

The Power Elite

by G. William Domhoff

An intertwined social upper class and corporate community, working through a leadership group called the power elite, are far and away the dominant power factor in the United States, as most directly evidenced by their disproportionate amount of wealth and income; by their predominant role in financing moderate and conservative political candidates in both political parties; by their over-representation in key positions in the executive branch of the federal government in both Democratic and Republican administrations; and by their lobbying victories in the decision-making arenas of the federal government on a wide range of issues of direct concern to them. Members of the power elite, who speak for the upper class and the corporate community, work through nonprofit policy-planning and opinion-influencing networks.

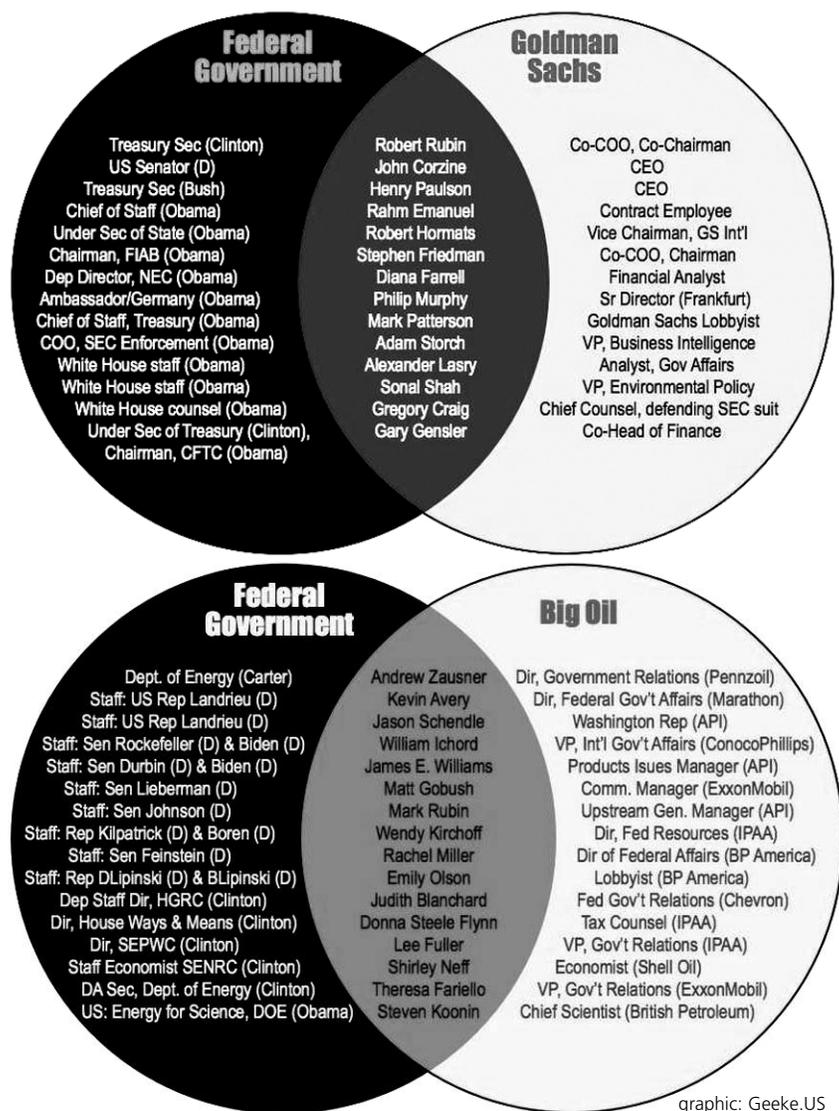
Studies reveal there is an overlap between the directors of the interlocked corporations and membership in the interconnected social institutions that constitute the upper class, which demonstrates that the corporate community and social upper class are by and large two sides of the same coin. In terms of the critical issue of how the social upper class/corporate community is able to organize in order to influence government, the upshot of these studies is that social cohesion facilitates political and policy cohesion when members of the upper class and corporate executives gather in more formal settings.

Detailed tracings of the linkages among individuals, institutions, financial donations, and policy proposals demonstrate the existence of a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy-planning network — made up of dozens of foundations, think tanks, and policy-discussion groups — that is financed and directed by corporate leaders. This network strives to formulate policies concerning the general interests of the corporate community. The policy-planning network focuses on policy makers in the White House, relevant Congressional committees, and the high-status newspapers and opinion magazines published in New York and Washington.

Think tanks are best exemplified by one of the earliest, The Brookings Institution, founded in 1929, which has steered right and left of center in its long history, and by the American Enterprise Institute, which came into prominence in the 1970s as an ultraconservative counter to the government-oriented solutions to social problems. The key policy-discussion groups, which bring together corporate leaders, experts from think tanks and universities, journalists, and current and former government employees for sustained consideration of specific issues, include the Council on Foreign Relations,

the Committee for Economic Development, and the Conference Board. These corporate leaders who are members of policy-discussion groups are more likely to be tapped for government service than other corporate leaders, suggesting that such groups are a proving ground as well as an educational forum. The discovery of a general policy-planning network with many nested networks within it makes it possible to explain how most of the major new government initiatives of the 20th century were developed.

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