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Fake Shake

IN THE summer of 1995, Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich were embarrassed by a citizen's question into shaking hands in front of the TV cameras and agreeing to seek campaign finance reform. The shake was fake. Now both men are in serious trouble for having engaged in precisely the sort of behavior that campaign finance reform is intended to avert. In raising large amounts of private money for their very different political purposes they defied if not the law itself then the standards of conduct that the law is meant to represent.

Both of them managed as part of the process to leave the impression that they were in part for sale and being bought. The disclosure of what they did now threatens not just, in varying degrees, their careers but their political standing, their clout and therefore their ability to carry out their agendas. We have said forever that the great risk the politicians run in allowing the present fetid system of campaign finance reform to flourish is the risk to themselves—that it will consume them in the end. You have now before you, simultaneously, the president and speaker of the House, one from each party, as examples. What greater proof than the way each of these men is now writhing in public about the need to cut this system off?

The president is having to deal with a number of what tend to be described as ethics problems just now. The most immediate are those arising from the fund-raising practices in his last campaign. It has become a kind of guessing game. What will it turn out today that they auctioned off—a night in the Lincoln bedroom, a seat on a trade advisory commission, an audience of one kind or another with the president—and for how much and to whom? Who knows where it leads? The president has said since at least his own 1992 campaign that he was determined to clean up the system of campaign finance.

But in his first two years, when his own party was in command of Congress and theoretically in a position to deliver, no delivery occurred. The House Democrats in particular were reluctant to change the system that had got them there, and he who had other things he wanted them to do was loathe to press them. In the second two years, when neither party faced the risk of enactment, he continued to pay lip service to the

need for reform, even as he was industriously raising vast amounts of money outside the reach of the regulatory system whose weakness he would periodically deplore.

Now he seeks to convert the excesses of his own campaign into an agenda for the second term by urging passage of a well-intentioned bill that would solve only part of the problem and that, even so, the Republicans have already indicated they oppose. That's his record.

Mr. Gingrich meanwhile is in trouble for having run a giant laundry in which ostensibly charitable contributions were converted to political use—and then for having lied about it to the House ethics committee. The laundry operated in such a way as to short-circuit if not violate both the tax and campaign contribution laws. He now admits to a certain inattentiveness—that's about all—says it won't happen again and asks the House to let him off with a reprimand while letting him keep his speakership. Sure, an ethics panel made up half of members of his own party has found that he violated House rules, but what's a little rules violation among friends? Surely not disqualifying.

The need is for a system of spending limits, plus some public financing or the equivalent. Together they would serve to reduce the outside money that participating candidates would have to raise and, we believe, reduce the enormous financial advantage that incumbents now routinely enjoy over challengers. There should also be a serious penalty for those who mock and breach the rules, as both presidential candidates did this year. If you want the law to work, create the risk, which for the most part doesn't currently exist, that those who violate it will spend a campaign cycle or two in prison.

Mr. Gingrich's Republicans claim not to like the idea of public finance. Heaven forbid that the taxpayer should subsidize campaigns. Yet Mr. Gingrich's own laundry was designed precisely to create a backdoor system of public finance. You labeled a contribution as charitable rather than political, which allowed you to deduct it in figuring your taxes. The government paid a share of the cost as surely as if it had handed over the money directly. The hypocrisy of both the parties on this subject knows no bounds.