

Sun Journal

Voices of many diminished by money of a few

Editorial Board

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Ever been on a White House tour? It's free when you obtain a pass from your congressman or woman.

But if you are a high-rolling lobbyist or Washington lawyer, that visit is likely to cost you something north of \$30,000.

Then again, if you are a lobbyist, you are likely arriving at the "peoples' house" with higher expectations than a few memories and photographs.

Antoinette C. Bush is a well-connected Washington lawyer, a friend of the president and cousin to Obama aide Valerie Jarrett.

She visited the "nation's house" nine times during the president's first term, according to a story in Sunday's New York Times, sometimes with friends and other times with lobbyists for the industries she represents.

Her husband, Dwight, donated \$35,800 to Barack Obama's campaign on the same day his wife visited with an entertainment industry lobbyist in tow, according to the Times.

This came in the middle of a contentious fight between that industry and the titans of the Internet who felt threatened by a new law before Congress.

The next month, Mrs. Bush donated an identical amount, the maximum allowed under law, to the Obama campaign.

That was followed by a \$17,900-a-plate dinner for high rollers at the Bushes' home, the Times reported.

At the dinner, the president pronounced that government should be more "responsive to the needs of people, not the needs of special interests."

We doubt anyone laughed out loud, although they should have.

The Times found that the typical visit with the president or his advisers to talk business costs upward of \$30,000.

Of the donors who gave \$100,000 or more, 75 percent got private visits to the White House.

With the U.S. Supreme Court liberalizing laws on donation limits, the price of a White House tete-a-tete is likely rising.

The court ruled in 2010 that laws limiting campaign finance laws violated the First Amendment, which guarantees free speech.

Obama complained that the new law "gives the special interests and their lobbyists even more power in Washington while undermining the influence of average Americans.

Others argued precedents rolling all the way back to Teddy Roosevelt's administration.

The ruling has also affected about half of the states, including Maine, that have been left trying to rewrite campaign finance laws.

The far-reaching ruling has already changed the nature of this year's Republican primary.

At one quaint time, donors were allowed to give \$5,000 per candidate per election; \$15,000 per political party and another \$5,000 to a PAC.

Already, the Citizens United decision has blown the doors off those limits for wealthy individuals. The Center for Responsive Politics found that the top 100 individual donors in the U.S. made up 3.7 percent of contributors, but accounted for 80 percent of the money raised.

Obama's people have set up their own super PAC, and it is hauling in money as fast as the one created by Mitt Romney's former staffers.

It is simply unrealistic to think this money isn't directly buying political access and power for the individuals and companies who can afford to pay.

From tax breaks from Congress to visits to the White House, the rules have changed. As the power of a few increases exponentially, the voice of the many is certainly diminished.

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The opinions expressed in this column reflect the views of the ownership and the editorial board.