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## **Who Runs Buffalo?**

### **The Big Business Party**

**By James Ostrowski**

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One of Free Buffalo's first announced projects was "Who Runs Buffalo?" It was to be a systematic analysis of those with the most power over Buffalo's public agenda, based primarily on donations to candidates and committees. The theory was and is that since public officials need money to get elected, those who give the most money have the most influence over those officials who get elected.

This research project has thus far turned out to be too ambitious for us given our limited resources and the enormous amount of work required to compile the full database.

We do hope to complete this work by the end of the year. In the meantime, we decided to release some preliminary results.

These results are based primarily on federal and state campaign finance records with a small sampling of local records. The period analyzed is 2002 through 2005. Those years include the complete cycle of campaigns including for president, governor, mayor and county executive.

What we found was that a small number of persons contribute gargantuan sums of money to candidates, parties and committees. The largest contributors in our preliminary analysis were owners and executives of large corporations. See for example, Table No. 1 (all four years are added together in the amount stated).

| <i>Donor</i>     | <i>Company</i>         | <i>Amount</i> |
|------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| Robert Wilmers   | M & T Bank             | \$192,392.60  |
| Hormoz Mansouri  | E. I. Team, Inc.       | \$171,960.00  |
| Anthony H. Gioia | Gioia Management Group | \$145,764.00  |

There is a clear pattern to their contributions. While there are exceptions to the rule, a large portion of the contributions is given to party committees or to incumbents running for re-election. Party affiliation matters less than incumbency. *Thus, these large contributions help to maintain the status quo in Buffalo area politics.* On the rare occasions when incumbents are seriously challenged, the critical difference has often been these large contributions. More importantly, the large campaign war chests the incumbents build up discourage serious challengers in the first place. That is why many incumbents run unopposed or with only token opposition from “sacrificial lambs.”

Thus, in seeking a true answer to the question: “Who runs Buffalo?”--we are led, not to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party, but to the *Big Business Party* and its platform: the maintenance of the status quo.

While many members of the Big Business Party give lip service to the need for change, some of the very same people have been funding politicians they later complain about. When a grassroots, populist tax revolt started in late 2004, not a single member of the Big Business Party offered their support. I say that not out of resentment or disappointment or surprise—I never expected them to support us--but rather in the hope that the public will begin to realize that they cannot rely on high-profile business leaders to turn this area around.

At an early tax revolt meeting, I addressed this very point:

“What about big business? Why are they hopeless? Merely because it’s their system we are living under. It’s their system we are fighting. We have met the enemy and it is the alliance of big government and big business. If I am wrong, please tell me why there aren’t any corporate fat cats here today. Why do they do so little to change things around here? Because they like the way things are. Where else can fifty guys call the shots in a large metropolitan area: pick the mayor, the county executive, *the judges, the prosecutors*. Life is good!”<sup>1</sup>

Let me emphasize that that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with making a contribution to a candidate. Such conduct is legally protected free speech. However, the Constitution also protects *our right* to ask what contributors get for their money. It is naïve to think that wealthy businessmen who contribute money to liberal Democrats *and* conservative Republicans are doing so for philosophical reasons. It is also naïve to believe that hard-nosed businessmen who would not think of wasting one dollar of their own firm’s funds, would spend huge sums on political donations without expecting a return on their investment.

In the second part of this research project, we will attempt to answer those questions. We will also draw the distinction between “defensive” and “offensive” contributions. Are businessmen donating funds merely to keep politicians off their backs or are they donating funds because they are receiving or seeking special privileges from politicians? At this point in the project, it is too soon to make such judgments about any of the donors mentioned in this report.

However, based on a review of dozens of files and databases containing the names of thousands of donors, a few general comments can be made about the kinds of people who donate to political campaigns. Political donors tend to be drawn from the following groups:

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ostrowski, “Remarks at the Founding Meeting of Primary Challenge,” LewRockwell.com, Jan. 24, 2005.  
<http://www.lewrockwell.com/ostrowski/ostrowski69.html>

1. wealthy businessmen;
2. firms that do large amounts of work with governments or are heavily regulated:
  - a. banking
  - b. insurance
  - c. real estate
  - d. engineering
  - e. architecture
  - f. construction
  - g. health care
  - h. law
    - large corporate firms
    - personal injury firms
3. unions
4. politicians themselves
5. government employees

In short, there is one term that encompasses them all: *special interest group*. Each of these groups has interests special to themselves and *adverse* to the general interests of average citizens. Average citizens of modest means who do not fall within one of these categories rarely contribute and when they do, it is often based on a personal friendship or family relation and the sums they contribute are small. They are not a major factor in politics.

Free Buffalo cannot fulfill its stated mission of freeing Buffalo and New York from big government, political machines and special interests without completing this vital research project of determining who gave how much, to whom, when and *why*.

Nobody said freeing Buffalo would be easy, or pretty.