
Profile: Tom Harkin

The fat cat populist backed by big money

by Kathleen Klenetsky

Sen. Tom Harkin's claim that he is the only "true Democrat" running for the presidency has to be one of the biggest frauds of the 1992 campaign.

True, the senator from Iowa enjoys high marks from the liberal interest groups, including Americans for Democratic Action and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). True, he comes from a working-class background, and has managed to sell himself as a friend of labor and the family farmer. And true, his standard campaign spiel is so full of allusions to the fat cats and the rich corporations, that the media have come to depict him as waging "class war" against the wealthy.

But once you manage to get beyond his soak-the-rich rhetoric, what do you find? That Harkin is a demagogue who drapes himself in populist verbiage; who was put in Congress and then maintained there by some of the fattest cats around; and whose campaign program would not only fail to improve the lot of those he claims to represent, but would actually exacerbate the U.S. depression.

Harkin was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1974, one of a group of "Young Turks" who benefited from Watergate's political fallout. Supposedly, Harkin won because of his opposition to the Vietnam War and because of his populist economics. A much more influential factor was socialite George Plimpton, scion of New York "old money," who personally campaigned for Harkin in Iowa, while raising huge contributions to the campaign from his wealthy friends back East.

Since then, Harkin has had no trouble tapping into lucrative campaign funding sources, notably the pro-Israel lobby. Harkin has the dubious distinction of receiving the third largest contribution from AIPAC (the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee) in the 1990 election—a whopping \$245,500. In his first, successful, run for the Senate, in 1984, Harkin received over \$100,000 from AIPAC.

Harkin has given AIPAC an excellent return on its investment. Although he made a name for himself as a "human rights" advocate during his freshman term in the House by sponsoring the Harkin Amendment, which tied U.S. foreign aid to a recipient country's human rights behavior, Harkin has had nothing but kind words for Israel, despite its brutal treatment of Palestinians. Last summer, Harkin declared that

Israeli settlements on the West Bank were not an obstacle to peace and that the very idea that they might be "is ridiculous on its face." "The biggest obstacle is the lack of any will on the part of other countries to take off the boycott and sit down and negotiate with Israel," he claimed.

Harkin has been raising hefty chunks of money for his presidential campaign from the AIPAC network, as well as from the degenerate Hollywood set, including Roseanne Barr and Ed Asner. Christie Hefner of Playboy Enterprises, that great purveyor of the traditional family values Harkin says he will protect, has also contributed.

Harkin's links to the power elite have been strengthened by his wife, Ruth, through her work for the firm of Akin, Gump. One of the three top law firms in Texas, Akin, Gump's Washington office, where Mrs. Harkin works, was headed by Robert Strauss, the wheeling-dealing former Democratic National Committee chairman, until George Bush appointed him ambassador to Moscow.

No energy, no doctors

If anything demonstrates Harkin's dismal lack of qualifications to run the country, it's his policies. Harkin says he will solve the country's economic woes by cutting the U.S. military budget by 50%, using the savings to invest in public works and infrastructure, while simultaneously launching trade war against U.S. trading partners in Germany and Japan.

While cutting the defense budget may sound appealing, it is a non-solution, which will shut down industries wholesale, throw millions out of work, and undercut one of the few institutions in the country which supports advanced scientific research and development. Harkin's tough talk on trade is just as bogus: Unless the United States starts investing in its plant and equipment, as the Japanese and Germans have, there can be no economic recovery, no matter how much "Jap-bashing" goes on.

What makes Harkin's avowed commitment to reviving infrastructure and industry especially questionable, is his record on the environment. Harkin has supported nearly every key "environmental" measure, no matter how detrimental to human welfare. According to aide Sandy Thomas, Harkin opposes removing any of the environmentalist-imposed barriers to nuclear power—an essential component of a thriving economy—nor will he urge an increase in the paltry U.S. contribution to fusion research. Instead, says Thomas, "The senator believes that we should emphasize conservation and alternative energy sources."

The same could be said for Harkin's vow to provide health-care coverage to every American. Despite that noble promise, his performance in the Jan. 31 Democratic presidential debate on PBS television made it clear that to him, health-care reform means strict controls on cost and medical technology. Harkin insisted that we must "reduce unnecessary medical procedures," by resorting to "lower cost providers like nurses" and "home care."