



Written by [John and Nisha Whitehead](#) on November 6, 2025

Rule by Thieves: The Police State Becomes a Pay-to-Play Shadow Government

America has been backsliding into kleptocratic territory for years now, but this may finally be it.

A kleptocracy is literally “rule by thieves.”

It is a form of government in which a network of ruling elites “steal public funds for their own private gain using public institutions.” As analyst Thomas Mayne explains, it’s “a system based on virtually unlimited grand corruption coupled with, in the words of American academic Andrew Wedeman, ‘near-total impunity for those authorized to loot by the thief-in-chief’ — namely the head of state.”



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One could fairly say that a kleptocracy was always going to be the end result of the oligarchy that was America.

The signs were visible long before now: power and wealth have been trading places for decades.

Indeed, it has been more than a decade since researchers at Princeton and Northwestern concluded that the U.S. is a functional oligarchy in which “[political outcomes overwhelmingly favored very wealthy people, corporations, and business groups](#),” while the influence of ordinary citizens was at a “non-significant, near-zero level.”

So now we find ourselves in this present moment where billionaires are running the show.

The optics are undeniable: while the country suffers through a government shutdown, with welfare programs shuttered and inflation, healthcare and basic cost-of-living expenses skyrocketing, [the elite are living it up](#).

In the White House, President Trump is redecorating, transforming what had been known as “the people’s house” into a palace fit for an American king, [complete with marbled bathrooms and a sprawling, gold-fitted ballroom](#). The rest of the administration, taking its [cue from their leader](#), are jetting around at taxpayer expense for lavish vacations, sporting events — and decadent parties at Mar-a-Lago, Trump’s Florida retreat.

The responses to criticisms either deflect to how other administrations wasted money or, in the case of the ballroom, insist the project is privately funded — and therefore beyond reproach because taxpayers aren’t paying for it.

But money is never truly “private” once it purchases influence over public office. The moment a government accepts such funding, it becomes indebted to the funders rather than accountable to the people.

Case in point: the list of donors to Trump’s White House ballroom.



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It reads like a who's who list of the government's biggest contractors and those most eager to curry favor. Collectively, the corporations and individuals on the ballroom donor list [have received staggering sums in government contracts](#) in recent years, and more than half face or [have faced government investigations](#) or enforcement actions "that includes [engaging in unfair labor practices, deceiving consumers](#) and harming the environment."

This is how you bring about a kleptocracy — one crooked buy-in at a time.

The constitutional question that follows is unavoidable: if presidents and agencies can do whatever they please simply because someone else foots the bill, what remains of constitutional, representative government?

Follow that rationale to its end and you find yourself in dangerous territory.

If a president can privately fund a ballroom, could he privately fund a battalion? If a cabinet agency can accept donations to expand its reach, could it sell policy favors to the highest bidder?

If every public act can be recast as a private transaction, then the public no longer governs — it merely observes.

That is why the defense of demolishing and reconstructing the White House ballroom — an undertaking never authorized by Congress — on the grounds that no public funds will be used does not pass constitutional muster.

The Constitution gives Congress — and only Congress — [the power of the purse](#).

This safeguard was designed not as a bureaucratic formality but as [the chief restraint on executive abuse](#) — the people's means of holding the presidency to account.

Once presidents can raise private money to do what the people's representatives refuse to fund, that weapon is disarmed.

What follows is the slow unraveling of constitutional restraint, replaced by the notion that money — not law — sets the limits of power. The same mechanism that once protected the people from tyranny now becomes the means of financing it.

What was meant as a safeguard becomes a loophole — a backdoor to unchecked power.

The logic is as seductive as it is corrupting: if private dollars cover the cost, the Constitution doesn't apply.

By that reasoning, a president could wage war, build prisons, or launch surveillance programs — all without congressional authorization — so long as a billionaire or corporate sponsor signs the check.

This is how republics fall: not only through coups and crises, but through the quiet substitution of private interests for public authority.

We have already seen this creeping privatization at every level of government: private contractors running prisons and wars, corporate donors dictating policy priorities, and surveillance and censorship outsourced to tech firms.

Now the presidency itself is for sale — brick by brick, ballroom by ballroom.

Decisions that once required debate and oversight now happen behind closed doors, in boardrooms and donor suites. The result is a shadow government financed by privilege instead of the people.



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This is what a pay-to-play police state looks like: private actors deputized to do the government's bidding, free from constitutional safeguards, answerable only to the wallet that funds them.

Yet the power of the purse was meant to be the people's last line of defense against tyranny.

If Congress no longer controls the nation's spending — and if presidents, agencies, and corporations can bypass public consent by courting private benefactors — then the people no longer control their government.

We need more than the right to pay for our government — we need the right to say how those payments are used, and the power to refuse when they are misused or abused.

The moment we accept the notion that government may do whatever it wants so long as someone else pays for it, we have already sold the republic.

As we make clear in [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#) and its fictional counterpart [The Erik Blair Diaries](#), the restoration of liberty will not come from new donors, new deals, or new rulers — it will come from a renewed insistence that power in America flows only from one source: We the People.

Our forebears fought a revolution to end taxation without representation. We may yet have to fight another — this time, against representation without appropriation, where officials claim the right to govern without the duty to answer to those they are supposed to represent.

Remember, they are the servants. We the People are supposed to be the masters.

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