-old first-time voter feels a vote won't do much good in the face of a \$5,000 donation from a political action committee, he or she won't vote.

Without serious reform — including tax exemptions for individual donations, limiting PACs to \$1,000 donations, the elimination of soft money (huge donations to political parties) — politics will be come as irrelevant as many of the political commercials today. And people won't feel that it is worth it to vote.

And that would be downright un-American.

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