MONEY IS the lifeblood of politics. All politics — local politics, state politics, national politics — and it’s been so since the founding of the Republic. Money is the vitalizing *eau de vie* which fuels and sustains that raucous and sometimes-even-informative discourse we call political campaigning in America. Money in politics isn’t evil. It’s necessary. It’s irreplaceable. And the need for it — in greater and greater quantities each campaign cycle — has become virtually an addiction. So proclaiming that “We must get rid of money in politics!” is not only uninformed and silly, it’s patently non-actionable. It won’t happen because it *can’t* happen — and this will remain true until someone figures out how to buy advertising and office space and airplane tickets and campaign personnel (etc.), without spending any money.

Besides, as most political *cognoscenti* realize, money in politics *per se* isn’t the problem. The problem is the *influence on policy-making* that so much of that money is (quite openly) intended to purchase.

Virtually all the efforts undertaken in this and the previous century to reform campaign financing in America have been built around two basic strategies — (1) limiting the size (and to some degree the sources) of political money, and (2) requiring full disclosure of the names of all contributors as well as of the amounts (or nature) of the support they contribute. This is the *Strict-Limits/Full-Disclosure* (SLFD) model. But the very politicians who thru the years have been responsible
for legislating these requirements are the same ones who — with their assorted apparatchiks, hacks, and helpers — have regularly found ways of legislating ways around them. So “soft money” (or “dark money”) continues to flow into party and campaign coffers at floodtide levels; special interests are as powerful and as entrenched as they’ve ever been; and the lobbying profession in Washington has never known a more optimistic visage of job security.

There’s only one remedy that has any chance of breaking this vicious cycle of ineffectual reform and creative circumvention. And this remedy relies upon a strategy that’s as completely opposite to the Strict-Limits/Full-Disclosure approach as it possibly could be. It is the No-Limits/No-Disclosure (NLND) model; and it has its roots in a philosophical tradition more than five thousand years old!

Moses Maimonides, a rabbi, physician, scholar, and teacher in Spain, Morocco, and Egypt who lived during the late Middle Ages (1135-1204), is acknowledged to be one of the foremost rabbinical arbiters and philosophers in Jewish history. Today, his works and his views are considered a cornerstone of Jewish thought and values; and in one of his most important works, he discusses the Jewish tradition of tzedakah, or charity.

In explicating the Talmudic perspective on the subject of giving, Maimonides suggests that an act of tzedakah can in fact take place at many levels, and that these levels can be seen more or less as the rungs of a ladder. The lowest rung represents the most niggardly and least noble kind of giving. A donor on this rung is “one who gives what he should, but does so grudgingly and in full public view” (i.e., so that everyone in the community, as well as the recipient, is aware of who the giver was and how much was given). The highest (eighth) rung on the ladder represents the noblest and most righteous form of giving — namely, helping the
poor become self-sufficient and (so) relieving them of the burden of having to accept charity in the first place.

But it’s the sixth rung of Maimonides’ ladder of tzedakah that, for me, provides the most useful and apposite template for effective campaign-finance reform in America. For, a person who’s reached the social maturity and egoless clarity of the sixth level of tzedakah is “one who gives so that neither the recipient nor the community knows who the donor is” or how much was given — in other words, total anonymity. Nobody’s embarrassed (at having to accept alms), nobody gets “credit” (for having given them), nobody’s indebted; and thus the whole community is ennobled by this single act of anonymous charity. It’s just a good deed done for its inherent righteousness, and it represents personal giving in nearly its purest and most altruistic form.

This is the basis for the No-Limits/No-Disclosure (NLND) campaign financing system I propose in this paper: a system of no limits but total anonymity.

The problem with American campaign financing today is that everybody knows pretty much exactly how much everybody else has given, to whom, and when. Yet it’s precisely this lack of secrecy that allows special interests to buy political influence — or at least political access — thru their campaign contributions and in-kind gifts. If I’m politician and I know that a certain union or a particular interest group put together a contribution of a couple of million dollars for my campaign war chest, then I’m probably going to be especially attentive to that union or that industry’s interests when it comes to crafting a party platform, casting certain votes, making policy decisions, and so on.
But what if I didn’t know — *and could never find out* — how much anybody (or any PAC or any other kind of group) ever gave to my campaign? Or even *that* they gave to my campaign at all? How would such “total anonymity” affect the now-so-incestuous interplay of politics and money?

*Let me count the ways . . .*

First and foremost, in an No-Limits/No-Disclosure financing system, virtually all corporate and organizational gifts (including those from PACs and 527 groups, etc.) would be prohibited, because their anonymity could never be assured: The discussions and votes authorizing any such contributions are all part of the organizations' public record, and thus are accessible to the media and to others. The tens of millions of dollars these organizations had been spending to influence policy or buy political access could now be returned to the customer in the form of lower prices, better service, higher stock dividends, improved ROI, and rising stock values. (It wouldn’t surprise me a bit to learn, for example, and I’m only guessing here, that the pharmaceutical industry could both bump up its bottom line *and* halve the price of its drugs if they’d collectively just stop paying for all those lobbyists!)

Second, individual donors and privately-held companies could provide unlimited financial support to any candidates or parties in whose positions they believed and with whose policies they agreed; it’s just that nobody — including the candidates themselves and the community at large — would ever know about it! This would represent “political speech” in its freest and most unfettered form: The more people who believe in what you stand for and what you’ll fight for, the more your campaign coffers will grow. But you’ll never know how many gave, or which attendees at any particular speech or rally or picnic gave, or even how much that *specific* speech or rally or picnic or parade, by itself, brought in; for, in the No-Lim-
its/No Disclosure system I propose, a candidate’s (and party’s) campaign contributions from all sources would be tallied, disbursed, and published on a weekly basis only. I believe that the consequent inability for candidates to calibrate a particular event’s impact on campaign contributions would be a very good thing, as it would at least tend toward increased honesty and decreased pandering.

Third, political campaign contributions from all socio-economic strata would increase, once donors no longer had to fear public disclosure either of their political leanings or their financial station. It’s true that many traditional funding streams would probably dry up because the money could no longer be counted upon reliably to buy either influence or political access. But these losses would be substantially offset by the increased levels of giving that a “total anonymity” system would almost certainly stimulate in the broader populace. And even if the net result ended up being a significant decrease in the total amount of political giving, this would not (in my view) be an entirely undesirable outcome, given the obscene sums of money now being spent on our elections every year.

Fourth, the spectrum of political candidates would become increasingly enriched and diversified, as wealthy donors and donor groups throughout the country begin supporting non-establishment and “fringe” candidates (including even themselves, perhaps) under the protective anonymity of an NLND financing system.

Fifth, politicians and political parties, by being liberated from the tyranny of special interests, would be free (and indeed obliged) to formulate their positions solely on the basis of what they and their constituents truly felt and believed in — not on what might serve the interests of this lobby or that interest group at a particular moment in time.
And finally, elected officials would be able to spend more time legislating and less time “servicing” special-interest constituencies. We still might have only a part-time legislature, as members will likely continue (in the absence of term limits) to spend half their waking hours groveling after money to fuel their next election campaigns. But at least they won’t be spending any additional time kowtowing to financial supporters — because there’d simply be no way for them to know who their financial supporters are!

In fact, the only negative impact I could foresee arising from the implementation of an No-Limits/No-Disclosure campaign-financing system would be the instantaneous and unavoidable unemployment of untold thousands of lobbyists and special-interest representatives in Washington and elsewhere — a tragedy not to be trivialized by any means (because there are so very many of them!), but one, nonetheless, with which I believe the nation would be entirely prepared to live.

As for implementation, between the IRS, the FEC, and the GAO (among others), the apparatus and technology already exist to implement, administer, and police an NLND campaign-financing system effectively, at least at the Federal level; this is also widely true at the State level, as well. The only added element required would be a central campaign-contributions clearinghouse, which would act as the sole depository and disbursement center for all campaign funds, as adumbrated in the following — a new and radically simple . . .
Federal Election Campaign-Reform Act of [Year]

1. Any person, family, or privately-owned company may contribute any amount of money to any political party, or to any individual candidate, as often as the contributor(s) may wish; contributions from all public-record organizations, including corporations, NPOs and NGOs, PACs and similar groups are prohibited.

2. All contributions must be remitted to, and deposited with, the National Campaign Contributions Clearinghouse (NCCC), and earmarked for a particular political party or for a particular candidate.

3. The NCCC will publish, once each week, the total amount of money raised by each party and by each candidate during the previous seven days, and will show each party’s/candidate’s cumulated year-to-date totals; no other details (including the amounts and dates of individual contributions, the names of the donors, and demographic information about the donors) will ever be published.

4. Also once a week, the NCCC will deposit the previous week’s contributions into the accounts of the parties and candidates for whom they were earmarked, as a single, lump-sum transfer.

5. Excepting their own, personal funds, candidates may spend on their respective election campaigns only the amount of money contributed to them thru the NCCC.

6. Parties may spend on their operations and campaign-support programs only the amount contributed to them thru the NCCC.
7. Except for freely-given and uncompensated hours of volunteer labor, neither parties nor individual candidates may at any time receive, or enjoy the benefits of, any in-kind contributions of any description or value.

With all campaign contributions under a No-Limits/No-Disclosure financing system remaining anonymous, and with an absolute prohibition on in-kind gifts, the grip of the special interests would be broken utterly, and the citizens of the nation would become once again empowered. For they’d now truly be able to “vote with their pocketbooks” in expressing their political preferences, and their votes would be protected — as votes in America have always been protected — by that most sacred and cherished pillar of any democratic society: the secret ballot.

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EDWARD SHAW is a professional writer and political speechwriter, whose clients have included several C-level executives at Fortune 500 companies, Detroit’s mayor, a number of political candidates, and a wide variety of NPOs and NGOs. He’s also written a volume of poems, several white papers, a children’s book, and several plays and musicals; and he has contributed articles to Performance Improvement, Training, SCIENCE, Datamation, Directors & Boards, The Clinical Social Work Journal, and Adult Leadership, among others.