WinRed, ActBlue, and the Flat Joint: A Cent and a Half on the Dollar

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For P. W. Parks, my high-school history teacher, who set me at my mother's college Underwood and had me bang out an essay on Manifest Destiny – and so taught me that history is typed, not inherited.

Five authenticated fundraising emails in my wife's inbox, pulled apart by their own buttons, open onto an industry: a single firm, Mothership Strategies, and a captive lattice of PACs that since 2018 raised roughly $678 million and passed 1.6 percent of it to candidates. The grift is not corruption in the ordinary sense; it is a rigged carnival game, a flat joint, and the essay takes it apart with the vocabulary of the con, the agent, the gaff, the shill, the patch who squares the law, and the cooler who reconciles the fleeced mark to his loss. Underneath the carnival rides the mathematics: John Nash's proof that the crooked midway is a stable equilibrium no player can leave alone; Mancur Olson's logic of why the atomized marks never combine; David Maurer and Erving Goffman on cooling the mark out, which is exactly the DNC's plausible-deniability architecture named by a sociologist in 1952; John Boyd and Norbert Wiener on the fast loop that eats the slow one. Both machines are named and documented, with the structural asymmetry called out as a finding: the Democratic side an arm's-length skim engineered for deniability, the Republican side the coercive dark pattern run on the committee's own page – worse on donor harm, and proven so with the Republicans' own refund numbers. The equilibrium is the bottom of a valley in a high-dimensional landscape, and escaping it is hard; the last time the Republic climbed out of a structurally identical valley it took the muckrakers and the Progressive movement to re-carve the ground. The wider corruption is constitutional – the money-as-speech doctrine that shelters the whole system – and the elected branches retain forgotten Article III levers to restrain the Court. The essay is damning and does not flinch from the bleakness; but it holds forth hope on engineering terms, because the Progressive era is an existence proof that the valley can be climbed.

The Midway

I did not set out to find a scandal. I set out to read my wife's spam, because I craft the filters on our private email server. Five political fundraising emails reached Brenda's inbox at Nova Lux in the space of three days this summer, all of them authenticated, all of them begging, and I opened the headers the way I open any machine that arrives uninvited, to see what it is actually made of rather than what it says it is. The fifth gave up the game. It came dressed as a "Costco poll" from a committee calling itself Progressive Turnout Project, YES in red and NO in blue, and when I read the names buried in its own buttons they confessed a destination the prose never mentioned: `act_stoprepublicans_com_surv_debate`, a survey belonging to a *different* committee, Stop Republicans, whose donation code in turn read `ms_ptp`, and whose Post Office box, in Evanston, Illinois, was the same box Progressive Turnout Project uses. One email, pulled gently, unspooled an entire industry; and the industry, once you have its measure, turns out not to be a scandal in the ordinary sense at all. A scandal is a departure from how a thing is supposed to work. This is the thing working exactly as its incentives require, which is worse, and more interesting. I did the forensics.

A word before the machinery, because every American mailbox tilts one way and ours tilt blue. The committees I trace fly Democratic colors, and that is an artifact of whose lists my wife is on, not a verdict on which party is worse; on the harm a donor actually suffers, the Republican operation is measurably worse, and I will prove it with the Republicans' own numbers before I am done. This is not a partisan essay. It is an essay about a rigged game, and a rigged game does not care what color the tent is. The number to hold in your head the entire way, the one the whole thing walks toward, is one and six-tenths of one percent. This is the carnie number.

The Flat Joint

I grew up close enough to both the carnival and the camp meeting to know that in each of them the lights are the honest part. At the Iowa county fairs of my boyhood I walked the midway and passed the row of games where the basketball is a hair too big for the rim, the milk bottles are lead-weighted at the base, and the ring will pass over the peg from every angle but the one you are standing at. In the trade these are not called games. They are called *flat joints*, or flat stores, and the man behind the counter is not a vendor but an *agent*, and what separates his booth from the honest ring-toss two tents down is a thing called the *gaff*: the hidden rig, the weight in the bottle, the rim bent half a degree, the mechanism that makes the outcome a foregone conclusion while the play looks fair. The mark does not lose because he is clumsy. He loses because the joint was built to be unwinnable before he arrived, and the entire art of the agent is to keep him from noticing that, to keep him feeling that one more dollar and a steadier hand would do it. The distractions are important, as are the quiet rigs.

For readers who have never stood at that counter, the crucial thing to understand is that the *apparent fairness is part of the gaff*, not separate from it. The agent wants you to watch closely; close watching is what convinces you the game is legible. He runs a *shill* beside you, a confederate who steps up, plays, and wins a garish prize, so that the crowd, the *tip* in the language of the lot, sees that winning is possible and presses in with its dollars. When you lose, he does not send you away; he runs an *alibi*, a reason you fell just short, the ring caught the felt, the count was ten and not eleven, and he offers you the next throw at a discount because you were *so close*. A flat joint that merely took your money would be a robbery, and robberies end. A flat joint that keeps you throwing is an income, and income is the point. Fundraising.

Now I read the email again. The money card, the noun doing all the work, is *poll*, or *survey*, or *petition*, or the little black-and-yellow receipt Stop Republicans sent my wife reading "Supporter: Brenda Laurel" and "DONATION PENDING." Each of these is a familiar civic object, and the familiarity does the cheating, exactly as the honest-looking ring does at the counter. The reader forms a stable picture: I am being consulted, I am being counted, I have a balance to settle – and is then walked, still feeling consulted, into a payment processor. The poll is the shill; it manufactures the sense that others are playing and that her voice is being tallied. The receipt is the alibi run in advance; it fabricates a transaction she never began so that paying feels like settling a debt rather than starting one. The deadline, always tonight, always doubled if she acts in the next hour, is the discounted next throw. And the gaff, the weight in the bottle, is the thing the prose never says: that the object is not a poll or a petition or a receipt but a funnel, and that of every dollar dropped through it, as we are about to see, a cent and a half reaches the cause on the sign. The civic noun is the cheat. All in public.

The Agent at the End of the Lot

A flat joint has an agent, and this one has a name, a founding date, and that Evanston Post Office box. The nested committees whose plumbing my wife's headers exposed – Progressive Turnout Project, Stop Republicans, End Citizens United, Bold PAC, Equality PAC – are not unrelated grassroots outfits that happen to share a house style; they share a link-wrapper, a stray Grammarly plug-in left bleeding into the code that builds the email (forensics!), a mailing address, and above all a builder. The builder is Mothership Strategies, founded in 2014 by three alumni of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's digital shop, Greg Berlin, Jake Lipsett, and

Charles Starnes, who took the act-now-the-deadline-is-tonight style they had piloted *inside* the party and set up in business for themselves, spinning a lattice of PACs that now function in large part as their own best clients. Hold that fact; it is the hinge of the whole essay. The gaff was invented inside an official party organ and then privatized by the very people the party trained to build it. So the corruption began.

The scale is on the public record because a Stanford political scientist, Adam Bonica, sat down with the Federal Election Commission filings and did the arithmetic the tip is never invited to do. Since 2018 the Mothership-linked network raised roughly six hundred and seventy-eight million dollars from individual donors. One and six-tenths of one percent of it reached a candidate, a campaign, or a party committee. About one hundred and fifty-nine million went straight to Mothership as fees, seventy million of that to its own payroll; the agent was paid something on the order of fourteen times what the causes it invoked ever saw. The client ledger names names: Jaime Harrison, who chaired the Democratic National Committee until this year, paid the firm $16.5 million for his 2020 Senate run; Jon Ossoff, $11.9 million; the Congressional Hispanic Caucus's PAC, $16.9 million; the Congressional Black Caucus's, $6.1 million; House Majority PAC, $5.5 million; a single text-message vendor, Message Digital, drew $22.5 million from the same pipe; Progressive Turnout Project alone paid Mothership $12.3 million across 2023 and 2024. This is not a rumor and not an emergent surprise. It is a going concern with a payroll, and its product is the email itself.

Let's be precise about that number, though, because the firm's defense lives in the imprecision, and the honest version is worse for the firm than the sloppy one. Mothership calls Bonica's analysis "completely inaccurate" and answers that it has "directly raised over $400 million for dozens of campaigns and member-connected PAC clients" – and note the preposition, because it is doing all the work. Raised *for* is money poured into the top of the funnel; the one and six-tenths of one percent is what came *out* of the bottom into a candidate's account, and both figures can be true at once because they measure different ends of the same pipe. Nor does the missing ninety-eight percent vanish into Mothership's vault alone; the firm fairly notes that much of what the filings show flowing to it passes onward to other vendors, and much of the rest funds a genuine program, for Progressive Turnout Project really does pay canvassers to knock on doors. So I will not pretend the number means the whole sum was stolen. It means something narrower and harder to answer: that of every dollar a frightened donor gave to *stop Republicans*, a cent and a half reached anyone actually running to stop them, while the firm that built the committee, writes its mail, and stands as its single largest paid vendor – $12.3 million out of Progressive Turnout Project in two years – took, on its own payroll alone and before a dollar of pass-through, some seventy million, six times over what every candidate in the network saw between them. The flat joint's tell was never that a turnout PAC spends money on turnout. It is the distance between what the email swore the money was for and where the money actually went. Nice con, nicely run.

Why Every Joint on the Lot Is Gaffed

The question that should trouble you is not why the agent runs a flat joint. It is why he *cannot afford to run a straight one*, given that everyone on the lot, including him, has known for a decade exactly what the count is. Here the carnival explains the mathematics before the mathematics can explain itself. Put an honest ring-toss on a midway where every other joint is flat, price it fairly, let the marks actually win, and you will not last the season; your neighbors clear their nut – the day's overhead every joint must cover just to stay open – by noon while you are still making change, and the lot boss rents your spot to someone *with it*, carnie speak for a fellow initiate of the gaff. On a crooked midway the straight agent starves. That is the whole of it, and it is why the midway is uniformly crooked not by conspiracy but by selection: the joints that survive are the joints that are gaffed, everyone can see this, and no one can unilaterally stop, because the first to stop simply loses.

In 1950 a mathematician named John Nash proved the thing the carnival had known since the first weighted milk bottle, and proved it for any game among self-interested players: that such a game settles into arrangements in which no player can improve his own position by changing his own move alone, and that once the players are in such an arrangement it holds, because unilateral departure is punished. This is the load-bearing fact of the whole essay, and I will not hurry past it, because nearly every hopeful proposal to clean up small-dollar fundraising breaks against it. You are not fighting a villain who can be shamed, or a bad actor who can be fired; you are fighting an *equilibrium*, and an equilibrium has no head to cut off. The committees and PACs are scored on one number, this quarter's gross against their siblings' and against the other party's, and against that scoreboard the high-pressure, deceptive, churn-and-burn appeal is the dominant move: it raises more no matter what the neighbors do, so the committee that cleans up its mail simply raises less – not nothing, but measurably less – and loses the only race it is scored on. The cooperative outcome – everyone eases off, the shared base stays healthy – is better for every player and reachable by none of them, because reaching it would take an enforcer to punish the first defector, and, as we will see, the enforcer has been squared. A carnie needs no chalkboard for any of this; he says there is no money in a straight joint on a crooked lot, and he means exactly what Nash means. But keep Nash's word, because it carries the bad news the carnie's shrug leaves out: this will not yield to indignation, or to a better class of consultant, or to one honest committee resolving to do better. It behaves like a solved position: stable, self-restoring, and proof against everything short of a change in the board itself. An external change.

Picture that board as a landscape – I will come back to it, because it decides what a cure would have to be. Every possible configuration of the whole system is a point on a surface of many dimensions, one axis for each dial the players can turn – how deceptive the mail, how aggressive the recurring default, how much of the take the agent keeps – and the height at each point is how well the players are doing by the only measure they keep. The machine has rolled to the bottom of a valley, and it sits there, and every direction out is uphill. Hold that image. It is the whole difference between a problem and a predicament.

Why No Mark Fetches the Sheriff

A flat joint survives its marks for a second reason, and it is not that they fail to notice they have been fleeced. It is that no single mark's grievance is worth the drive back to the county seat. The economist Mancur Olson wrote the general law of this without ever mentioning a midway: when a benefit is concentrated on a few and its cost is smeared thin across a great many, the few organize effortlessly to defend it and the many never organize at all, because no individual's share of the harm clears the cost of acting on it. One agent and a handful of committees are a compact, motivated interest; the twelve or thirty-five dollars lifted from each of several million people is a harm that is real in the aggregate, six hundred and seventy-eight million dollars of it, and unpoliced, because it is nobody's job and nobody's whole grievance. The marks on a midway are strangers to one another by the design of the midway; so are these.

And here is where the psychology enters, and I want to be exact about its rank, because the flashy part of any con is the least important part of it. The manipulations are not the argument; they are the *gaffs*, the interchangeable weights the joint bolts in because they work, and a machine forced by the scoreboard to squeeze the most from an atomized, unorganizable crowd will converge, by pure A/B experiment, on the same fixed kit every carnival agent has used since the first lead-weighted bottle. Manufactured scarcity: the deadline that is a lie. Borrowed authority: the party's colors on a committee the party never chartered. Social proof: the shill, "NO ONE in your area is donating." Reciprocity: the "poll" that seats a small obligation before the ask. Commitment: the counterfeit receipt that makes finishing the payment feel like consistency rather than surrender. The register is fear and guilt held at a permanent boil, because a frightened mark throws again and a calm one walks away. And the optimization has a direction that ought to settle every argument about intent, because a machine tuned to conversion finds and strips precisely the people who convert, which is why the reporting keeps turning up the same victims, "hundreds of elderly Americans" and donors "battling dementia or other cognitive impairments" relieved of thousands of dollars they never meant to give. That is not a side effect of the gaff. It is what the gaff is *for*.

There is an old rule among con men, that you cannot cheat an honest man, that every mark must carry a little larceny of his own for the hook to catch; and the single most damning thing about this particular joint is that the rule is *inverted*. The hook here is not the mark's greed. It is his *virtue*. The whole operation is wrapped in the flag – defend democracy, stop the other side, save the Republic by midnight – and here the county fair gives way to the other tent I used to sit outside in rural Iowa in the 1970s, the revival meeting, where the same clock runs: the manufactured emergency of the soul, the altar call that must be answered *tonight*, the plate passed hand to hand while the feeling is hot and the reason is off its guard. The political email is those two tents fused, the flat joint's mechanical gaff married to the camp meeting's emotional one, so that the mark's idealism becomes the lever and his loyalty the wire that is stripped. He is not being fleeced by a stranger despite his good faith. He is being fleeced *through* it, and by people wearing his own team's colors, which is a crueler thing than any three-card operator on any corner ever attempted, because the three-card mark at least thought he was getting away with something.

The Patch

A game this plainly crooked ought to have a cop, and the absence of one is not luck. Every carnival that ran flat joints carried a man called the *patch*, the fixer whose whole job was to square the local law, to make the sheriff's complaint go away with a handshake or an envelope, to keep the lot open. This grift has a patch too, and it is the machinery of enforcement itself, squared by design. The Federal Election Commission has six commissioners, no more than three from either party, and needs four votes to do anything, so it deadlocks three against three by construction and has done so on hundreds of enforcement matters; its own Scam PAC Working Group could recommend nothing sharper than better disclosure and has been asking Congress, annually since 2016, for authority Congress will not grant. The Federal Trade Commission, which would jail a merchant overnight for a prechecked recurring charge, is barred at the border of political speech, which the First Amendment rightly protects and the statutes accordingly exempt. And where enforcement stirs at all it is not principle but tit-for-tat: House Republicans open an investigation into ActBlue, House Democrats demand Suspicious Activity Reports on WinRed, each side aiming the law at the other's platform and shielding its own.

The patch is not neutral and paralyzed. He is bought, twice, one hand from each tent.

Both Lots, and the Difference Between Them

Here I make good on the promise. I have spent most of this essay on the blue machine because it is the one that runs in my house, and honesty now requires that I turn the same lamp on the red one and concede, in the plainest terms, where it is worse – for the two lots are genuinely not mirror images; they are gaffed on different axes, and the difference is itself the finding.

The Democratic lot is an arm's-length skim, engineered for deniability. Mothership serves the satellite PACs and individual heavyweights, not the party committees directly, and that gap is the architecture, not an accident of it: the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee keep their distance, take roughly half of the paltry eleven million that ever escapes the network, and receive, as Bonica's investigation put it, "plausible deniability, allowing it to benefit from the fundraising without taking direct responsibility for the deceptive tactics." Read that twice, because it is the whole indictment. The party did not fail to shut the joint down. It *positioned* itself to take the joint's cut while swearing the games on its lot are run by independent operators. That is not negligence; it is the oldest arrangement on any midway, the lot owner who rents the space, pockets a percentage of every flat joint's take, and tells the sheriff he only leases ground. And the committees are not even clean at the remove they purchased: the DCCC and the DSCC send their own mail promising a match "of up to 400%," with no explanation anywhere of how such a match would work, because there is none. Duplicity is the exact word, and it attaches to an institution that built its own deniability with its eyes open. Morally corrupt, and publicly pious.

The Republican lot is cruder and, on the measure that matters most to a donor, worse: it runs the gaff on its own counter, in its own name, no satellite committee interposed. The Trump campaign and the Republican National Committee built a pre-checked recurring box into their own pages on WinRed – the party's donation processor, which runs the checkout for thousands of Republican committees and is the platform, not the author, of any one campaign's tricks – then a *second* pre-checked box, known internally as the "money bomb," that added a further charge, and some versions billed *weekly*; the National Republican Congressional Committee's page carried a bright-yellow pre-checked box reading, in bold, "If you UNCHECK this box, we will have to tell Trump you're a DEFECTOR & sided with the Dems," disclosing only in smaller unbolded type that the box was the difference between one gift and every month. The result was a bank-level fraud wave: the Trump operation and the RNC refunded $122 million in 2020, a 10.7 percent refund rate, against the Biden side's $21 million and 2.2 percent, and the FTC fielded nearly seven times as many complaints about WinRed as about ActBlue. The two operations had run *near-identical* refund rates, about 2.17 and 2.18 percent, until the pre-checked boxes appeared; the divergence is the gaff's own fingerprint. Four state attorneys general, in Minnesota, New York, Connecticut, and Maryland, opened consumer-protection investigations; WinRed sued to stop them and lost, the Eighth Circuit clearing the Minnesota probe to proceed. And the tactics did not stop with the exposure; the follow-up reporting ran under the headline "GOP Continues Trump Campaign's 'Deceptive' Online Fundraising Tactics," and the NRCC still advertises, as a 2025 triumph, four hundred percent growth in recurring contributions. Asked about the fraud wave, the campaign's spokesman, Jason Miller, called a sub-one-percent card-dispute rate "remarkable," which is the sound the agent makes when he has decided his marks' complaints are a rounding error.

So the shapes differ, and saying so is more damning than pretending they match: the Democrats built the cleaner skim and hid behind a firm; the Republicans ran the more brazen and more harmful gaff on their own counter. And beneath both tents sprawls the freelance swarm that answers to no party at all, the scam PACs where up to ninety-five percent of the take, and in the worst cases more than ninety-nine, is funneled to "consulting fees" paid to firms the operators themselves own, and where the law has actually reached a few of the crudest: Kelley Rogers, whose scam PACs raised roughly ten million dollars, most of it small-dollar and elderly, and passed $48,400 of it to actual politicians, pleaded guilty and drew three years; his treasurer, Scott MacKenzie, went to federal prison; Kyle Prall, who ran "Feel Bern" and "Trump Victory" and spent less than a penny on the dollar on politics and the rest on Belize and lap dances, drew three years of his own. In 2024 two such outfits, Patriots for American Leadership and Campaign for a Conservative Majority, ran robocalls that opened with a clip of *Donald Trump's own voice* to dun the faithful – the analog forerunner of the AI-cloned voices now flooding the same channel, the machine I wrote about elsewhere that has made the counterfeit free.

Cooling the Mark Out

The deepest move on any lot is the last one, and it has the best literature. The anatomy of the American confidence game was written down in 1940 by a linguist, David Maurer, who spent years among con men taking down their speech and published it as *The Big Con*; his book is the source from which the whole vocabulary I have been using descends – the *store* dressed to look legitimate, the *roper* who steers the mark in, the *insideman* who takes him, the *fix* that squares the police, the *blowoff* at the end, and the delicate final labor of *cooling the mark out*. Maurer's insight, made with a philologist's exactness, was that a first-class confidence game is not a smash-and-grab but an engineered social experience, and that its most sophisticated stage comes *after* the money is gone, when the operators must send the fleeced man home in a condition that keeps him quiet. So it goes in our polis.

Twelve years later the sociologist Erving Goffman took that final stage and made it permanent, in a spare, exact essay called *On Cooling the Mark Out*. A mark who has just been taken, Goffman observed, is a danger to the whole operation: he may go to the police, or make a public scene, or simply refuse to accept that he has lost, and any of these can close the store. So the mob leaves one man behind – the *cooler* – whose work is not to take anything more but to sit with the ruined mark and reconcile him to his ruin, to redefine the loss as something other than a swindle, an unlucky turn, a bad bet, a private embarrassment better swallowed than announced, so that the mark accepts a smaller account of himself and goes home without a word. A mark who cannot be cooled is the operation's nightmare; he "blows his top," fetches the law, and burns the store down. And Goffman's enduring move – the reason the essay outgrew the carnival and became sociology – was to notice that cooling the mark out is not a criminal specialty at all but a routine and respectable function, performed everywhere that institutions must reconcile people to losses the institutions themselves have inflicted: the employee eased out with a story that spares the firm, the applicant let down so gently that the process is never indicted, the customer talked into believing nothing really went wrong. Wherever an organization profits by a loss it would rather not own, someone is assigned to cool the mark.

The plausible-deniability architecture is the cool-out, performed at the scale of a national party. The donor who starts to suspect he has been worked is met not with a refund but with a structure built in advance to absorb his suspicion: the committee can say, and say truthfully, that *it* did not send the deceptive mail, that these were independent expenditures by unaffiliated groups, that the party neither wrote the gaff nor pockets most of the take. That is the roper's disavowal and the fix in a single motion. And over all of it lies the sedative that does the real cooling, which is the very virtue that was the hook in the first place, now turned to a second purpose: a man who gave to *save democracy* cannot easily let himself believe he was merely fleeced, because to admit the con is to admit that his own idealism was the instrument of it, and that is a loss most people will pay a great deal not to look at directly. So he is cooled by his own better nature. He does not fetch the sheriff. He gives again next quarter. This is the answer to the question that ought to be a national scandal and somehow is not – *why is this tolerated* – and the answer is that a durable con is never merely the taking; it is the taking plus the apparatus for reconciling the taken to it, and the party's studied distance from the joint is precisely that apparatus. The DNC has not failed to notice the grift on its own lot. It is running the cool-out, and running it well. Perhaps notice might be taken.

Why the Lot Burns Itself Down

Norbert Wiener would have named the flaw without flinching, and John Boyd would have named why it persists anyway. A control system steers by what it can measure, and this one measures a single variable with blinding speed, dollars per send, tested to the decimal within the hour, and measures *nothing at all* on the axes that decide the long war: donor trust, the party's standing, the signal-to-noise of the one channel it owns outright. Boyd's hard insight, earned in a cockpit, was that in any contest control migrates to whoever cycles through observation and action faster than the other can; and Mothership cycles faster than the party can govern it, which means the vendor now sets the party's relationship with its own base. The tail wags the dog because the tail has the faster loop. It is all tactics and no strategy, which Boyd would call not cleverness but noise with excellent instrumentation, and the instrumentation is exactly the trap, because it reports the one number that is going up and is blind to everything going down. Grand strategy is absent, and tactics attacks the local hill.

And everything is going down on the slow axis, where no gauge is pointed. The very appeals that maximize this quarter's haul are, by the operators' own admission, the ones that erode the long-term base; unsubscribe and churn rates climb, donors report burnout under the unrelenting pace of the appeals, and both parties' small-dollar programs now show the fatigue as a measurable drag. Which yields the sharpest charge the machine invites, and I offer it as a reasoned hypothesis and not a proven fact, because it is the one they will fight hardest: an operation calling itself Progressive Turnout Project, examined as a control system rather than a brand, may on balance *suppress* the very participation it bills for, exhausting and burning the base whose turnout is its ostensible product. The turnout engine as a turnout sink. It is not a stupid machine; it is an intelligent machine with its one sensor bolted to the wrong variable and the feedback wire to the right one cut, which produces behavior indistinguishable from stupidity while every individual actor inside it behaves with perfect local rationality, and that is a far more dangerous condition than stupidity, because stupidity is corrigible and this is not. There is no damping term anywhere on the destructive axis. Shame carries no cost. The base's erosion is metered on no one's dashboard. The patch is squared, the marks are cooled, the scoreboard shows only dollars, and ten years of exposure enter the loop as pure input and change nothing, because the machine cannot feel them. Right about now I'm hearing Chris Rea singing "The Road to Hell (Part 2)."

The Valley, and the Last Way Anyone Climbed Out

Return now to the landscape, because it is the only frame that shows the true size of a fix. A system of many coupled players, each chasing its own advantage, can be drawn as a point moving over a high-dimensional surface, and Nash's equilibrium is not merely a spot on that surface; it is the bottom of a basin, a valley in a space of many dimensions, and the defining cruelty of a valley is that you cannot leave it by going downhill. Every small, self-interested step – the only kind an individual player will ever take – runs straight back toward the floor, because that is what equilibrium *means*: the committee that unilaterally disarms climbs a little way up the wall, is punished at once by the scoreboard, and slides back. This is why the sensible remedies fail one after another. A voluntary code of conduct is a stone that rolls back. A stern letter from the party chair is a stone that rolls back. A single honest vendor is a stone that rolls back. The landscape swallows them all and returns the system to the same floor, because not one of them changes the shape of the ground.

There are only two ways a system leaves a basin like this, and neither is gentle. Either a shock arrives large enough to throw the whole system over the ridge at once – a correlated, lot-wide jolt no single player could supply and none of them wanted – or the landscape itself is re-carved, the valley filled and a new low cut elsewhere, by changing the rules that set the heights, which is to say by changing the payoffs until the honest joint is no longer the starving one. In human affairs only the second kind lasts, and it never comes from inside the game; it comes from outside it, from law and from a shift in what the public will stomach, applied with enough force and for long enough to move the ground under every player's feet at the same instant, so that no one is left punished for having been the first to stop.

We have done this exactly once in the American Republic for something structurally identical, and the memory is bracing. The Gilded Age ran a fundraising machine any operator alive today would recognize on sight: parties financed by the systematic assessment of their own officeholders, clerkships sold and kicked back through the spoils system, Senate seats bought from the legislatures that still chose them, and machines like Tammany metering patronage and skimming at every valve. It was a stable, crooked equilibrium, defended by everyone inside it, and it did not reform itself; incremental virtue rolled back down the wall for thirty years. What finally re-carved the ground was not a better grade of politician but a broad and sustained external forcing that took a generation to build and a generation to apply – the muckrakers who made the skim visible and then intolerable, Ida Tarbell on Standard Oil, Lincoln Steffens on the shame of the cities, David Graham Phillips on the treason of the Senate, and behind them a mass movement that turned disgust into structural law. The Pendleton Act pulled the spoils out of the civil service. The Tillman Act banned corporate money outright. The first federal disclosure statutes dragged the flows into daylight. The Seventeenth Amendment took the Senate away from the men who had been buying it. Not one of these was a nudge; each raised or lowered the heights of the landscape itself, until behavior that had been dominant became, at last, costly. That is the scale of the thing, and it is the honest measure of this grift – not that it is wicked, for wickedness is cheap and everywhere, but that it lies at the bottom of a valley the Republic last climbed out of only with a Progressive movement, and that nothing smaller has ever worked, because nothing smaller changes the ground. I say it's time, again.

And here is the part that must be stated without any softening, because every hopeful reader reaches for the exit it closes: not one of those reforms was enacted by the machines it disciplined. They were done *to* the parties, from outside, over the parties' own furious objection. The direct primary, the initiative and the referendum, the direct election of senators, the civil-service rolls – each was a structural amputation of boss power, and the bosses fought every one, because a machine does not reform the ground it is perfectly adapted to feed on. This is the evolutionary heart of the matter, and here the fitness landscape stops being a figure of speech and becomes the literal mechanism: the party committees and their vendors are not gardeners standing above the valley deciding how it ought to be shaped, they are its best-adapted organisms, the specialists most exquisitely tuned to the crooked floor, and one does not ask the creatures best fitted to a valley to go and fill it in. Tammany did not clean itself. It was routed around by new machinery it could not capture, and then it starved. Selection acts *on* the organism; the organism does not volunteer to be selected against. Any theory of reform that waits for the DNC or the RNC to lead it has mistaken the weed for the gardener. And lest the rhyme be taken for an equation, mark where it breaks: the Gilded-Age machine was fed by concentrated wealth, the railroads and Standard Oil buying government wholesale, while ours is fed by the diffuse pennies of millions defrauded at retail – the vector of the theft is reversed, the plutocrat's dollar swapped for the pensioner's, and a historian is right to insist the two diseases are not the same. But the structure beneath them is identical: a self-dealing equilibrium its beneficiaries will never reform from within, broken the last time only by force applied from outside.

So let me name the amputations that would fit this valley, because the shape of a cure is worth drawing even when the surgeon is nowhere in sight, and they are narrower and sharper than the slogans suggest. Put a nutrition label on every solicitation: require each appeal to disclose, at the point of the ask, what fraction of the previous cycle's dollars actually reached a candidate, so that *one and six-tenths of one percent* must stand on the counter beside the button – the flat joint cannot survive the mark doing the arithmetic, which is precisely why the Publicity Act of 1910 dragged the flows into daylight. Give a cop jurisdiction over the transaction without touching the speech: the pre-checked recurring box, the fabricated receipt, the countdown that is a lie are not protected argument but billing mechanics, consumer fraud wearing a flag, and the Eighth Circuit has already held that state consumer-protection law reaches them – federalize that holding and the patch is un-squared. Cut the self-dealing that is the scam-PAC's entire engine: forbid a committee from routing the bulk of its receipts as "fees" to a firm its own operators own, the way the Pendleton Act cut the clerk's living loose from the boss who appointed him. And rebuild the referee: restructure the Federal Election Commission so it cannot deadlock three against three by design, and hand it the authority it has begged Congress for, uselessly, every year since 2016. Those four cuts would drain this particular valley, and every one of them could be enacted by ordinary statute tomorrow. The deepest cut of all is a different matter, because it runs not through Congress but through the Court itself, and I will come to it.

Every one of those cuts drains the pool the parties drink from, and so every one of them will be fought by the parties; that is the whole reason for saying it plainly. The reform cannot be authored by its targets. It waits, as the last one waited, on a movement large enough and angry enough and patient enough to impose it from outside – and that movement does not exist yet.

The Master Patch

There is one more patch, and it sits above all the others, because it does not square a single sheriff but the whole possibility of a sheriff. I said earlier that the First Amendment rightly bars the state from policing political speech, and that this is why the Federal Trade Commission cannot reach the content of a fundraising lie. That is true, and it is not the deep problem. The deep problem is that the Court has spent fifty years reading the same amendment to mean a thing the men who wrote it would not recognize: that money is speech. In *Buckley v. Valeo* in 1976 the justices reasoned that because political communication costs money, a limit on political spending must be weighed as a limit on political speech itself – as though a dollar were a sentence. From that seed grew everything after it: *Citizens United* in 2010, extending the doctrine to the treasuries of corporations; the lower court's *SpeechNow* ruling the same year, which conjured the super PAC out of it; and this summer's *NRSC v. FEC*, decided on the thirtieth of June, striking the last caps on coordinated party spending. An amendment written to protect the pamphleteer and the preacher from the sheriff has been turned, by slow degrees, into a shield for unlimited money and a bar on the public's power to limit it. That is the master patch. It squares the entire midway at the level of the Constitution, and it is why the ground keeps being re-carved downhill: the hands doing the carving are five or six unelected judges reading a checkbook as a mouth.

Which raises the question the reflex forecloses. Is the Republic simply helpless before a Court that keeps deregulating the money, able to do nothing short of amending the Constitution itself? The reflexive answer is yes, and it is wrong, and the wrongness is a piece of half-buried history worth exhuming, because it is where the only real possibility lives. The Court is supreme over the other courts; it is not sovereign over its own scaffolding, most of which Congress built by ordinary statute and fought over freely in the nineteenth century. The number of justices is nowhere in the Constitution: Congress fixed it at six in 1789, shrank it to five and swelled it toward ten as the politics of the moment required, and settled it at nine only in 1869, where it has sat since by nothing sturdier than habit. The Court's appellate jurisdiction – the whole of its power to hear appeals – exists, in the words of Article III, "with such Exceptions, and under such Regulations as the Congress shall make"; and Congress has used that clause with a hard hand, most starkly in *Ex parte McCardle* in 1869, when it stripped the Court of jurisdiction over a case already argued before it, precisely to head off a ruling it feared, and the Court swallowed the amputation without a fight. Since the nineteenth century Congress has floated bills requiring a supermajority of justices before a statute may be struck down; it has never passed one, but nothing in the Constitution forbids it. These are not the fever dreams of cranks. They are the ordinary, forgotten levers of a coequal branch that has merely lost the nerve, or the votes, to reach for them. Careful reading rewards the student of revolution.

And behind those levers stands the larger possibility, the one that reaches the question of a separate constitutional court. The American arrangement – constitutional review scattered through the ordinary courts and crowned by a single supreme one – is not the world's template but a minority report. Most mature democracies took instead the design of the Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen, who in 1920 lodged constitutional review in a specialized *constitutional court*, set apart from the ordinary judiciary and charged with nothing but the constitution itself: Germany has one, and Italy, and Spain, and France in its own fashion, and none of them is thereby the less free. The obstacle to grafting that model onto our trunk is textual and real – Article III vests the judicial power in "one supreme Court," and Chief Justice Charles

Evans Hughes, whose 1937 letter helped sink Franklin Roosevelt's scheme to pack the bench, argued that the Constitution will not abide two supreme courts running in harness. So a true constitutional court here would likely take an amendment, which is the Progressive-scale labor once more. But the blueprint is not the point. The point is that the elected branches are not the Court's supplicants; they are its architects, and they have built and rebuilt it before, and could again. The valley is deep, and the doctrine that roofs it is deep, but neither is bedrock. Both were laid down by human decisions, and human decisions can be unmade – from outside, by force, over the objection of the men who profit by them, which latter is the only way any of it has ever been done.

The Existence Proof

An engineer keeps a hard line between a problem with no known solution and a problem proven to have none, because the first is an invitation and the second is a wall, and most of the despair in public life comes of mistaking the one for the other. This grift is the first kind. It has no solution in hand, and it has not been shown to have none, and the whole of whatever hope this essay has earned lives in that gap – because the valley can be climbed, and we know it can be climbed not as a matter of faith but as a matter of record, since it was climbed once already, from a lower start, by people with cruder tools and a narrower franchise. The Progressive era is the existence proof. And an existence proof, in the cold sense the phrase carries in mathematics, is worth more than any promise, because it is not a hope about the future; it is a fact about what is possible.

Begin with how bad the starting position was, because the temptation is to file the Progressives under a gentler age, and the truth runs the other way. In the last decades of the nineteenth century the United

States Senate was known, without irony, as the Millionaires' Club, its seats effectively bought from the state legislatures that still chose them; the Crédit Mobilier bribes had reached into the House and the Vice-Presidency; the spoils system made every federal job a kickback; Tammany and its cousins ran the cities as private revenue farms; and by 1896 Mark Hanna had systematized the assessment of corporations to bankroll a presidential campaign, wholesale. The machine of that day was richer, cruder, and more openly for sale than anything in my wife's inbox. If any equilibrium ever wore the face of permanence, it was that one.

What broke it began not in a statute but on a page. The January 1903 number of *McClure's* is the issue historians mark as the ignition: in a single magazine it ran the third installment of Ida Tarbell's nineteen-part dismemberment of Standard Oil, Lincoln Steffens's "The Shame of Minneapolis," and Ray Stannard Baker on the coal fields – three separate anatomies of how the country was actually run, set side by side for a public that had stopped looking. In March 1906 David Graham Phillips laid out in *Cosmopolitan*, under the title *The Treason of the Senate*, how the upper chamber had been bought, and the series broke the Senate's resistance and opened the road to the Seventeenth Amendment; that same year Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* put the Chicago killing floors in front of the country and Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act within months, in June. Theodore Roosevelt, half admiring and half alarmed, handed the writers the name meant to shame them – the men with the muck-rake – and the name stuck precisely because the method was working. The method was nothing more than this: make the theft specific, and visible, and impossible to un-see.

Then the ground moved – not at once and not gently, but decisively, inside a single generation. The secret ballot spread through the states in the late 1880s and 1890s; the direct primary followed, Wisconsin's under La Follette in 1903 and 1904; the initiative and the referendum let voters legislate over the heads of the bosses, Oregon's carried at the polls in June 1902; the Tillman Act banned corporate contributions outright in 1907; the first federal disclosure laws arrived in 1910 and 1911; and in 1913 two amendments landed together, the income tax and the direct election of senators that finally pried the Millionaires' Club open. It took roughly thirty years. It was fought at every step by everyone who fed at the old floor, and it won anyway, because a movement had formed that the machines could not buy, could not co-opt, and could not outlast. None of it was foreordained, and that is the entire point: it was improbable, and it happened.

Set our position beside theirs and the ledger is not the rout that despair pretends. The levers, as I have shown, already exist, and most of them need only ordinary statutes. The precedent exists, and it is recent enough to touch. Even the reporting has begun – Bonica's arithmetic, the investigations in *Sludge* and *The Nation*, the CNN accounting of the elderly emptied of their savings are the muck-rake taken up again, the theft being made specific once more. What is missing is not the diagnosis and not the tools; it is the ignition, the movement large enough to carry the disgust into law over the objection of the men who profit by the dark. That absence is real, and I will not paint over it, and the most recent motion of the ground – the June ruling in *NRSC v. FEC* – was the wrong way. But an absence is not an impossibility. The Progressive generation stood exactly where we stand now, with the theft documented, the public not yet moved, and the machine looking eternal, and they struck the match regardless. The valley is deep. It is not bottomless. And it has an upslope, worn once already by feet no stronger than our own.

The Money Card

I began in my wife's inbox and I will end there, because the abstraction has a face and the face is the whole point. The people this joint strips are not marks in the carnival's contemptuous sense, not the greedy and not the gullible. They are the most loyal givers a party has, the ones who answer every "everything is on the line" because for them it *is*, the ones whose faith in the Republic is precisely the surface the optimization has learned to strip. Small-dollar democracy was supposed to be the clean money, the citizen's answer to the corporate check, the many quietly outweighing the few; and a private firm, with the party's knowledge and the party's cut and the party's carefully purchased distance, has turned that faith into a renewable feedstock and metered it back out at a cent and a half on the dollar. The counterfeit is driving out the coin, in the one channel where the mere appearance of care is how a stranger earns a moment of your attention, and this time the stranger is wearing your own colors and invoking your own hopes.

So walk back down the midway one last time and look at what the hands did. The money card was *poll*, and *petition*, and *receipt*, and *match*; you were invited to keep your eye on the familiar civic object and told that watching closely was enough, and while you watched, the object changed. The poll became a payment processor, the committee became a private firm's best client, the party that owned the lot swore it only leased the ground, the cop was squared, and when you began to suspect, a soft voice explained that a patriot does not make a scene. It was never a poll. It was a flat joint, gaffed before you arrived, and the tell was there in the machinery the whole time for anyone who read the buttons instead of the prose: one and six-tenths of one percent.

And yet I do not write this in despair, because despair is a category error, the mistake of taking a valley for a pit, Dante's fell destination. The people who last stood at the bottom of a valley this shape did not wait to feel hopeful before they moved; they made the theft visible, one printed page at a time, until it could no longer be borne, and then the ground moved under everyone. That is the only hope on offer, and it is enough – not that the machine will collapse of its own weight, for it will not, but that it can be named, and shown, and in the end out-organized, because that has been done inside the memory of the Republic by people who began just where we are, with a documented theft and a public not yet angry enough. The counterfeit is sovereign only while it goes unseen.

We did not answer the email. I read its headers and chased its source instead. And I now speak to polis.

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