

# **The Real Struggle for Political Power in America**

**Elizabeth Drew**  
Washington journalist and author

**Ninth Annual John S. Knight Lecture**

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## Elizabeth Drew

Elizabeth Drew has been one of the country's most knowledgeable and keen-eyed observers of the American political scene in the 40 years that she has written from the nation's capital.

She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Wellesley College, where she majored in political science. Early in her career she wrote for Congressional Quarterly and then for Atlantic Monthly, the New York Times magazine, and other publications. She had a weekly television interviews program in the early 1970s before beginning a 20-year association with The New Yorker as a Washington correspondent. She was a panelist for the first presidential debate of the 1976 campaign and she was moderator of the Democratic candidates debate in the 1984 election.

She is a prolific author as well. She has written ten books, beginning with "Washington Journal," her account of the Watergate years, published in 1975. In 1994, she published the book "On The Edge: The Clinton Presidency," followed in 1996 by "Showdown: The Struggle Between the Gingrich Congress and the Clinton White House."

Her most recent book, published in the spring of 1997, is "Whatever It Takes: The Real Struggle for Political Power in America." Of it, the Los Angeles Times said:

"Elizabeth Drew, a Washington author, whose book, 'Politics and Money: The New Road to Corruption,' accurately predicted in 1983 the current fundraising scandals, has written a new book, 'Whatever It Takes,' that has become a prime source for the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee's probe into questionable fundraising in the 1996 elections by both Democrats and Republicans. Committee chairman Fred Thompson, Republican of Tennessee and ranking Democrat John Glenn of Ohio both have copies of the book with passages underlined."

She has won many awards, including the University of Missouri's Medal for Distinguished Service in Journalism, the Award For Excellence of the Society Magazine Writers, the DuPont Columbia Award, and the Edward Weintal prize for Diplomatic Reporting for her PBS commentaries during the Iran-Contra hearings.

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# The Real Struggle for Political Power in America

By Elizabeth Drew

Thank all of you for coming out tonight. It's a beautiful night and there are so many things to do on this marvelous campus, so I'm honored by your presence.

I have found that picking a speech topic can be a perilous act. Some years ago — you'll know how long ago when you hear this story — I was invited to speak to a group in Richmond, a women's group, and I had the flu. And I called a mentor of mine and I said, "I don't know what to do, I have to give this speech in Richmond and I have the flu and what'll I do?" And he said, "That's all right; you just stand up and talk about the things that you know best. Don't worry about it." And so we decided that the things that I knew best were my recent experiences in covering Watergate and the impeachment proceedings for *The New Yorker*, my first big series there, which became my first book. And then if I ran out of things to say about that, we agreed that I would talk about the Congress, because there's always plenty to say about the Congress. And I was having lunch with the ladies in charge before the speech and one of them, apropos of absolutely nothing, said, "You know, we had Senator Ervin here last year and thank God he didn't talk about Watergate. Nobody wants to hear another word about it." So, brow becoming ever damper, I turned to the lady next to me, and I said, "Excuse me, ma'am, but who is the congressman from this area?" And she looked down at me and she said, "My husband." Well, I survived. Actually, he didn't.

I know what I want to talk to you about tonight and it's a happy coincidence of being able to talk about some things — some new things, some new discoveries — that I made about American politics and our political system, even though I've been at it a while. At the same time it's kind of a moral about journalism, because to me the joy of journalism is that you can keep learning, you can keep discovering and you can keep meeting some of the most interesting people in this country. I

discovered a whole new political phenomenon and a whole new world of people who were among the most colorful and interesting that I had ever met in politics.

What happened was that at some point in 1995, I sensed that — especially for groups on the right, and it also turned out to be true for the hierarchy of the Republican party as well — the presidency wasn't really the big thing in 1996. It wasn't really what they were concerned about — it was about maintaining Republican control of the House. That mattered far more to them than the presidency.

This was a whole new phenomenon in American politics. The Republicans had won the House in 1994, after 40 years of Democratic control, and they wanted to hold on to it, not simply because they wanted two more years of power, and not simply because they wanted to pass certain kinds of bills, but because they saw this as the long-term way to continue to dictate and shape the political agenda. They're after a long-term goal, which is called realignment — in other words, a shift in the predominance of one political party or the other over American politics, to get hegemony over American politics.

And I began to hear this, and I began to think about it, and so I went to a couple of people — one I knew, one I hadn't known. I went to a friend who was very close to the groups on the right and he said, "You're right, it's nailing down realignment that the Republicans are really after, it's not the presidency." And I managed to meet for lunch with someone who I knew was very involved in Republican operations. I hadn't met him, I'd heard about him. And I told him my thesis and he said, "Well, I was wondering when someone would figure that out." So I was off and running.

I think just about none of the rest of the press saw that this was the real story of 1996. Beware of ingrained habits, of thinking, well, this *has* been the

story, this *will be* the story. Most of the press was reporting on what they quite accurately called a boring presidential election. What I reported on and saw was to me very interesting, exciting, and new.

Let's go back to why these people wanted to hold the House. Why was that so much more important to them than the presidency? Sometimes I get a skeptical response, "Oh well, that was easy, because they knew they'd lose the presidency, so they did the obvious thing." When this strategy was decided on, it wasn't the obvious thing. No one knew who the Republican nominee was going to be. No one knew what kind of campaign that nominee would run. It was not at all clear through much of 1995 that Bill Clinton would have the strength that he ended up having in 1996. There were a lot of scandals brewing. The shape of the economy could not be predicted.

So this was a decision in and of itself about what really mattered in American politics. From the House, these people decided, you can overrule a president, even if he's your own president, as Republicans had done when George Bush was president and the Republican minority overturned a big tax decision that he had made — a package that he had arrived at with the Democrats — led by a certain whip named Newt Gingrich. With the end of the Cold War the presidency didn't seem as vital. All tax legislation begins in the House. All revenue, all appropriations bills begin in the House.

Why the House and not the Senate? Well, the Senate, as I'm sure most of you know, has the filibuster rule, and that means that you need 60 votes to get almost anything done in the Senate, because filibusters are now threatened all the time — even when someone wants to bring up a bill. So you don't need to have the majority in the Senate in order to block action.

These people have an agenda. It's a long-term agenda of squeezing American government, of reducing the role and size of American government.

Now let me tell you who some of them are. You haven't heard of almost any of them. One of them you will hear more of because he's already been subpoenaed by the Thompson Committee. He's actually the figure I write about most in the book, a man named Grover Norquist. Anybody here ever heard of Grover Norquist? Well, very few

people in Washington had. They knew the name, that this was a conservative figure who did something or other. But he has actually done a very brilliant thing that has garnered him a great deal of power. He's in his late 30s; he went to Harvard, then Harvard Business School. He was involved in various conservative movements and then he started something called Americans for Tax Reform. And his hobby-horse is lowered taxes.

It's not just because taxes are irritating and unpopular and all that. He has a long-term view, which is the lower the revenues that the government takes in, the less spending it will be able to do, the less money will go to the groups that he sees as the base of the Democratic party and its power — the teachers' unions, welfare workers, municipal workers and so on. This is a big, long-term war. It's total. It's Armageddon. And I have to say that the people on the right, I think, have thought this through much more than their opponents on the other side who really don't much know what they do and how the opposition thinks and are just waking up to it — frankly, some of them by reading this book.

One prominent liberal called me up — I can't name him, but you all know who he is — and said, "I read your book," and I said, "What did you think?" He said, "Scared me to death. They're so much more organized than we are, they're so much more long-sighted than we are, they really know what they want and they know how to work together to go out and get it."

Grover Norquist's insight was that he could put together a coalition, and he did, of about 70 groups who have different agendas. They're all on the right in the spectrum of our politics, but they all have one very important thing in common — they all have something they don't want the federal government to do. In Norquist's case, it's taxes. The Christian Coalition, it's allowing abortion, it's interfering with prayer in the school, and the obvious things that you know about. The National Rifle Association doesn't want guns controlled. There are other groups in here as well. Small business groups — a very, very powerful part of the political spectrum and of the Republican party — because there are occupational and safety regulations that they don't want, environmental regulations that they don't want, and they don't much like taxes, either.

I went to the chairman of the House Repub-

lican Campaign Committee once I realized what was going on, and I said, "Who are the most important people in this effort?" And he said Grover Norquist, Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition, the National Rifle Association, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, a very big and powerful small business organization, and the beer wholesalers. The who? I'd never heard of them. Neither had anybody I knew. Well, this led me to a young man named David Rehr, who is the main political activist and lobbyist for the beer wholesalers. And why are they so powerful? Because they are in every congressional district in America. There are many, many of them. They are very well organized. They know what they want and much of it coincides with the interests of the small business groups. They certainly want to roll back taxes on beer.

All of these groups are grass roots groups. So, again, it's a different sense of what really works and is going on in our politics.

Ralph Reed, as you know, is the soon-to-be former director of the Christian Coalition. I spent a lot of time with him. I had fascinating conversations with him in the course of working on this book, and in our first meeting, I'll let you in on something: We shared a hot fudge sundae. It was very risqué. And he said flat out, I'm much more interested in the Republicans maintaining control of the House of Representatives than in whoever becomes president. And he had a very interesting reason for this. He said, "You know, we have tried and tried and tried through electing Republican presidents to get *Roe v. Wade* overturned, and we've now had two Republican presidents, serving three terms in all, and we still have *Roe v. Wade*. So I've decided that's not the route for getting out what we want."

He had decided to try to do what Franklin Roosevelt had tried to do in the 1930s. Roosevelt had tried to pack the Supreme Court, to add members to it who'd be sympathetic to his programs and philosophy of government and he was defeated. So then Roosevelt went out to change the political atmosphere. And that's what Ralph Reed was about, changing the political atmosphere, because he felt, and some think he felt with reason, that the Supreme Court does pay attention to political waves and public sentiment.

So every Wednesday morning at 10:30 there came into Grover Norquist's office at DuPont Circle

about 70 representatives of these groups. And Norquist, amazingly, and to my great pleasure, invited me to attend these meetings. They're private, secret, and this was a first. Why did he do it? Well, he had learned and felt that I could be trusted and that I would give an accurate picture of what was going on. So I sat through several of their meetings. I can't recite them here, but those who do read the book I think will find them quite delicious reading, no matter what side of the spectrum you're on.

They made strategy for campaigns. I saw candidates come before them and ask them for their help. It's grass-roots help. It's not money in this particular case. I saw a distinguished professor from Stanford come to speak to them defending, explaining the Dole tax cut program, and he didn't get very far into saying, "Well, now, I'll explain to you how we pay for the tax cut," when Grover Norquist cut him off and said, "Never talk about paying for a tax cut. That's government talk, that's Washington talk, you mustn't talk that way." And this man was given a fairly good dressing down and he was sent back to the Dole campaign with orders not to talk about paying for the tax cut.

There was an effort on the other side as well. If the Democratic allies had had to choose, the head of the AFL-CIO effort told me, between winning the House or winning the presidency, he'd have gone for the House as well. This was a much later conversation, when Clinton was in quite good shape. He understood what the other side understood as well. And as I've said to you, this was a total war, thus the title of the book, "Whatever It Takes."

The AFL-CIO, as you know, announced a \$35 million advertising program to go at Republican members of the House, particularly those freshmen who they found vulnerable. I followed three Republican congressmen, two freshmen and a sophomore, to see how they were working their way through this situation, with all of these ads going on and this big war going on and the unpopularity of Newt Gingrich. Some acted as if they'd never met the man. Some still appreciated his fundraising prowess. The one who had him in his district, to help him raise money, lost. But he was the target of a lot of ads on both sides. Newt Gingrich was so unpopular that the Republican party became very worried and they commissioned a poll, which was kept secret but which was shown

to me, looking at the popularity of various people. Colin Powell was way off in the stratosphere. I mean nobody came close. Gingrich was third from the bottom, just ahead of Louis Farrakhan and Prince Charles.

I saw new breaches of the campaign finance laws. I wrote about campaign financing in the early 1980s, and I found this thing called soft money. Soft money is otherwise illegal, unlimited contributions by individuals, and direct contributions by corporations and labor unions. These are barred in the law that was passed in 1974, after Watergate. If anybody tells you, well, you can't get any campaign finance laws that work, that's not true. The '74 act worked for at least one election. It worked for the 1976 election.

But then some bright people put into the law this little thing that said that soft money could be used for party-building activities, particularly in the states. You could use it for posters and banners and get-out-the-vote drives and all those really nice, benign things. I looked at it and said, here's trouble. It's a crack in the dam. And I did some reporting then that showed me how some of the national party officials were actually using this money nationally, not just in the states. Well, in the 1996 election, the crack in the wall became the Grand Canyon and it destroyed completely the campaign finance system.

The scandals you've heard about. The \$50,000 cup of coffee with the president — there were some little pastries, too, so it was a better bargain than you think. Al Gore's calls from the White House. The money that John Huang and all of his buddies were bringing in. The access packages that both parties sell. For \$100,000 you get to meet the leaders of your party, for \$200,000 you get a sky-box at the convention, you get to meet your party's candidate, you might get your picture taken with him, and you can talk to Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich, if that's your idea of an exciting thing to do. They'll help you get access to decision-makers in Washington, and they promise if you buy this season ticket that they'll never bother you again for the two years of that campaign. These are access packages. Both parties sell them.

This is all soft money. What happened in '96 was that soft money was used in new and, I think, highly questionable or illegal ways. We knew fairly early that both the Clinton/Gore campaign and the

Dole campaign were using soft money to make ads on behalf of their candidates. This is hardly a state party-building activity. What I found as I was covering the battle was that all four congressional campaign committees were doing the same thing. You see, in the House and the Senate there are Democratic and Republican campaign committees. They raise money, they try to get their people elected or to take control or keep control of either chamber. And I discovered that they, too, were gathering this soft money and using it for ads for their own candidates.

Now, they didn't say these ads were for their candidates, because that would be against the law. These people still have a little shame left — not very much. They said this was "issue advocacy." You've probably heard the term during the election. The labor ads were issue advocacy. They weren't partisan, heavens no. Similarly, the ads the political parties themselves put out, they have the temerity to call issue advocacy and they used soft money for them. Well, if that wasn't using soft money in a federal campaign, I don't know what is. And this I did expose in my book. It's part of what the Senate Committee is looking at. What I have found talking to the senators and the staffs is each side is reading my book for what goods they can get on the other side. And it's really rather fun to watch it.

There was another kind of breach of the campaign finance system. These groups are not supposed to share real data with each other. And if you're running an independent campaign or issue advocacy, you may not talk to the political parties themselves. Well, this is a complete charade. They all swim in the same polluted pond of pollsters and consultants and they all read the same newsletters and there is simply no problem in sharing the information. I was talking for example to the NRA. And they carried on what they said was an independent campaign. Well, there is no such thing. There's no way that you don't find out which candidate is in trouble, who needs what money, even what the other groups are doing.

The head of the NRA, by the way, was a woman named Tanya Metaksa, one of the most colorful and interesting people I have ever met in politics. To show you how far I will go in pursuit of my work, I actually went on a shooting expedition with her into Pennsylvania where a local NRA

organizer had told her that they had a real chance of defeating a Democratic incumbent. They kept pressing a gun on me, and I, with real honesty can say, I'm sorry, I have a very bad shoulder. They weren't killing animals and birds that day, though; it was all clay objects.

But by being there, I could really get inside the NRA and how they talked to their own people and how they keep them on edge — that they are about to lose their “constitutional right to keep and bear arms.” As most of you know this is a highly challengeable proposition. I'd have to say, though, that Tanya somewhat won me over when a local reporter came up to her and conducted an interview, then he hadn't turned the camera on, so he had to do it again, and he said, “I just don't know how to spell your name, or really how to pronounce it.” This she is used to. So she said, “M-E-T, A-K for AK's, S-A for semi-automatics.”

What this fight was about was turnout. I don't know how many of you have seen or remember the movie “The Graduate.” Benjamin has graduated from college and he doesn't know what to do and one of his parents' friends says, “Benjamin, plastics.” That was the answer to everything. Turnout was the plastics of the 1996 campaign. Certainly money was a very, very important factor, but for these groups that I'm talking about, on the right and on the left, their main goal was to get people out. It's probably the case that the Democrats lost the House in 1994 because a number of Democratic groups were angry with Clinton or the Clintons over a number of things, including the failure on health care, and they thought it didn't really matter who controlled the House. Then they learned otherwise.

So in 1996 labor was trying to flex its muscles again. Women's groups were trying to get women out who had stayed home in droves in 1994. But there was the problem for the groups on the right. There was this presidential candidate named Dole and he was running a pretty inept campaign. And we talk a lot about coattails — coattails being how the candidate at the top does, the candidates down the line do. There's a more subtle and interesting thing, which is motivation of getting people to the polls and getting turnout — grass roots work. And these groups on the right began to worry, as Dole continued to make mistakes, that he was going to depress the turnout of their groups, because they really wouldn't care and they really wouldn't bother.

So the Republican Party dumped him. You didn't read this and it was a remarkable thing. I've never seen it happen in politics before. I've seen candidates down the line stand apart from their presidential candidate if they thought he was too far left, too far right, too unpopular. They'd manage not to turn out for his rallies, things like that. But this was a really actually a cold-blooded assassination of their own candidate, participated in by the hierarchy of the Republican Party because they, too, shared the primary goal of holding the house.

In brief, how they did it was by deciding that the House would pass bills that Dole desperately didn't want them to pass because it would give Clinton an opportunity to sign some things into law, like welfare reform, like immigration reform. They took a secret decision at the end, they didn't tell Dole and they didn't tell his Scott Reed, his campaign manager, who didn't find this out until he read my book. They took a secret decision that they were going to dump him. They sent out the word to the other candidates quietly — these things are never written down — forget about Dole, don't worry about him, don't talk about him, act like he doesn't exist, and they took an ad that said, forget about the presidency, the important thing is that the Republicans control the House. This was as brutal as I've ever seen it get in politics.

One of the conclusions that I know a lot of Americans are drawing from the campaign scandals is that the election system can't be fixed. And one of the things that probably makes me angriest when I watch the Sunday shows out of Washington is people sitting around saying, “The public doesn't care, it doesn't matter, nobody cares.” I don't believe that for a minute. And I have proof, I think, because I show at the end of my book that though the Republicans barely maintained control of the House, the Democrats actually had it won two weeks before the election. I have the numbers and I show what happened. Without going into all the data, let me give you one example.

When story after story after story of the Clinton campaign finance scandal started to come out, one Republican operative said to me, “Thank God for John Huang. We were thrilled when he came along because we'd run out of things to say.” The Republicans felt that the House was lost. During that last two-week period, the Democrats lost 15 points on the subject of ethics. Clinton was at 51.5

percent going into that last period, and he desperately wanted 51 percent but he fell to 49 percent. Women in large numbers went from Democratic House candidates to Republican House candidates. And in one of the grand ironies of history, Clinton is now faced with two hostile chambers, two hostile investigating committees, because of his own campaign finance scandals and carelessness and insouciance.

I hope that some of this opens up two

thoughts, especially for the journalism people here, but for everyone. One is, don't think you know how things are working in this country or that you can go on old assumptions, because something new might be going on, and to me this was something very new and very big. And the other one is if you are in journalism, it's an endless voyage of discovery.

Thank you. □