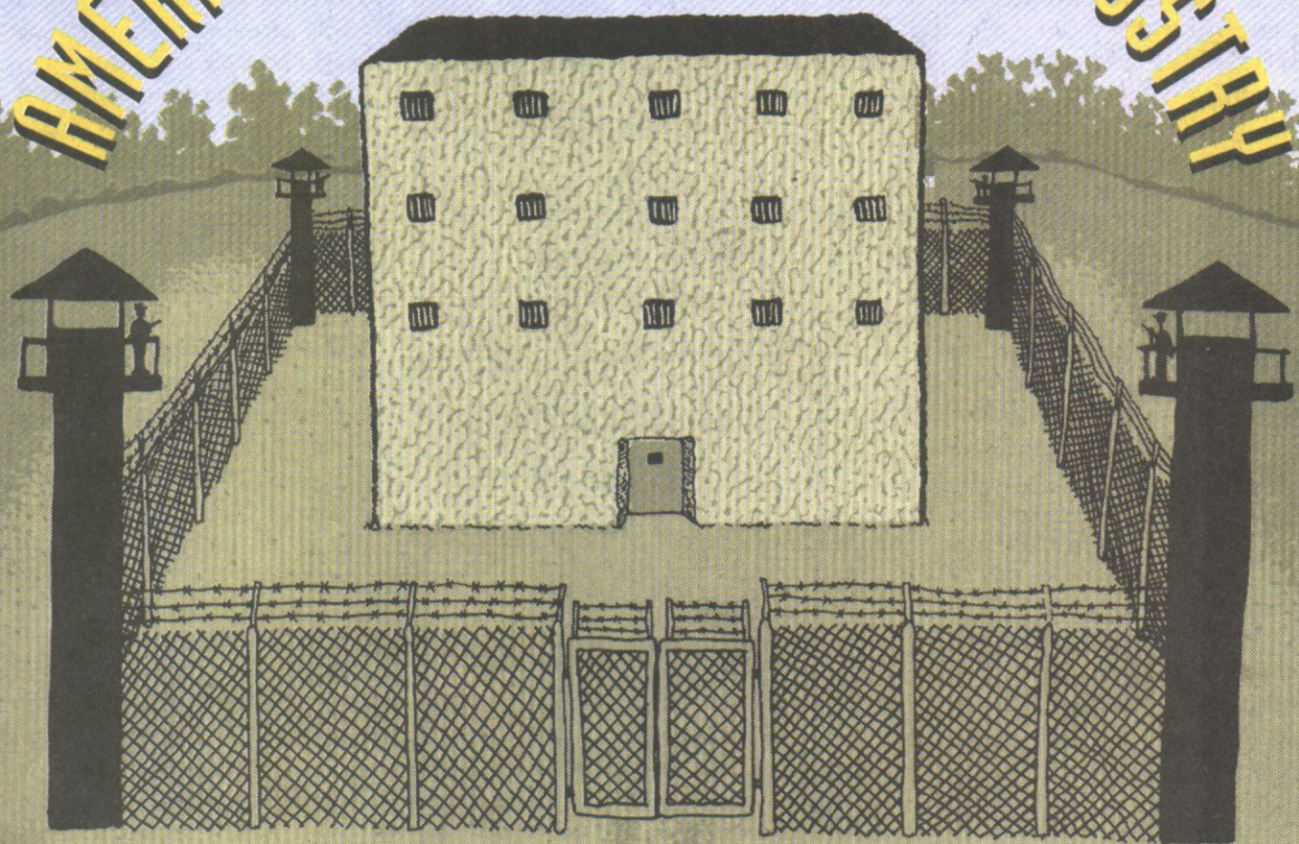


WHY THE PILOTS' DISPUTE MATTERS

March 17-30, 1997

# In THESE TIMES

AMERICA'S NEWEST GROWTH INDUSTRY



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**Private prisons leave  
inmates at the mercy of  
the bottom line.**

*Kristin Bloomer reports*

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# EDITORIAL

## ELECTORAL REFORM THAT WILL WORK

The immense fundraising machines that financed the 1996 electoral campaign brought the corruption of our political system to an unprecedented level. Two well-known factors are responsible for this degradation of our democracy: the prominence of television, with its elevation of individual personality above reasoned discussion, and the 1974 election-law reform, with its elevation of political action committees above parties.

The enormous expense of TV advertising has encouraged, if not forced, ambitious politicians to abandon principle and constituency in a mad scramble to finance their campaigns. No politician better illustrates this trend than Bill Clinton, who—as recent revelations confirm—surpasses all others in his uninhibited enthusiasm for squeezing money out of corporate favor-seekers and wealthy celebrity hounds.

As long as political campaigns require mountains of money, real reform of the electoral system will remain a remote possibility. That is why those most committed to democratization argue for full public financing of election campaigns.

Public financing, however, would not resolve all the problems with our current electoral system. First, the process of deciding which candidates are to receive money would be immensely complex. A commission set up to make such decisions would inevitably be controlled by those with a strong interest not only in favoring major-party candidates, but also in funding only those candidates acceptable to the establishment. This would be particularly true in primaries, which are often more important ideologically than the final elections. Second, giving money to a candidate to pay for 30-second campaign spots would do nothing to raise the level of political discourse or public education on the issues.

Perhaps most important of all, from a practical political point of view, full public financing of election campaigns does not have any chance of being enacted in this Congress. Opponents of reform would seize upon the estimated \$300

million cost of complete public financing. Already, even in the absence of mainstream proponents for campaign reform, those opposed to changing the status quo attack public financing by arguing that it would create yet another government bureaucracy and be an added burden on taxpayers.

On the other hand, requiring broadcasters to provide substantial blocks of time to qualified candidates would avoid or minimize each of these shortcomings. Such a reform would cost the public nothing. Current licensing laws would simply have to be amended to make this a condition for granting broadcasters permission to continue using our airwaves

for their commercial benefit. Such a change would be perfectly legal, though pushing it through Congress would entail a fierce political struggle.

Such legislation would also solve the soundbite problem by requiring the provision of substantial blocks of time—30 minutes instead of 30 seconds. Half-hour spots would make intelligible messages possible and would favor candi-

dates who have thought deeply about relevant social-policy issues over those who merely repeat catchwords and phrases gleaned from polls and focus groups.

Finally, the law would award free airtime during both primary and general elections only to those candidates who can demonstrate some minimum level of organized popular support. If such minimum qualifications were met, broadcasting companies would be required to offer time. If they failed to do so, a candidate claiming to be qualified could then seek relief from the federal courts, not from a bureaucratic commission carrying heavy political baggage. This process might be a burden on the less affluent, but,

to level the playing field, the law could mandate that the cost of such disputes be borne by broadcasters found guilty of having violated the law's provisions.

Such a reform would, of course, be no panacea. Even if it were adopted, corporate money would still distort the democratic process. But financial clout would no longer be the decisive factor in winning elections. Moreover, political campaigns would have more substance, and therefore would attract more popular participation than they do now.

If campaigned for vigorously, this reform has as much chance of success as any of the feckless proposals now being offered by Democratic or Republican leaders. If the left fought for and promoted this reform intelligently, it could gain considerable public support and might well become law. ◀

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