

Bidding Underway to Buy America: Is the US for Sale?

In his inaugural address in 1961, John F. Kennedy called Americans to action: "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country". Today, this seems a quaint and bygone notion. Kennedy's sentiment, emphasizing civic duty and collective responsibility, has faded and been replaced by a transactional mindset where personal gain often overshadows the common good.



The KEI Network backchannel was abuzz this past week about an article regarding Elon Musk's role as the presumptive 'Czar of AI' in the incoming Trump administration. The discussion included one very salient question: **Is America for sale to the highest bidder?** This question sparked an examination of the shift from Kennedy's idealism to the current normalization of the quid pro quo.

Kennedy's inaugural address, delivered at the height of the Cold War, resonated with a spirit of shared sacrifice and national purpose. It was a call to confront common enemies - tyranny, poverty, disease, and war - and to build a "grand and global alliance" for the betterment of humanity. This vision, however, seems increasingly distant in an America grappling with heightened polarization, declining civic engagement, a fragmented media landscape, and the outsized influence of wealth.

The **rise of transactional politics** marks a departure from the idealism of Kennedy's era. This approach to governance, defined by a focus on mutual benefit or personal gain rather than ideology or public service, has become increasingly pervasive.

Ronald Reagan's presidency, while lauded by some for ushering in an era of economic prosperity, also demonstrated a shift toward individualism and a shrinking of government's role in society. This laid the groundwork for a more transactional approach to politics, where individual ambition and self-reliance took center stage.

Bill Clinton's mastery of transactional politics further solidified this trend. His ability to forge deals across party lines, often employing a quid pro quo style, demonstrated the effectiveness, and perhaps the allure, of this approach. We have to acknowledge that Clinton's administration coincided with the rise of Newt Gingrich whose approach emphasized partisan warfare over consensus building. Gingrich's focus on partisan victories and his aggressive tactics helped shift the political dynamic further in the direction of transactionalism.

But it was during Donald Trump's presidency (2017-2021) that transactional politics took center stage. Trump's business background and penchant for deal-making shaped his approach to governance, blurring the lines between personal interests and public service. Allegations of leveraging political donations for personal gain, his DC Trump Hotel, and the impeachment trial which centered on a quid pro quo with Ukraine all exemplify this transactional mindset.

During the 2024 Presidential campaign, this trend reached its peak. Trump hawked sneakers, bibles, and \$100,000 gold watches. In September of 2024, the membership fees for Mar A Lago were raised to \$1,000,000. These products represent a loophole in political fundraising; a way to 'sell' something that looks legitimate on the surface but signals an influence operation. This would have seemed outrageous and disqualifying a mere decade ago. During the 2024 campaign, no one seemed to care.

The article that spurred the KEI backchannel conversation concerned Elon Musk's potential status as America's unofficial "Chief AI Officer" under a second Trump administration. This scenario raises concerns about the concentration of power and influence among a select few, particularly those with immense wealth. This type of role could potentially give Musk outside influence over companies and individuals operating in a space directly competitive with his own interests. OpenAI, Microsoft, Alphabet and others must be very concerned. And that's just at a commercial level. What of Musk's entanglements with China in EVs and with the Middle Eastern investors who supported his acquisition of Twitter to the tune of \$8 billion dollars? What sway might Chinese and Middle Eastern interests have over Musk? What are the national security implications?

The shift from Kennedy's call to service to the transactionalism of recent times reflects a broader decline in civic virtue. What Perry Kinkaid has often described simply as 'manners' is referring to honesty and civility - the cornerstones of a functioning democracy and free market. Both have been eroded, fueling distrust and undermining social cohesion.

This concern has been echoed elsewhere; many have noted a decline in civic engagement and a waning sense of collective responsibility. There's lots of speculation about the factors contributing to this decline, including:

- **The rise of social media**, which while initially promising connection, has instead fostered isolation, echo chambers, and a "culture of contempt".
- **The decline of local news** and shared sources of information, leading to fragmented realities and a diminished sense of community.
- **The increasing influence of wealth** in politics, leading to concerns that political decisions are driven by the interests of the wealthy and powerful rather than the needs of the broader public.

The implications of this shift toward transactional politics are profound. These changes are accompanied by warnings about the erosion of democratic principles when self-interest dominates political actions. A system where political contributions are seen as investments for future favors undermines accountability and public service, leading to governance that prioritizes the wealthy and powerful over ordinary citizens.

We are not in a good place regarding public trust or confidence in their government. The perception that politics is merely a transaction further erodes public trust in institutions. As citizens become disillusioned and cynical, they withdraw from civic life, worsening the problem. And the erosion of trust isn't only focused on government. Media and universities too, occupy a much lower status today than in previous decades. The pendulum has swung too far.

But amidst this bleak landscape there is hope. Action always gets attention. But it's the reaction we have to monitor. This shift towards transactionalism has stimulated the desire for a return to political realism, emphasizing the importance of compromise and engagement across ideological divides. The need to rebuild community and foster connections, advocating for government policies that support local institutions and promote a broader sense of civic responsibility is being recognized. Whether this is enough to counter the shift away from 'ask not what your country can do for you' to 'what's in it for me?' remains to be seen.

Sadly, in the near term, the answer to the question ‘**Is America for sale to the highest bidder?**’ seems to be **yes**. Trump, it must be said, did not invent this dynamic. But with a cowed and emasculated Republican Party drifting in search of its lost conservative values, control of Congress, a supportive Supreme Court, and an apathetic electorate, Trump is uniquely qualified and positioned to capitalize on this moment. America is open for business.

The way forward requires a conscious effort to rebalance individual ambition with commitment to the common good. The solution is multifaceted:

- **Business leaders** and **organizations** like the KEI Network can play a role in promoting ethical decision-making, resisting cronyism, and supporting initiatives that rebuild social trust and civic engagement.
- **Government** can prioritize effectiveness, focus on revitalizing local communities, promote social connection, and expand opportunities for national service and civic education.
- **Media** can be more active in fighting misinformation and less focused on attention grabbing opinion pieces. Media can do more to expose the influence of money in politics, educate viewers/listeners, encourage civil debate, and focus on the common good.
- **Individuals** can make conscious choices to engage in their communities, support ethical leaders, and build relationships across political divides.

The shift from Kennedy's idealism to the transactionalism of the present day raises questions about the future of American democracy and this has implications for Canada and the rest of the World. A society that prioritizes self-interest over the common good risks undermining its own foundations. Our task is to rediscover a sense of shared purpose and to recognize that the pursuit of individual gain cannot come at the expense of the collective well-being that underpins a healthy and vibrant society that functions as an effective democracy.

Links to Sources:

- **"KEI Network Email Chain"** (excerpt discussing Elon Musk's potential role as "Chief AI Officer" under a second Trump administration).
- **"Perplexity Search Result"** (excerpt on "Examples of Transactional Politics")
- **"Americans' Views of Government: Decades of Distrust, Enduring Support for Its Role"** by Pew Research Center - <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/americans-views-of-government-decades-of-distrust-enduring-support-for-its-role/>
- **"Ask not what your country can do for you (Kennedy's inaugural address)"** from ushistory.org - <https://www.ushistory.org/documents/inaugural.html>
- **"How Government Can Help Americans Find the Common Good Again"** from *TIME* magazine - <https://time.com/6269091/individualism-ahead-of-the-common-good-for-too-long/>
- **"Incentive Infrastructure"** by Rhys Lindmark - <https://www.rhyslindmark.com/incentive-infrastructure/>
- <https://snyder.substack.com/p/the-strongman-fantasy-updated-1124> The Strongman Fantasy (updated) Timothy Snyder author of *On Tyranny*
- **"Transactional Politics: The Case for Getting Stuff Done"** from *Democratic Erosion* - <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2020/11/18/transactional-politics-the-case-for-getting-stuff-done/>
- **"What Killed the 'Civic Culture'?"** from the Stanford University Press blog - <https://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2019/12/what-killed-the-civic-culture.html>