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MONEY IN POLITICS", David Adamany, December 14, 1997**

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A FEW GOOD WORDS FOR MONEY IN POLITICS

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Commencement Address
Eastern Michigan University

December 14, 1997

Thank you, President Shelton for your generous introduction. I deeply appreciate the honor of being invited to make remarks at this 1997 Winter Commencement at Eastern Michigan University.

I want to join President Shelton, the Board of Regents, and the faculty in extending my warmest congratulations to the graduates, their families and loved ones, and their friends. By the time commencement arrives, graduates are so often exhausted from their last exams, from long hours of work to pay for their education, from the exertions of looking for a job, and from at least a few hours of partying and celebration, that they don't fully enjoy or appreciate their own commencements. Nonetheless, commencement, as the word itself says, is a new beginning. I hope that all of the graduates are taking a few minutes today to enjoy your accomplishments and to look forward to the bright future that lies in front of you.

Now part of that bright future is probably not the idea of a commencement address. I can understand your feelings. As I was preparing these remarks, I took a moment to think about my own attendance at commencements. This is my 94th one. I can only remember

anything about the commencement speeches at four of those 94 commencements--and that includes the 64 commencements at which I was one of the people making remarks. And not all commencement speeches are upbeat either. Hanna Gray, when she was President of the University of Chicago, told the graduates: "I have seen the future and it looks just the same as the present, except a lot longer."

There are times when I am asked to give an address that I think everyone would be relieved if I simply said: 30215 Oakview Way, Bingham Farms, Michigan, and then sat down.

Today I decided therefore that I'm not going to give a commencement speech. But I am going to take a few minutes--about twelve minutes, actually--to engage in a brief dialogue with you. Now my dialogue has two purposes. First, it is an appeal to you to use the wonderful educations that you have received at Eastern Michigan University and the wonderful intellectual skills you have developed to help run this country better than my generation has. Second, it is to engage you in a discussion to illustrate that it is not as easy as it sounds to make wise decisions as citizens.

I have nothing more to say about my first purpose: I hope that you will indeed take seriously the opportunity to govern yourselves as citizens of a free country. If you don't, the country may not be as good or as free as it has been. As to my second purpose: I propose to make my point by giving a test. I invite the graduates and everyone else in

attendance, including those on the platform, to participate in this test, which is a series of questions that unfold as more and more facts become known.

My test is about a subject that has had so much current publicity that we should all know a lot about the issue and might even be expected to have some ideas what to do about it.

The subject is, of course, money in politics.

Let me begin then by asking you how much money you think might have been spent on campaigns in 1996 by candidates for President and Congress and by political parties and interest groups. I am going to give you a few numbers, and I will give them to you a second time and you can raise your hands to indicate just how much you think the total campaign spending was. Let's try these numbers: \$500 million. \$1.1 billion. \$2.2 billion. \$4 billion. OK. Let's have a show of hands. How many of you think that candidates, parties, and interest groups spent \$500 million. \$1.1 billion. \$2.2 billion. \$4 billion.

A recent study by the Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington think tank, put the amount at \$2.2 billion. Like a majority of you, I would not have gotten the number correct if asked.

Now that I've got that number in front of you--\$2.2 billion spent by candidates for President and Congress, by politics parties, and by interest groups--let me get your opinion. I will ask you if you think that number is too little to run a national election.

About the right amount. Too much. Or obscenely excessive. Let's try it. How many believe that \$2.2 billion is too little money to run a national election? How many think it is about right? How many think it is too much? How many think it is obscenely excessive?

Now I'm going to fill in a few more facts for you, and we can then come back to a few more questions before we're finished. Here are some additional facts. There were 194,018,000 persons of voting age in the United States in 1996. Now you can quickly figure backward how much all candidates for President, U.S. Senate, House of Representatives plus political parties and interest groups spent to influence each voter in all of the primary and general elections held in 1996. The calculation, of course, is \$2.2 billion divided by 194,018,000. Some really bright math student--or some misguided soul who carried her calculator to commencement--can figure that out. But it probably isn't reasonable to expect someone to make such a calculation on the spur of the moment. The is \$11.34 spent by all candidates in all primaries and general elections for all federal offices and by all parties and all interest groups to persuade each voter.

Let's go a step farther. The Congressional Research Service, which is a nonpartisan research unit in the Library of Congress, reports that the average candidate for a seat in the United States House of Representatives spent \$425,000 for the primary and general campaign during the 1996 election.

Now I'd like to stop and take your pulse again. I am going to phrase my question in the same way I did before. I am going to ask you if you think that spending \$425,000 to run for Congress is too little money to run a congressional campaign. About the right amount? Too much? Or obscenely excessive? OK, let's take our temperature on this. Too little? About right? Too much? Obscenely excessive?

Now I want to add a few more facts about this discussion. Let's begin with the size of each congressional district. In 1996 there were approximately 445,000 voting age people living in each congressional district. So the average major party candidate spending \$425,000 to run a congressional campaign was actually spending less than \$1 dollar to reach each person of voting age. If you think about the cost of printing a pamphlet, buying an envelop, paying for postage, and hiring some help to get the materials assembled, it is clear that for less than \$1 dollar per voter, the average candidate could perhaps send one or two mailing to each voter. Or instead, the candidate might buy some radio advertisements, or televevision spots, or newspaper ads, or hire a marketing company to make phone calls. But at \$1 dollar per voter, the average candidate for Congress isn't really running much of a campaign.

Now how did we get from \$2.2 billion or \$11.34 per voting age person to \$1 dollar per voting age person. Well, we have to remember that there were four or five candidates seeking the Republican nomination for president, then there was Senator Dole and Mr.

Clinton as well as Mr. Perot running for President in the general election, there were two major party candidates for the Senate in every state that had a Senate campaign, and there were two major party candidates for House of Representatives in most of the 435 districts across the country. So if each candidate is spending just \$1 per voting age person and there are candidates in the primary elections and in the general elections, and there are candidates for President and Senator and U.S. Representative, it does not take long before total spending in the country by all candidates gets to be \$7 or \$8 or \$9 per person. And the parties and interest groups want to get into the contest--in fact they have a constitutional right to do so!--and that adds another few dollars to the bill.

Now for just a minute I would like to go in two other directions, then ask a couple of more questions, and then I'll be done.

It turns out that in campaigns for the House of Representatives, the incumbents didn't spend an average of \$425,000. Instead, they spent an average of about \$668,000. The challengers--the people who weren't in office--averaged about \$262,000. So the people in office were spending about \$1.50 per voting age person to hang on to their seats. The challengers were spending about 60 cents to defeat them. Of course, the people in office have a great many advantages when it comes to raising money. One of the advantages is that big givers and interest groups like to support the people in power.

Some political scientists have been taking a careful look at what happens when incumbents and challengers spent money on campaigns. It turns out that when the people in office spent a lot of money on campaigns, it doesn't help them much. That's because the voters are smarter than we give them credit for. Generally, they know who their congressperson is and they have some impression about whether that man or woman is doing a good job. On the other hand, when challengers spend money, they gain votes. That's because voters don't know who these challengers are at the beginning of the campaign; and if these challengers can raise some money and tell their story, some of the people in the district will find them attractive and will switch their votes to the challengers.

So part of our puzzle is that the challengers have a hard time raising money, but if they do raise money, they make American politics quite a bit more competitive because they give the people in office a hard contest. When there is a hard contest, voters sit up and take notice. In fact, the voters make the elections closer because they know their choices and quite a few of them choose the challenger once they know her story. And when elections get closer, more people go out to vote. The additional voters are often quite unpredictable, so more elections become hotly contested.

One lesson from all this is that many things we believe about campaign finance are only partly true. Yes, we spend a lot of money on politics in total--about \$2.2 billion. But if

the average candidate is only spending \$1.50 or 60 cents to reach each voter, that doesn't seem like so much to help voters learn what their choices are. Spending money may actually help voters to know what their choices are, and that may be a good thing in elections. Also, when money is spent and elections become closer, more people show up to vote. And that may not be such a bad thing either. So there are several different ways to think about how much we are spending on politics. A lot in the whole country.

Correct! But perhaps not enough in many individual campaigns? Also correct!

Now a couple of more questions for you:

No matter how little or how much money is spent in campaigns, we're still going to have elections. We're still going to elect officials to represent us in Washington, in Lansing, and in city hall. If we limit campaign spending, we are going to get maybe less information from candidates and we're going to rely for information on someone else-- usually the newspapers, radio, and TV.. Of course, the media--like candidates, parties, and interest groups--have a certain point of view about candidates and election issues. So we are may not be getting better information, only different information.

Let me put some hard choices in front of you. Would you prefer to have limits on the amount of campaign money spent and to rely more on the news media for information?

Or would you prefer to let the candidates spend whatever they want to make their case to

voters and rely less on the news media? Let's try it: How many prefer to limit money spent in campaigns and to rely more heavily on the news media for information? How many prefer to allow candidates to spend as much as they want to make their arguments to the voters and to rely less on the news media?

Finally, one of the things that troubles us about politics is who gives the money. We all know the stories about the wealthy people who run for office using their own money. They range from Senator Jay Rockefeller on the more liberal end of the political spectrum to Ross Perot on the more conservative end. We all know that political action committees contribute and spend huge amounts in politics. The Federal Election Commission reported that in 1996, corporate political action committees spent \$131 million for political purposes. Labor union PACs spent \$58 million, and the unions spent millions more on political education for their members and on get-out-the-vote drives for union members and their families. Trade association PACs--that would range from the American Medical Association and the Trial Lawyers Association to Auto Dealers, the American Hospital Association, and the National Rifle Association--spent about \$105 million. What worries many Americans, I believe, is not so much that a lot of money is spent in politics, but rather that to spend so much money, candidates must rely on the big contributors and the interest group contributors for money; and the big givers and interest givers then develop too much influence over the government.

Second, I am interested in provoking my fellow citizens--especially younger people, like the graduates today--to think about political issues. I want to make clear that issues that seem pretty simple--"We are spending too much money in political campaigns!"--are in fact quite complicated. I want to invite the graduates to bring the same kind of wonderful analytic skills and education to public issues as they are bringing to the professions they will be entering with the degrees they have worked hard to earn today. Indeed, if they do not approach our public life with the same seriousness as they approach their professions, our system of self government will be in trouble..

Finally, I talked about campaign finance because it is a subject that we all think we know a lot about. But when we begin to dig into the facts--how much is spent, how much is spent per person, how much is spent in each congressional race, do incumbents or challengers benefit more from campaign spending--it turns out really to be quite complicated.

In politics, as in life generally, the answer we get often depends on what question we ask. I like the story about the church in Boston. On the sign outside the church, it asked the question: "Tired of Sin?" And it gave the answer: "Come in!" Below the sign a prankster scrawled a different question and gave a different answer: "Tired of Sin?," said the sign. "If not," the prankster wrote, "call 832-6465."

I hope our discussion today has been interesting not only about campaign finance, but also about our need to think openly about public issues that we think we already know a lot about. A wonderful proverb says: "The human mind is like an umbrella: It works best when open."

As you go forward from this commencement as citizens, as well as graduates, I hope you use your talents and education open mindedly to help address our public problems.

Again, congratulations and best wishes.