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Enron Pundits

By Howard Kurtz

The debate about campaign finance reform can be boiled down to one question: What exactly are corporations buying when they give millions of dollars to politicians?

Now, there's some heated talk about journalistic finance reform -- that is, what are corporations buying when they lard their payrolls with prominent media folks? And should columnists and commentators be taking cash from companies such as Enron, about which they later find themselves delivering strong opinions?

The contretemps has exposed just how cozy the relationships are between some in the pundit class and the corporate world, in which \$50,000 can change hands for what the average cubicle dweller would consider remarkably little work.

The journalists involved have, with varying degrees of candor, disclosed their Enron ties while writing about the collapse of America's seventh-largest corporation. But they find themselves facing the sort of hostile questions usually reserved for committee chairman who do legislative favors for big-time donors.

I've been critical of journalistic buckraking since the mid-1990s, when I wrote about a \$30,000 speech that Sam Donaldson had given to an insurance group. The gilded trail of corporate honoraria quickly led to such luminaries as David Brinkley, Robert Novak, David Gergen, Cokie Roberts, Christopher Matthews, Larry King, Mark Shields, Fred Barnes, George Will and Michael Kinsley, who memorably said: "I didn't do it for years, but it became more socially acceptable." King likened it to "white-collar crime." Many refused to discuss it on grounds they weren't public officials.

The issue began to fade as a number of news organizations, including ABC and NBC, banned the practice. (The Washington Post had long barred honoraria from corporations or trade groups that lobby Congress.)

But now, for those who took Enron money, there's no place to hide, the burgeoning scandal having replaced the war as the Beltway's reigning obsession. And the journalists involved (with one exception) have whacked Kenneth Lay & Co. pretty hard.

New York Times columnist Paul Krugman, who got \$50,000 from an Enron advisory board before joining the Times, blamed the criticism on an "effort by conservatives to sling Enron muck toward their left." Unfortunately for this argument, most of the Enron journalists are free-marketeers on the right.

Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan, who received \$25,000 to \$50,000 for speechwriting help, told me: "I don't regret having done the work -- it was honest work, honestly done, hard work too, reported on my taxes, not hidden in any way. . . . But my feeling is: I have to talk about my experience in order to talk about Enron, and I have to talk about Enron because I have strong feelings about what they did."

Lawrence Kudlow of CNBC and National Review said that he should have disclosed earlier that he'd gotten \$50,000 for consulting and research, but he also said that he's tougher on the energy company because he feels betrayed.

Weekly Standard Editor Bill Kristol, who received \$100,000 from the advisory board, sees nothing wrong with such work. His role was disclosed in a Standard piece by another Enron beneficiary, contributing editor Irwin Stelzer, who praised Lay and Enron for "leading the fight for competition."

Other than Stelzer, who failed to disclose the arrangement in articles for the British press, the other writers can boast that their criticism of Enron demonstrates they can't be swayed by mere money. Of course, had Enron not suffered a spectacular meltdown, we likely would not have known about most of these financial ties -- and still don't know about other such moonlighting.

The Enron pundits have put themselves in a weird box. If they recused themselves and wrote nothing, as some critics suggest, then the company would in effect have bought their silence. By writing on Enron, they risk the appearance of biting the hand that fed them just to flaunt their journalistic courage.

Perhaps what rankles most is the notion that Enron was trying to do what it did with George W. Bush, John Ashcroft, Joe Lieberman, Lawrence Lindsey, Ralph Reed and about half of official Washington -- making an investment that could pay off later on. What, after all, did the commentators do for Enron? "This was an advisory panel that had no function that I was aware of," Krugman told his newspaper. Exactly.

It's hard for journalists who work for big companies, write books and appear on television to avoid all conflicts these days. But many of these commentators wax indignant when politicians of all stripes appear to be doing the bidding of those who fill their campaign coffers. For media people to line up at the same corporate trough is just asking for trouble.

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