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RELEASE: APRIL 8, 1983

TAX-FUNDED LOBBYING

It's now pretty clear why President Reagan is finding it so difficult to cut the federal budget. The special interests which profit from big federal spending are lobbying hard and effectively to keep spending high, and they are using our tax dollars to finance their lobbying.

The hard-pressed American taxpayers, who have to use their own after-tax funds if they want to lobby, are simply outmaneuvered by the skillful, professional lobbyists whose salaries are paid by our tax dollars.

A few weeks ago, the Office of Management and Budget proposed a revision of federal rules that would prevent tax funds from being used to lobby Congress into voting for particular spending measures. That's when the veil of secrecy dropped off a cosy deal that has been ripping off the taxpayers for years.

The new rules would prevent federal agencies from paying any portion of the salary of individuals who engage in "activities constituting political advocacy." The new rules would prohibit the use of federal money to pay for the rent of any office in which five percent or more of the space is devoted to political advocacy activities.

The new rules would prohibit the use of federal money to pay all or part of the costs of meetings, publications or equipment that are used for political advocacy. The new rules would prohibit the transfer of federal money to any organization that spends more than $100,000 a year in connection with political advocacy or has political advocacy as a "substantial organizational purpose."

"Political advocacy" is defined as attempting to influence the outcome of any federal, state or local election, referendum, initiative or similar procedure through contributions, endorsements, publicity or similar activity; establishing, administering, contributing to pay the expenses of a political action committee; or attempting to influence governmental decisions through an attempt to affect the opinions of the general public.

It certainly isn't unreasonable to expect special-interest groups to spend their own money for their own political lobbying activities. But the roof fell in on the White House from the organizations that expect the taxpayers to subsidize their political activities. The special-interest groups used tax funds to generate mail, phone calls, and personal visits by trained, professional lobbyists in order to keep the federal funds flowing at our expense.

A coalition of 466 foundations, volunteer groups and corporations suddenly sprang into action, representing such diverse groups as the American Civil Liberties Union, the League of Women Voters, and the Chamber of Commerce. Some 200 nonprofit organizations met at the American Red Cross national headquarters in Washington to plan and coordinate their protests.

The special-interest groups began complaining that prohibiting them from lobbying with federal tax dollars would violate their First Amendment right to free speech. In the last decade, we've heard a lot of extravagant claims for the First Amendment, but until now no one ever seriously advanced the notion that anyone has a First Amendment right to lobby Congress with the taxpayers' money.

The myth has been massively spread that federal spending cuts hurt the poor and underprivileged. The squeals and yelps that erupted after OMB proposed these new rules, however, show that most of the pressure for big federal spending comes from well-heeled nonprofit special-interest organizations that have their hands in the cookie jar.

What the proposed new OMB regulation did was to uncover a major scandal in the federal budget. After OMB flushed this issue out into the open, we discovered that some $50 billion in federal grants are given annually to nonprofit groups. That's the place where federal spending can and should be cut in order to reduce deficits and start the task of balancing the federal budget.

Faced with the aggressive lobbying from special interest groups, OMB is now rethinking its rules proposals. We hope that the aggressive lobbying by the special interests will stiffen rather than soften the backbone of OMB. It is essential that we clean up the cosy and expensive relationship between public money and private interests.