

A Conversation with **PETER SCHWEIZER**

Author of *Extortion: How Politicians Extract Your Money, Buy Votes, and Line Their Own Pockets*

The title of your book is *Extortion*—and that’s illegal in America. People can and do go to prison for extortion. Are you seriously saying Washington politicians are engaged in extortion?

Washington politicians are absolutely engaged in extortion. The shocking part is that it’s legal. Politicians won’t go to prison for it like you or I would, but it’s happening, in secret, until now.

Conventional wisdom holds that Washington is broken because of outside special interests, but in this book you show the reverse is true. You expose how politicians have developed a new set of brass knuckle tactics designed to extort wealthy industries and donors. Do you name names in the book?

I think readers will be shocked; I certainly was. For so long the conventional wisdom has been it’s the lobbyists fault, but it turns out members of Congress have been creating their own private slush funds, in secret. And they’re doing it by shaking down entire industries by threatening to inflict pain through legislative and regulatory action, or inaction, to get paid. And, yes, I name names—both Democrats and Republicans.

You conducted interviews with top former CEOs that contain pretty graphic descriptions of how politicians and their fundraisers strong-arm corporate executives into forking over donations. How willing were business executives to go on the record about their experiences in Washington?

Former CEOs were eager to air the kinds of extortion and arm-twisting they encountered from politicians and their campaign staff. Current CEOs were terrified to talk. I told them they could speak on background or off-the-record, but they were afraid to even do that for fear of political reprisals and retribution.

In *Extortion*, you compare the tactics politicians use to extract donations to the way the Mafia extorts people. What are the differences and similarities between politicians and mobsters?

Both make a living via the protection racket: Pay me money and I will promise to not make your life miserable. Fail to pay and bad things will happen to you.

There is one big difference between the Permanent Political Class and the Mafia. In the Mafia, you cross the line at your mortal peril. If you're a member of the Permanent Political Class, you cross the line regularly to raise money—from both sides.

The recent government shutdown has created a perceived political crisis. You say politicians have learned there is cash to extort in a crisis. How does that work, and can you give some examples?

Politicians have figured out that there's cash in chaos. The more afraid individuals and businesses are, the better the climate to extract political donations. Think about it: thousands of bills are proposed each year that will never pass. Why propose hopeless bills? Simple: they scare up campaign contributions. So many of the "crises" in Washington are manufactured to create opportunities for political extortion.

Most voters are unfamiliar with the secret tactics you say politicians use to extract money from wealthy individuals. Can you explain what a "milker bill" and a "tollbooth" are?

Milker bills and tollbooths are two strategies being used in modern-day Washington that are, without a doubt, extortion, plain and simple. A milker bill is a bill that is never intended as serious legislation, but rather a tactic to "milk" an industry for cash. A "tollbooth" is essentially "Why schedule a vote for free?" My team at GAI and I discovered this quiet yet effective means of extortion after countless hours of research revealed a very basic pattern: you must pay the toll to move your legislation down the highway.

Your last book, *Throw Them All Out*, was a grassroots sensation and is widely credited with the STOCK Act being passed. What do you hope you will achieve with *Extortion*?

The success of *Throw Them All Out* was entirely grassroots. Voters discovered members of Congress were being allowed to engage in activities (in that case, using privileged information to trade stocks and make a killing in the stock market) that would send the rest of us to prison. The American people demanded action and the STOCK Act was passed. Not because members of Congress wanted it passed, but because they had to pass it. I hope by shining a light on the extortion practices on Capitol Hill—practices you and I would be sent to prison for—voters will again rise up and demand action. In the book I discuss a Washington Corrupt Practices Act. Will Congress pass this without grassroots pressure? Absolutely not. Can American citizens make it happen? Absolutely.