Tea Party’s Big Money

Tea Party supporters and their candidates like to imagine themselves as insurgents, crashing the barricades of Washington to establish a new order of clean and frugal government. In earthbound reality, many of the people pulling the Tea Party’s strings are establishment Republican operatives and lobbyists. Some have made money off the party for years.

One example is Sal Russo, a gun-for-hire who has worked for former President Ronald Reagan, former Gov. George Deukmejian of California, former Gov. Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey, former Gov. George Pataki of New York, and many other Republicans. As The Times reported on Sunday, Mr. Russo saw a sure thing last year, establishing a group called the Tea Party Express to support candidates in the midterm elections and raise cash at the same time.

The group has spent nearly $1 million in an effort to replace Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic Senate leader. It spent nearly $350,000 to elect Senator Scott Brown of Massachusetts. It is pouring money into Alaska to support Joe Miller’s Senate bid. And it has spent $250,000 in Delaware on behalf of Christine O’Donnell, now the Republican nominee for the United States Senate. Mr. Russo held a fund-raiser for Ms. O’Donnell and organized a rally.

In all, Mr. Russo and his group have raised $5.2 million and are the biggest independent supporters of Tea Party candidates. Of that, $3 million to buy advertising went to his political consulting firm or one controlled by his wife. Of course, he takes a substantial cut of each buy.

Dick Armey, the former House Republican leader, considers himself a godfather of the Tea Party and is co-author of the book, “Give Us Liberty: a Tea Party Manifesto.” Writing in The Wall Street Journal, he called for a “hostile takeover” of the Republican Party, which sounds so very revolutionary until one remembers that he helped lead that party for many years, guiding its policies and raising its money. When he left office in 2003, he cashed in on his connections to become a very high-paid lobbyist at DLA Piper, one of Washington’s biggest
law firms, which has clients that include health-care companies, energy producers and foreign governments.

Then there is Carl Paladino, the Tea Party-backed Republican nominee for governor of New York. His bloodcurdling denunciations of Albany never seem to mention that he is one of the **biggest landlords** of state agencies, owning properties with $85 million in taxpayer leases in Buffalo alone that provide him with income of more than $5 million a year. He is the biggest property owner in Buffalo, and much of his empire has been constructed with state development incentives and tax breaks. An adviser is Roger Stone, an operator for Republicans since Richard Nixon’s re-election campaign.

There are undoubtedly thousands of Tea Partiers who would love to purge Washington of well-connected lobbyists, high-priced political consultants and others who take millions of taxpayer dollars while condemning the lawmakers who spend it. They should take a long look at the leaders and candidates who are driving their movement and decide whether purging begins at home.