

The Case Against Reform

by Thomas B. Edsall

Self-declared political reform movements are among the most ambiguous forces in America. Proclaimed as drives to eliminate corruption, bossism, and secrecy, many reform efforts in this country have been stalking horses for groups pushing their own covert agendas. The goal of the Progressive movement to prevent machine control of the political system produced restrictive voter registration laws that in practice became vehicles for a Protestant middle- and upper-class to restrict the growing political clout of Irish and Italian immigrants. In 1908, California Governor Hiram Johnson pushed through legislation gutting the power of political parties in the state and produced a system glorifying political irresponsibility. Party fundraisers have been replaced with lobbyist-fundraisers; single-issue initiatives, with governance by elected officials; and the campaign functions of party officials have been taken over by paid political consultants with no allegiance to substantive policy, and no public responsibility.

"Overall, the Progressives' reforms of government procedures were not an impressive contribution to the American heritage of democracy," Andrew McFarland pointedly notes in his new book.* For Common Cause, the mixed achievements and failings of the Progressive movement pose the central question: Is the self-proclaimed citizens' lobby a representative of the general interest or of an upper-middle class elite? McFarland has written an intelligent, thoughtful book that comes down in favor of Common Cause. For any student of reform movements, it

is a significant contribution. Unfortunately, the book is written from the inside of Common Cause looking out, a sympathetic portrayal of the techniques, aims, and internal structure of a lobby run by intelligent, articulate, likable men and women.

In the most interesting section of the book, McFarland carefully outlines the demography of the membership of Common Cause, showing that it is an organization made up of an affluent, well-educated, liberal elite. The median family income of members is about twice the national average, and fully 75.8 percent of the members have completed college, including 42.6 percent who have an advanced graduate or professional degree. Some 53.2 percent of the members describe themselves as liberal or very liberal, while only 7.3 percent call themselves conservative or very conservative. An estimated 99 percent of the members are white, but, unlike the white population at large, 67 percent of the contributors to Common Cause describe themselves as Democrats and only 19 percent as Republicans. The core of the membership grows out of a very special universe of Americans: "There seem to be 100,000 households in the country that contribute a total of \$75 a year to three or more of the following: Common Cause, Nader's Public Citizen, the League of Women Voters, the ACLU, public radio/television, and environmental lobbies."

By any statistical standard, then, Common Cause is made up of affluent, white Democrats. McFarland argues, however, that the leadership and staff of Common Cause have effectively avoided the danger of falling into the trap of the Progressives—serving the needs of its privileged members at the expense of the working class. Instead, Common Cause has succeeded in winning approval of legislation and rules "opening up the system." These included the elimination of many closed congressional hearings, the required public disclosure of politicians' holdings and sources of income, and campaign finance measures providing public financing of presidential general elections and full disclosure of all contributors to federal elections.

These are all legitimate and important victories, but they are not as clear-cut as McFarland suggests. The campaign finance reforms have in many ways encouraged and legitimized special-interest campaign financing through political action committees. Open congressional hearings

more often benefit lobbyists, who actually attend the sessions than they do an undifferentiated "general public."

But much more importantly, McFarland neglects the larger role of reform in the 1970s. Common Cause rode, and to some extent directed, the crest of a wave of public revulsion with politicians resulting from Watergate and all the related scandals. Watergate had clear partisan consequences: it severely damaged the Republican party and gave a beleaguered Democratic party a massive boost, pushing the Democratic advantage in the House from 50 seats in 1973 to 149 in 1977 and handing the party the presidency in 1976.

This massive swing to the Democratic party had nothing to do with policy, however. On such gut economic and social issues as taxation, domestic spending and abortion, the Democratic party was in severe trouble, reflected in the strength of George Wallace's independent bid for the presidency in 1968, the failure of the nomination of George S. McGovern in 1972, and, most recently, in the 1980 and 1984 election and reelection of Ronald Reagan. Watergate was a stroke

of undeserved luck that offered the Democratic party a brief opportunity to address the problems of a federal tax system that had become increasingly burdensome on its own core constituency—the working and lower middle class—and a welfare system which that same core constituency saw as a method of transferring hard-earned dollars into a slum of wastefulness.

Instead of capitalizing on the overwhelming Democratic majorities in the 94th (1975-76) and 95th (1977-78) Congresses to stem the hemorrhaging of white Democrats into the independent and GOP columns, Democrats in those Congresses were dominated by a reform agenda, defined in large part by Common Cause. The successful enactment of much of this reform agenda, along with Democratic victories in 1976, lulled the party into a false sense of security, entirely unprepared to cope with a changing electorate. ■

Thomas B. Edsall is a writer for The Washington Post and author of The New Politics of Inequality, published by W.W. Norton.

**Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest. Andrew S. McFarland. Chatham House, \$20.*

A Mil-Symp Takes on the Pentagon

by Nicholas Lemann

Readers with less than fond memories of Edward Luttwak's tendentious *Commentary* story of a couple of years back, "Why We Need More Waste, Fraud, and Mismanagement in the Pentagon," will be surprised by this book,* which is first-rate. Luttwak's great strength is that he *really* knows what he's talking about—by virtue of the quality of his sources and the years he has devoted to the subject, he's absolutely not blinded by the smokescreen of manly technobabble that emanates from the Pentagon. Much of the ground Luttwak covers will be familiar to those who follow the foibles of the military. Weapons are gold-plated past the point where they work; the officer ranks are swollen with ticket-punchers; interservice rivalry is the real determinant of how things are done; the Grenada operation was a military embarrassment dressed up as a great victory for public relations purposes. What Luttwak

adds to all this is a tone of complete authority. One has the feeling that he knows the difference between the real screw-ups and the things that can be made to look like screw-ups, but aren't really. He also deserves credit for being a member of the small band of conservative military experts (George Kuhn of the Heritage Foundation is another) with the guts and the knowledge to attack the Reagan "rearming of America" as the greatest government spending spree of all time, devoid of military logic. In particular, it's refreshing to find a mil-symp who sees through John Lehman, the secretary of the Navy, a master of the Washington game who has walked away with the store budgetarily for the strategically questionable goal of a 600-ship Navy.

Two quibbles: First, Luttwak is extremely wary of the military reform movement and of cutting the defense budget. In this he reflects the views of the thoughtful, concerned officers who seem to be his main sources. These people feel that the reformers are wolves in sheep's clothing—that is, liberals whose real goal is to eviscerate the military (in this view, that's what all liberals want). In the Pentagon, there is the feeling that if one wants to criticize the F-15, or the Aegis