Think Supreme Court

By Mel Lavine

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As Robert Reich sees it, the question in Election 2012 could come down to this: “How many billionaires does it take to buy a presidential election?”

In last Sunday’s San Francisco Chronicle, the former U.S. secretary of labor and professor of public policy at UC Berkeley argued that President Obama lost a chance to take the high road on fundraising. By endorsing a super PAC in his bid for re-election, he ratified the Supreme Court’s decision in Citizens United in 2010 which, as Reich pointed out, “opened the floodgates to unrestricted campaign money through super PACs.”

The president's people say Obama had no choice. The question was decided in the Republican primaries. What happened? Florida happened. Mitt Romney's super PAC easily delivered Florida, dropping Newt Gingrich to third or even fourth place. Reich cited the president's campaign manager, Jim Messina. He explained that the White House did not want to "unilaterally disarm" by not exploiting the same tactic.

But what if Obama had stuck to his guns and eschewed super PACs? Reich doesn't believe Obama's refusal "to play the billionaire election game would have been unilateral disarmament." He points out that the president was "a hugely successful fundraiser" for the 2008 election, taking in "an unprecedented $745 million," much of it in "an unprecedented amount of small donations."

Reich suggested what Obama might have said to rally the public: "More of the nation's wealth and political power is now in the hands of large corporations and fewer people since the era of the robber barons and the Gilded Age. I will not allow our democracy to be corrupted by this! I will fight to take back our democracy!"

In Reich's view, if Obama had taken "a strong stand" against super PACs, he would have offered voters a choice: a campaign "financed by millions of small donors" or "a Republican campaign underwritten by a handful of America's most powerful and privileged."

But Obama is a pragmatist, no tilting of windmills for this fellow. Under fire from an obstructionist Republican House of Representatives and Senate Republicans, he vainly sought to bargain with his foes at the risk of looking weak, even naïve. This is not to say he doesn't have core beliefs. Reich's hope is that if Obama is re-elected and sincere about the issues he cares about, he will "go to bat for a system of public financing that will make it possible for candidates to raise enough money from small donors and matching public funds that they won't need to rely on a few billionaires pumping unlimited sums into super PACs."

Upon reading aloud from Reich's piece, I turned to the Lady Friend and said, "In this election one could argue that no matter who wins the people lose."

"Think Supreme Court," the Lady Friend replied. "Obama's made two good appointments in his first term. If he wins in November he's sure to make more."

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