



March 11, 2014

The Honorable Barack Obama  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama,

Recent published reports by *NBC News*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* indicate that Organizing for Action (OFA) has been selling direct access to you and to your White House in return for huge contributions to OFA.

The published reports raise multiple serious concerns – about OFA’s role in linking meetings with White House staff and a government agency to receiving a huge contribution for OFA, about OFA’s attempt to get the benefit of huge secret contributions by steering the money to partner organizations which do not disclose their donors (in contravention of OFA’s “voluntary” disclosure policy), and about OFA selling a donor the opportunity to take part in a “small clutch” meeting with you for a \$100,000 price tag.

More than a year ago, on January 22, 2013, Democracy 21 issued a statement challenging the creation of OFA by you and your political allies. The statement said that your association with OFA was “fraught with danger.”

[In our January 22, 2013 statement](#), Democracy 21 said that OFA “opens the door to opportunities for government corruption, by allowing corporations and individuals to provide unlimited amounts of money to directly benefit the President’s interests and potentially to receive government benefits and favors in return.”

We called on you to “shut down Organizing for Action now before it creates the appearance of influence buying and/or scandals” in the second term of your Administration.

The recent published reports show that our warnings of last year have come to pass. Democracy 21 again calls on you to shut down OFA, or alternatively, to end any relationship that you and your Administration have with OFA.

[According to recent reports by NBC News](#), Jon Carson, the executive director of OFA “set up talks with an official at the White House and another at the U.S. Agency for International Development on behalf of a New Jersey businessman embroiled in a legal dispute with a U.S. government agency.”

[A published report in The New York Times stated that](#), according to the New Jersey businessman, Munz Kazmir, Carson initiated a meeting with him last December and asked Kazmir “whether he would be interested in raising money for Organizing for Action events with Mr. Obama.”

[According to the NBC News report](#), Kazmir “has a reputation as a major Republican ‘bundler,’” and has “close ties to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie.” He reportedly has also raised money for some Democrats.

According to the *NBC News* report, Kazmir said that “he reached out” to Carson “in hopes of getting meetings with White House and administration officials who might be able to help him in his legal dispute” with the Overseas Private Insurance Corp., which had obtained a judgment against Kazmir for failing to repay a \$2.5 million loan.

According to the *NBC News* report, Kazmir said that Carson responded to his request for administration help “by saying he would introduce him to a White House official ‘to see what can be done.’” Carson reportedly replied to Kazmir’s request for a meeting, “Sure, can you meet at the Caribou Coffee at 17<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania,” and he arranged a meeting with White House staffer Yohannes Abraham who, Carson said, “Should be a good sounding board on this.”

White House officials have often arranged meetings at this Caribou Coffee site when they do not want the meetings to show up on White House visitor logs that are made available to the public.

[According to The Washington Post](#), as soon as the White House aide at the meeting learned from Kazmir that he wanted to discuss ongoing litigation, he ended the meeting and appropriately took no further action.

According to the *NBC News* report, the day after Kazmir met with the White House aide to discuss his legal problems, Kazmir “emailed an OFA fundraiser and committed to raising funds for an OFA event and dinner with Obama in Washington, D.C. ‘I have a \$100k commitment solid,’ Kazmir wrote” in his email.

Thereafter, according to the report, OFA received a \$100,000 check from Dr. Joseph Piacentile, who had recently applied for a pardon for a 1991 conviction for Medicare fraud. Kazmir, who arranged the Piacentile contribution, reportedly stated that OFA executive director Carson “was directly involved in soliciting the cash that came from Dr. Piacentile.”

Thus, the executive director of OFA reportedly arranged a meeting with a White House official for a businessman to discuss a legal dispute with the government while OFA was soliciting the businessman to make or raise a large donation for OFA.

These actions constituted a fundamental violation of the integrity of the office of the presidency.

Furthermore, the public has no way of knowing how many other occasions there have been since OFA was created where OFA may have sold access to the White House or to government agencies. Under current circumstances, there is also no way to ensure that the sale of access by OFA will not happen again in the future.

According to *The New York Times*, OFA raised more than \$26 million in 2013.

The \$100,000 check from Piacentile to OFA was returned to Piacentile because of his prior conviction. However, Kazmir was asked by an OFA fundraiser, Samantha Maltzman, to have Piacentile rewrite the \$100,000 check to “one of our partner organizations,” according to the *NBC News* report. The partner organization, America Votes, does not disclose its donors.

According to the report, Piacentile then wrote a new check for \$100,000 to America Votes and at Maltzman’s request, Kazmir sent the check to OFA headquarters in Chicago. America Votes is located in Washington, D.C.

Directing the check to OFA apparently would allow OFA to deliver the check to America Votes and get credit for it. However, after questions were raised by *NBC News*, the check was reportedly retrieved from OFA offices in Chicago before it had been sent to America Votes, and was returned to Piacentile.

According to the *NBC News* report, OFA acknowledged that it also had steered two other contributions it found unacceptable to “other allied tax-exempt groups” that also do not disclose their donors. This included “a \$250,000 donation from a donor who had a previous ‘legal problem’ with the government” and “a \$75,000 check from a corporation that at OFA’s request, was made payable” to another progressive group.

Thus, rather than return huge checks that OFA had concluded came from unacceptable sources, OFA steered the money to allied groups. OFA got the benefit of these huge contributions while keeping secret the contributions and the fact that OFA had channeled the money to the groups.

In undertaking this steering operation, OFA flew in the face of the organization’s public commitment to “voluntarily” disclose its supporters and the amounts they were giving over \$250 per donor.

Additionally, recent published reports leave little doubt that OFA sold direct access to you.

When questioned about OFA fundraising tactics a year ago on March 4, 2013, White House press secretary Jay Carney said at his daily press briefing, “Any notion that there is a set price for a meeting with the president of the United States is just wrong.”

Democracy 21’s response in a statement issued at the time was “Really?”

The Carney comments last year were made following published reports in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* that giving to or raising \$500,000 for OFA would provide donors with the privilege of attending quarterly meetings with you.

According to the recent *NBC News* report, OFA sent a fundraising appeal to Kazmir for a recent dinner and reception with you at an event billed as an “OFA summit.” The fundraising appeal stated that “It is \$25,000 per person to attend and for those who raise or write \$100K, there will be small clutch with the president.” Kazmir reportedly solicited Piancentile’s \$100,000 check for OFA in response to this email fundraiser.

In other words, according to the OFA fundraising appeal, “a small clutch” meeting with you could be bought for giving or raising a \$100,000 contribution to OFA. Any way you look at it, this is “a set price for a meeting with the president of the United States,” notwithstanding White House press secretary Jay Carney’s assertions a year ago.

All of these various events only confirm the serious concerns we raised a year ago about your association with OFA. As Democracy 21 said in [our statement issued on March 7, 2013](#):

OFA remains an unprecedented entity that allows individual donors and bundlers to provide unlimited amounts of money to an organization functioning as an arm of the Obama presidency.

The unlimited amounts provided to OFA create opportunities for individual donors and bundlers to buy corrupting influence over the Obama administration's policies and decisions. At a minimum, they create the appearance that opportunities for such corrupting influence exist.

We again warn as we did last year: Organizing for Action is a direct threat to the integrity of your presidency.

Democracy 21 strongly urges you to shut down Organizing for Action or, alternatively, to end any relationship that you and your Administration have with OFA.

Sincerely,

/s/ Fred Wertheimer

Fred Wertheimer  
President  
Democracy 21