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## Book Notes

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- [\*So Damn Much Money: The Triumph of Lobbying and the Corrosion of American Government\*](#) by Robert G. Kaiser
- [\*The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership\*](#) by George C. Edwards III

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***So Damn Much Money: The Triumph of Lobbying and the Corrosion of American Government***, Robert G. Kaiser, Knopf, 2009, 9780307266545, \$27.95, cloth, 416 pages.

Bob Kaiser is a senior editor at *The Washington Post* and has reported on American politics since the 1960s. In this book he draws on that long experience to explain the fundamental changes that have taken place in American government and politics, changes that are in his view not for the better.

This book will make an excellent companion book in courses in American government, the Congress, interest groups, or money in politics. It ties its narrative into the topics and themes these courses address, and adds the insider perspective that good reporting brings.

Kaiser's vehicle is the career of Gerald Cassidy, the co-founder (with Ken Schlossberg) of Cassidy & Associates, the Washington lobby shop that led the way in developing and mining the congressional earmark industry. Kaiser draws on an extended series about Cassidy that was published in the *Post* in the past two years. The book interweaves chapters that tell the highly personal story of Gerry Cassidy with other chapters that explain the cultural, institutional, and political forces that have altered the environment in which Congress does its business.

The nub of this book's argument is that American government has become corroded at the nexus of campaign contributions and special-interest lawmaking. Cassidy cultivated the form, and many others have followed in his wake. His insight was to see that a lobbyist could serve as the interface (the "fixer") between organized interests and the congressional appropriations process; his genius was to see that the real money was to be made in creating the need his skills would serve. Starting out with a specialized clientele among institutions of higher education, the Cassidy method was to identify funding opportunities

rather than institutional (much less public) needs. If the Cassidy team could find authorizing legislation that could support claims on the federal treasury, then it remained only to explain to college presidents how their institutions could capture the federal largess. Building out from his base in the higher education community, Cassidy created an earmark shop that became the most lucrative lobbying practice in Washington. Although Cassidy eventually branched out into more mainstream policy representation, his legacy will surely be traced to his fundamental business model.

Kaiser explains quite clearly how Cassidy & Associates cultivated contacts on the Hill, in the higher education community, and in the world of commerce. Central to the firm's success was reliance on "finders," i.e. persons of influence who would bring earmark business to the firm in return for 10 percent of the profits generated. Cassidy 10-percenters numbered in the hundreds over the years. The firm also established close ties to members of Congress through an active political action committee, bundling, and sponsorship of fund-raisers for individual members and the national party committees. While originally identified primarily with the Democrats, Cassidy shifted seamlessly to the Republicans after 1994, hiring high placed Republican staffers to help run the company. The explosion of earmarks under the Republican congressional regime was no accident.

So much does this book rely on the story of Gerry Cassidy, that one might have expected it to present itself as his story rather than ours. Yet the book's title and Kaiser's explanation makes it clear that Gerry Cassidy was as much a symptom as a cause of "the corrosion of American government" referenced in the book's title. Kaiser sees Gerry Cassidy as a sort of tragic figure of the American type, a latter day Jay Gatsby. He came from nothing and rose to great prominence and wealth. He had the insight to see his opportunities, and the drive to take advantage of them. Kaiser, who interviewed Cassidy often and at length for this book, ends up expressing a sort of sympathy for the man, just as Nick Carraway does of Gatsby: "No – Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men."

Professional political scientists may find themselves learning more about Gerry Cassidy than they need to know, although the personal narrative no doubt drives the interest of the general reader. Kaiser's discussion of campaign fundraising, congressional reform, the Democratic and Republican approaches to government, and the permanent campaign are all familiar to us. The contribution of this book lies in the adept meshing of these themes with the personal story of one man whose career unfolded in the context of this transformation of our politics.

Kaiser combines both a condemnation of the system and an understanding of the man who helped shape it. Still, one wonders if Kaiser would say of Cassidy what Nick says of Gatsby: "They're a rotten crowd," I shouted across the lawn. "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together."

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**The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership,** George C. Edwards III, Princeton University Press, 2009, ISBN 9780691139470, \$29.95, cloth, 256 pages.

One of the big issues within the literature on the presidency is how presidents use persuasion to get what they want. Is their persuasion effective? Who are they trying to persuade? These questions and others are justly answered in *The Strategic President*. In this book, Edwards is not concerned with whether presidents matter since they undoubtedly do matter. He is concerned with why they matter. Through the use of test cases in regards to the public and Congress, Edwards is able to answer this question.

Before he goes into his test cases, Edwards outlines the recurring argument of institutional context versus the personal skills and traits of the president. Edwards presents two broad perspectives on the presidency. The first sees the president as the director of change, creating “opportunities to move in new directions, leading others where they otherwise would not go” (11). This supports the personal skills and traits argument. The second perspective sees the president as a facilitator of change, using strategies and tactics to exploit opportunities for change in the environment in which he is operating. To build his argument that presidents have to act as facilitators in regards to their relationships with Congress and the public, Edwards looks to Joseph Cooper and David Brady’s conclusion that institutional context is more important than personal skills or traits.

While Edwards focuses on the public as well as Congress, it is chapter four, “Leading Congress: Best Test Cases,” that is the most relevant to legislative studies. In this chapter, Edwards analyzes a number of Republican and Democratic presidents in regards to their relationships with Congress. He finds that while most of the presidents chosen acted strategically by trying to persuade the marginal members, they were not very effective. Edwards uses Ronald Reagan as an example of a president who often lobbied members of Congress, and, therefore, found it hard to persuade them since his direct contact with them was not uncommon. The more novel a president’s contact with members of Congress, the better chance the president had at being effectively persuasive.

Edwards’ findings strengthen the well-known concept that presidents can more easily persuade Congress in their first year as president. Therefore, it is less than surprising that “Ronald Reagan began his term with rave reviews for his handling of Congress, but his legislative relations soured considerably in the years that followed” (145). This happens to most presidents.

Edwards’ ultimate finding is that the success of persuasion is more often than not the exception rather than the rule. Jimmy Carter’s use of persuasion regarding the Panama Canal treaties was successful. However, other such cases of successful persuasion are rare.

Although this book’s conclusions often enforce common knowledge, Edwards does an excellent job of using historical evidence and anecdotes to extend the debate over whether power is derived from the person or the position of the president. Any scholar interested in that ongoing debate should definitely read this book.

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