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Fear and Favor

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

A note to Tea Party activists: This is not the movie you think it is. You probably imagine that you're starring in "The Birth of a Nation," but you're actually just extras in a remake of "Citizen Kane."

True, there have been some changes in the plot. In the original, Kane tried to buy high political office for himself. In the new version, he just puts politicians on his payroll.

I mean that literally. As Politico [recently pointed out](#), every major contender for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination who isn't currently holding office and isn't named Mitt Romney is now a paid contributor to Fox News. Now, media moguls have often promoted the careers and campaigns of politicians they believe will serve their interests. But directly cutting checks to political favorites takes it to a whole new level of blatancy.

Arguably, this shouldn't be surprising. Modern American conservatism is, in large part, a movement shaped by billionaires and their bank accounts, and assured paychecks for the ideologically loyal are an important part of the system. Scientists willing to deny the existence of man-made climate change, economists willing to declare that tax cuts for the rich are essential to growth, strategic thinkers willing to provide rationales for wars of choice, lawyers willing to provide defenses of torture, all can count on support from a network of organizations that may seem independent on the surface but are largely financed by a handful of ultrawealthy families.

And these organizations have long provided havens for conservative political figures not currently in office. Thus when Senator Rick Santorum was defeated in 2006, he got a new job as head of the America's Enemies program at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a think tank that has received funding from the usual sources: the Koch brothers, the Coors family, and so on.

Now Mr. Santorum is one of those paid Fox contributors contemplating a presidential run.

What's the difference?

Well, for one thing, Fox News seems to have decided that it no longer needs to maintain even the pretense of being nonpartisan.

Nobody who was paying attention has ever doubted that Fox is, in reality, a part of the Republican political machine; but the network — with its Orwellian slogan, “fair and balanced” — has always denied the obvious. Officially, it still does. But by hiring those G.O.P. candidates, while at the same time making [million-dollar contributions](#) to the Republican Governors Association and the rabidly anti-Obama United States Chamber of Commerce, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which owns Fox, is signaling that it no longer feels the need to make any effort to keep up appearances.

Something else has changed, too: increasingly, Fox News has gone from merely supporting Republican candidates to anointing them. Christine O'Donnell, the upset winner of the G.O.P. Senate primary in Delaware, is often described as the Tea Party candidate, but given the publicity the network gave her, she could equally well be described as the Fox News candidate. Anyway, there's not much difference: the Tea Party movement owes much of its rise to enthusiastic Fox coverage.

As the Republican political analyst David Frum put it, “Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us, and now we are discovering we work for Fox” — literally, in the case of all those non-Mitt-Romney presidential hopefuls. It was days later, by the way, that Mr. Frum was fired by the American Enterprise Institute. Conservatives criticize Fox at their peril.

So the Ministry of Propaganda has, in effect, seized control of the Politburo. What are the implications?

Perhaps the most important thing to realize is that when billionaires put their might behind “grass roots” right-wing action, it's not just about ideology: it's also about business. What the Koch brothers have bought with their huge political outlays is, above all, freedom to pollute. What Mr. Murdoch is acquiring with his expanded political role is the kind of influence that lets his media empire make its own rules.

Thus in Britain, a reporter at one of Mr. Murdoch's papers, News of the World, was caught hacking into the voice mail of prominent citizens, including members of the royal family. But Scotland Yard showed little interest in getting to the bottom of the story. Now the editor who ran the paper when the hacking was taking place is chief of communications for the

Conservative government — and that government is talking about slashing the budget of the BBC, which competes with the News Corporation.

So think of those paychecks to Sarah Palin and others as smart investments. After all, if you're a media mogul, it's always good to have friends in high places. And the most reliable friends are the ones who know they owe it all to you.