

...And to Sabotage the Campaign Spending Law

Wingate

"We should prohibit those who have government contracts, contractors who deal with the government, contractors who make great sums out of government contracts, from making contributions to political parties for any purpose whatsoever . . . The greatest source of corruption in American politics today is the use of money obtained from those who make profit out of contracts with the government."

Those are not the words of your ordinary liberal reformer, holding forth against the unholy alliance of big business and big government. Those are the words, on the contrary, of the late Senator Harry F. Byrd, spoken over 40 years ago, as Congress was making its first real effort to exercise some control over money in politics by restricting campaign contributions by government contractors. These rules were later refined and expanded in the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, enacted in recognition, by most responsible people, that Harry Byrd had been right—that our political processes were being corrupted and debased by the ease with which the big spenders, and especially those doing business with the government, could buy their way to political influence. Today's headlines tell us that regulations are still far too lax; that we still have a long way to go if the political processes are to be freed of powerful, private, unfettered financial manipulation by men of means.

And yet, there on today's Suspension Calendar in the House, alongside the aforementioned bill to

cancel the news, is another striking example of legislation by stealth — a measure (H.R. 15276) which would undo an important part of the Election Campaign Act and make a mockery of that 40-year-old warning from Harry Byrd. Specifically, this bill would exclude corporations and perhaps also labor organizations from the reach of existing regulations governing political contributions by government contractors. Like the measure having to do with travel to Hanoi, it was sneaked out of a closed committee session, without benefit of hearings; nobody was supposed to know about it until it was too late—except, of course, the business and labor interests who covertly promoted it after a Common Cause lawsuit against an aerospace contractor had proved last August that the provisions of the Election Campaign Act could actually be made to work. Under a stipulated agreement with Common Cause, the contractor, TRW, agreed to dissolve its political fund, return unspent contributions, and stop soliciting political contributions from its employees.

HR 15276 would make this sort of thing permissible again, and right at a time when we are confronted with one report after another of campaign contributions "laundered" in Mexican banks and other gross abuses of the rules governing the handling of campaign finances. This, in short, is an odd time to open still another loophole to more "corruption in American politics" and the House should waste no time in knocking the effort on the head.