

Opinion: Obama falls victim to lure of super PAC

By Robert Reich

It has been said there is no high ground in American politics since any politician who claims it is likely to be gunned down by those firing from the trenches. That's how the Obama team justifies its decision to endorse a super PAC that can raise and spend unlimited sums for his campaign.

Baloney. Good ends don't justify corrupt means.

I understand the White House's concerns. Obama is a proven fundraiser – he cobbled together an unprecedented \$745 million for the 2008 election and has already raised \$224 million for this one. But his aides figure Romney can raise almost as much, and they fear an additional \$500 million or more will be funneled to Romney by a relative handful of rich individuals and corporations through right-wing super PACS like “American Crossroads.”



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The White House was surprised that super PACs outspent the GOP candidates themselves in several of the early primary contests, and noted how easily Romney's super PAC delivered Florida to him and pushed Newt Gingrich from first-place to fourth-place in Iowa.

Romney's friends on Wall Street and in the executive suites of the nation's biggest corporations have the deepest pockets in America. His super PAC got \$18 million from just 200 donors in the second half of last year, including million-dollar checks from hedge-fund moguls, industrialists and bankers.

How many billionaires does it take to buy a presidential election? "With so much at stake" wrote Obama campaign manager Jim Messina on the Obama campaign's blog, Obama couldn't "unilaterally disarm."

But would refusing to be corrupted this way really amount to unilateral disarmament? To the contrary, I think it would have given the President a rallying cry that nearly all Americans would get behind: "More of the nation's wealth and political power is now in the hands of fewer people and large corporations than since the era of the robber barons of the Gilded Age. I will not allow our democracy to be corrupted by this! I will fight to take back our government!"

Small donations would have flooded the Obama campaign, overwhelming Romney's billionaire super PACs. The people would have been given a chance to be heard.

The sad truth is Obama has never really occupied the high ground on campaign finance. He refused public financing in 2008. Once president, he didn't go to bat for a system of public financing that would have made it possible for candidates to raise enough money from small donors and matching public funds they wouldn't need to rely on a few billionaires pumping unlimited sums into super PACS. He hasn't even fought for public disclosure of super PAC donations.

And now he's made a total mockery of the Court's naïve belief that super PACs would remain separate from individual campaigns, by officially endorsing his own super PAC and allowing campaign manager Jim Messina and even cabinet officers to speak at his super PAC events. Obama will not

appear at such events but he, Michelle Obama, and Vice President Joe Biden will encourage support of the Obama super PAC.

One Obama adviser says Obama's decision to openly endorse his super PAC has had an immediate effect. "Our donors get it," the official said, adding that they now want to "go fight the other side."

Exactly. So now a relative handful of super-rich Democrats want fight a relative handful of super-rich Republicans. And we call this a democracy.

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