Congress Missed the Biggie in Campaign Finance Reform

July 12, 2000

Google Ads are provided by Google and are not selected or endorsed by Eagle Forum

While Americans are watching fireworks to celebrate Independence Day, the 10,000+ representatives of the country's most powerful political pressure group, the National Education Association (NEA), are meeting in the Windy City to approve their usual radical policies and resolutions. But the real NEA fireworks are being exploded in Washington, D.C., where the Landmark Legal Foundation has filed complaints with the Internal Revenue Service and the Federal Election Commission.

Both Houses of Congress just passed a law to require full disclosure of the notorious Section 527 funds, which allow tax-exempt unreported funds to be spent for political activities in campaigns. But 527 monies are a drop in the bucket compared to the massive unreported tax-exempt political money spent by the NEA.

Landmark's legal complaints, copiously documented with dozens of exhibits from the NEA's own publications, charge that "the NEA is spending substantial general operating funds on taxable political activities, which it has not reported on its tax returns for the last several years." The NEA's Forms 990 show that, at least since 1994, the NEA has entered a big zero in answer to question 81a demanding "the amount of political expenditures, direct or indirect."

Form 990 instructions make clear that "a political expenditure is one intended to influence the selection, nomination, election, or appointment" of any public official. "Expenditure" includes not only direct contributions, but loans, in-kind support, "or anything of value" such as personnel, equipment or supplies.

The other exhibits filed by Landmark consist of NEA publications that effectively prove that, out of its general association dues, the NEA has been doing all of the above to elect its chosen candidates, but not reporting its expenditures as the law requires. The NEA has two powerful incentives to avoid filling in line 81a: monies reported on this line are taxable, and NEA members (who may be up to half Republican) would find out that their dues money is being spent to elect Clinton-Gore-type candidates and would demand a refund, which they are entitled to under the Supreme Court's Beck decision.

This expenditure of NEA membership money on politics is in addition to the declared political money spent by the NEA's Political Action Committee, NEA-PAC, one of the largest and most powerful PACs operating today, with a budget in excess of $6 million. The NEA also has dozens of state and local PACs.

Landmark's exhibits include the NEA's series of "how to" handbooks to train its members in "practical politics." The NEA's political action manual instructs members how to "elect pro-education candidates at the local, state and national levels" so they can "more easily pass or defeat legislative proposals."

The NEA handbook instructs members in "integrating the structure" of the NEA with its various PACs by making sure that all the PACs have a majority of NEA board members to control how funds are spent.

Landmark's exhibits include the NEA's "Strategic Plan and Budget." This document reveals the extraordinary sums of money spent annually on politics from NEA dues: $350,000 for "cyberspace advocacy systems ... in support of ... candidates at the state and federal level," $386,000 for "partnerships with political parties, campaign committees, and political organizations," $540,000 for "candidate recruitment ... early voting, and vote-by-mail programs in order to strengthen support for pro-public education candidates," $350,000 for "training programs ... to support the election of pro-public education candidates," $872,000 to elect "pro-education candidates," $530,000 for "political data systems" to assist state political programs.

Much of the NEA's political spending is concealed under euphemisms: $2,517,701 was spent on "Government Relations programs assistance to state affiliates" for "candidate recruitment and recommendation; campaign staff and support." An additional $792,422 was spent to "secure member support for Association-endorsed candidates."

The NEA's UniServ program, with a budget of a whopping $76.4 million for 1999-2000, enables the NEA to select, train and fund at least one employee of each NEA affiliate, called a UniServ director, in every congressional district and linked to the NEA's 13,000 local affiliates. This UniServ director manages the NEA staff dispatched to assist with phone banks, door-to-door canvassing, absentee vote programs, media development, and polling and consulting services to elect NEA-endorsed candidates.

This NEA army of paid political organizers and lobbyists far exceeds the combined staff of the Republican and Democratic national committees. In addition, the NEA exercises uncommon leverage over the Democratic Party, controlling at least ten percent of the delegates to the Democratic National Convention.

At last year's NEA convention, NEA president Bob Chase congratulated NEA members for their role in congressional elections. "We supported pro-public education stalwarts in the Democratic Party -- the folks who have helped Bill Clinton," he said.

Chase made no secret of the NEA's special campaign to defeat Senators Al D'Amato (R-NY) and Lauch Faircloth (R-NC). Chase boasted, "Jesse Helms, you're next!"

"Campaign finance reform" is a sham unless it deals with the unreported politicking of the NEA.