

## Best democracy money can buy

### *Gregory Palast examines the sources of the \$500m that boosted Bush's bid for the White House*

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Last week, I mailed my overseas ballot for the US presidency -- and you can wipe that smug little grin off your face. I won't put up with condescending comments about America's democratic rituals from a nation with an unelected House of Lords occupied by genetic fossils and, soon, Chris Woodhead.

In fact, you could think of the \$3 billion spent in the US campaign in positive, New Labour terms. Call it 'the efficient privatisation of the democracy' -- though an outright auction for the presidency would be more efficient still.

If the guy who lost the vote, George W Bush, nevertheless wins the White House, he'll have surfed in on a crushing wave of nearly half a billion dollars (\$447 million), my calculation of the suffocating plurality of cash from corporate America, a good 25 per cent more than Al Gore's take.

George W could not have amassed this pile if his surname were Jones or Smith. The key to Dubya's money empire is Daddy Bush's post-White House work which, incidentally, raised the family's net worth by several hundred per cent.

Take two packets of payments to the Republican Party, totalling \$148,000, from an outfit called Barrick Goldstrike. That's quite a patriotic contribution from a Canadian company. They can afford it. In 1992, in the final hours of the Bush presidency, Barrick took control of US government-owned property containing an estimated \$10bn in gold. For the whole shooting match, Barrick paid the US Treasury only \$10,000.

Barrick made deft use of an 1872 gold rush law meant to allow pan-and-bucket prospectors to gain title to their tiny claims. In 1992, Clinton's newly elected administration was ready to prevent Barrick's stunning grab. But Barrick is a lucky outfit. Bush's Interior Department expedited procedures to ram through Barrick's claim stake before Clinton's inauguration.

Ex-Pres George Bush was lucky, too. When the electorate booted him from the White House, he landed softly - on the Barrick Goldstrike payroll, where he comfortably nested until last year.

Who is Barrick? Its founder, Peter Munk, made his name in Canada in the 1950s as the figure in an infamous insider stock-trading scandal. Munk headed a small speaker manufacturer that went

belly-up, just after he sold his stock. This is not quite the expected pedigree for an international minerals mogul.

If we look in the shadows behind Munk we can see the more accomplished player who provided the capital to set up Barrick - Saudi arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi.

During Bush's presidency, Khashoggi was identified as conduit in the Iran-Contra conspiracy. He had already run into trouble with US lawmen when, in 1986, he was arrested and charged -- but not convicted -- of fraud. He was bailed out of the New York prison by Munk, who provided the \$4m bond. Bush performed an even bigger favour for Khashoggi: as his last act in office, the president pardoned Khashoggi's alleged co-conspirators, key members of Bush's own cabinet. As a result, no case could be made against Khashoggi.

In 1996, a geologist prospecting in Indonesia, Mike de Guzman, announced his discovery of the world's richest gold field. Munk rapidly deployed his president. Bush, on behalf of Barrick, contacted officials of the former dictator Suharto who were in control of mining concessions. Thereafter, De Guzman's company was told it would have to turn over 68 per cent of its claim to Barrick.

Barrick didn't have long to gloat. Jim-Bob Moffett, the tough, old, Louisiana swamp dog who heads Freeport-McMoRan Mining, had a private meeting with his old benefactor Suharto. At the end of the meeting, Jim-Bob and the dictator stood on the steps of the presidential palace to announce that Freeport-McMoRan would replace Barrick. (Ironically, Barrick lucked it again. The gold find was a hoax. After Jim-Bob learnt he'd been suckered, his company invited geologist De Guzman to talk it over. Sadly, on way to the meeting, De Guzman fell out of a helicopter.)

While Mr Munk's president did not pay the cost of his rental in Indonesia, Bush could redeem himself in Africa. In 1996, as genocide in Rwanda fomented civil war in Zaire, Barrick smelt opportunity. We have learnt that, at that time, Bush spoke with his old golfing buddy, Mobutu Sese Seko (then dictator of Zaire) about diamond concessions.

I don't know what ex-CIA director Bush told the panicked dictator, but we do know that Mobutu granted Barrick exclusive rights to mine diamonds in north-west Zaire.

Maybe Bush talked about Barrick's mining experience in neighbouring Tanzania where, according to Amnesty International, Barrick's subsidiary carried out 'extra-judicial killings'. Amnesty reports that 50 independent miners who refused to move off the Barrick unit's concession were buried alive in the pits by company bulldozers. Barrick denies the allegations.

Beyond Barrick, Daddy Bush has many other friends who filled up his sonny-boy's campaign kitty while Bush performed certain lucrative favours for them. In 1998, Bush père created a storm in Argentina when he lobbied his close political ally President Carlos Menem to grant a gambling licence to Mirage Casino corporation.

Bush wrote that he had no personal interest in the deal. That's true. But Bush fils did not do badly. After the casino flap, Mirage dropped \$449,000 into the Republican Party war chest.

The ex-president and famed Desert Stormtrooper-in-Chief, also wrote to the oil minister of Kuwait on behalf of Chevron Oil Corporation. Bush says honestly that he, 'had no stake in the Chevron operation'.

Following this selfless use of his influence, the oil company put \$657,000 into Republican Party coffers. Most of that loot, reports the Center for Responsive Politics, came in the form of 'soft money' That's the squishy stuff corporations use to ooze around US law which, you may be surprised to learn, prohibits any donations to presidential campaigns in the general election.

Not all of the elder Bush's work is voluntary. His single talk to the board of Global Crossing, the telecoms start-up, earned him \$13m in stock. The company also kicked in another million for his kid's run.

And while the Bush family steadfastly believes that ex-felons should not have the right to vote for president, they have no objection to ex-cons putting presidents on their payroll. In 1996, despite pleas of US church leaders, Daddy Bush gave several speeches (he charges \$100,000 per talk) sponsored by organisations run by Rev Sun Myung Moon, cult leader, tax cheat -- and formerly, the guest of the US federal prison system.

There are so many more tales of the Bush family daisy chain of favours, friendship and campaign funding. None of it is illegal -- which I find troubling. But I don't want to seem ungrateful. After all, the Bushes helped make America the best democracy money can buy.

## **Blackout in Florida**

Vice-President Al Gore would have strolled to victory in Florida if the state hadn't kicked 12,000 citizens off the voters' registers five month ago as former felons.

In fact, only a fraction were ex-cons. Most were simply guilty of being African-American. While 8,000 of those disenfranchised went through the legal rigmarole of getting on to the voting list, the rest -- enough to have won the state for Gore - did not.

A top-placed election official (not a Democrat) told me that the government had conducted a quiet review and found -- surprise! -- that the listing included far more African-Americans than would statistically have been expected, even accounting for the grievous gap between the conviction rates of blacks and whites in the US.

The source of this poisonous blacklist: Database Technologies, a division of ChoicePoint, and hired by Governor Jeb Bush's frothingly partisan Secretary of State, Katherine Harris. My thanks to investigator Solomon Hughes for informing me that DBT is a division of ChoicePoint. Under fire for mis-use of personal data in state computers, ChoicePoint founder Rick Rozar made a strategic six-figure soft cash donation to the Republican Party.

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