

VOLUME 13 NUMBER 12 ♦ DECEMBER 2011

The *Hightower* LOWDOWN



I met a fellow wearing this political button in Vermont. If our "people's sovereignty" is to survive and thrive we must be more than button wearers—we must become citizen participants, agitators against corporate plutocracy.
—Jim Hightower

EDITED BY JIM HIGHTOWER AND PHILLIP FRAZER

To get America moving, the People must lead. Join the action!

Corporate elites and their small-minded political servants are creating the Incredibly Shrinking America

"WE THE PEOPLE of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

What a paragraph! This sparse, 52-word opening of our Constitution did not merely launch a fledgling nation—but a bold experiment in democratic idealism. The rest of the document consists of details, but this carefully considered Preamble set forth our nation's purpose. It declares to all the world that the BIG goal of America—its very reason for existing—is to create a society that embraces and fosters such egalitarian values as justice, tranquility, common effort, the welfare of all, and liberty.

As Benjamin Franklin put it at the time, "America's destiny is not power, but light." The light is our historic commitment to the common good, shared prosperity, and a government of, by, and for the People.

Whatever happened to that audacious reach, that grand vision, that proud progressive purpose? We know, of course, that our nation has never attained the fullness of this ideal, but over the decades, generation after generation has at least strived to get closer to it—and made impressive progress. But today, some 224 years after the penning of the Preamble, America's corporate-financial-political establishment is fleeing the light, insisting that it's no longer possible or even desirable to pursue those democratic ideals that make our country important—and make it work.

What's happened is that, from Wall Street to Washington, we have too many five-watt bulbs sitting in 100-watt sockets. As a result of their dimness, America's uniting and constructive ethic of "We're all in this together" and "Together we can" is being supplanted by a

shriveled, dispiriting ethic that exalts plutocratic selfishness and scorns the public interest as intrusive, wasteful, ideologically impure, and morally ruinous. They're pushing us toward a forbidding Kochian jungle in which there is no "we"—money rules, everyone's on their own, and such matters as justice, general welfare, tranquility, and posterity are none of society's damned business.

The nation of no-can-do

In recent years, acolytes of the far right have contrived yet another litmus test of ideological purity to divide "real Americans" (themselves) from those who obviously hate America (all who do not agree with them). "American exceptionalism," they call it.

America has most certainly been exceptional in many ways, thanks to the pluck and democratic determination of grassroots folks. But that's not glorious enough for these extreme nationalists, who insist that ours is a God-ordained exceptionalism. They preach that ours is both a Christian nation and one bathed in the blood of free enterprise, thus God has blessed us with a moral superiority that lifts the USofA ever-sparkling above all nations that ever existed.

Never mind that our national morality has a few conspicuous hickies on it (ask a Native American, for example), the believers believe... and that makes it true. They're also demanding that others believe—or be branded un-American. To get right with the rightists, such current seekers of the presidency as Mitt, Newt, Herman, Rick, the other Rick, and Michele have bowed to the

exceptionalists and are blissfully spreading this new gospel through their campaign speeches and websites. (Really, friends, how credible is America's claim to exceptionalism with those six carrying the flag?)

The cruelest irony is that America's genuine exceptionalism (our historic striving for a more egalitarian society) is under relentless assault by the political army of the hokey exceptionalists. These are the holy crusaders of the plutocratic, autocratic, theocratic, and



ROOTY-TOOT-TOOT, HERE COMES NEWT!

NEWT GINGRICH is back! Just three months ago, the presidential campaign of this corrupt, super-bloated-ego-on-legs had imploded, and commentators like me lost a sure-fire source of goofy material. Lo and behold, though, as Rick Perry stumbled over his own brain and as Herman Cain fumbled with Libya and several women—the Newt has been ascendant, now topping some polls in the GOP contest.

Explaining this exalted status, the former House Speaker was typically modest: “I don’t think there’s anybody in the race with [my] background,” he bloated. “I have a PhD in American history, I’ve written 24 books, seven documentary films.” Yes, and he’s also been fined \$300,000 by his own House ethics committee for official corruption.

Speaking of which, after his unceremonious exit from Congress, Gingrich parlayed his legislative connections into the lucrative life of a Washington influence peddler, carrying water for such corporate favor-seekers as IBM and Microsoft. Now we learn that he also quietly did chores for mortgage giant Freddie Mac—a firm he had blasted publicly. He even condemned Barack Obama in 2008 for taking campaign donations from the corporation’s executives.

He recently tried to dismiss his own involvement with Freddie Mac, saying his role there was short and minor. Really? No. It turns out he worked with them for six years and was paid at least \$1.6 million. Newt insists that voters will actually appreciate his work as a hired huckster for corporate interests—“It reminds people that I know a great deal about Washington,” he said.

Thank you, political gods—this is going to be fun!

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kleptocratic right—an army that includes the laissez-fairlyland Koch brothers; the Boehner-Cantor-Ryan triumvirate in the US House; off-the-wall senators like Jim DeMint and Jim Inhofe; the gaggle of goofy governors wreaking havoc in Arizona, Florida, Maine, Michigan, Ohio, Texas, Wisconsin, and elsewhere; Grover Norquist, Karl Rove, and other slash-and-burn political operatives; corporate front groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council and the Cato Institute; and such ceaseless propaganda pushers as Rupert Murdoch’s line-up of Fox TV yakkers.

Far from fostering exceptionalism, these heavily financed forces are rumbling throughout the country to crush the union movement, eliminate wage protections, privatize everything from schools to Social Security, kill poverty programs, un-regulate Wall Street, repeal environmental rules, suppress voter turnout, stack the courts, corporatize elections, and de-legitimize the democratic values expressed by the founders in the Preamble. They are dynamiting the underpinnings of the middle class and taking away the public tools that ordinary people must have to do the extraordinary things that truly make America great.

So here we are, the wealthiest nation on earth with massive needs and an industrious population eager to get working on those needs, yet our leaders throw up their hands and say: “No can do.”

The “leaders” have given up on greatness because there’s no greatness in them. Most of those at the top of the corporate and political establishment (excuse the redundancy there) are so narcissistic that they no longer see beyond their own good fortunes, equating America’s progress, well-being, and greatness to the size of their portfolios. The fact that they could invent phrases like “jobless recovery,” “too big to fail,” and “the new normal” reveals their spiritual constipation and self-absorption.

They’ve even fabricated a pious ethic of “austerity” to cloak their shameful abandonment of America’s common good. Using the ongoing economic collapse, which was caused by them—their Wall Street recklessness, profligate tax giveaways to the super-rich, unbridled corporate greed, and the multitrillion dollar wars put on the national credit card—the people in charge

now lecture sternly that America (i.e., you and I) must cut back.

Candidate Romney spelled it out: “I think it’s time for programs that we like but that we simply can’t afford, to be stopped... and I’m going to do that,” listing the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, PBS and NPR, and Amtrak.

These are abstemious times, we’re told, so workaday people must lower their expectation of having a middle-class existence. And, they scold, stop looking for either corporations or governments to do anything to lift people up or rally the nation to achieve any sort of grand national goals. In twisted language that would cause even George Orwell to gasp in disbelief, they tell us that America’s corporate and political leaders must be big enough to be small—and bold enough to see that the only way forward is to go backwards.

Apparently the Powers That Be expected to be applauded for imposing this pursed-lip politics of retrenchment. Instead, people are dismayed and disgusted by such a desiccated vision of our nation’s possibilities, and there’s a rising grassroots fury at the moneyed and political elites who’re creating The Incredibly Shrinking America:

MIDDLE CLASS

In a nation that once prided itself on trying to build a more egalitarian society, America’s wealthiest people have steadily been siphoning more and more money out of the middle class. In October, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office issued a report on changes during the past 30 years in the share of our nation’s income going to the rich. The top one percent enjoyed a stunning 275 percent increase in their take. These privileged few more than doubled the slice of America’s income pie that they consume, going from eight percent of the whole to 17 percent. They got that super-sized slice from us—the middle class and the poor, who saw our slices drastically diminish in this period.

At the very tip of our country’s income pyramid, where multimillionaire CEOs and Wall Street chieftains live, the shift was especially huge. This exclusive zip code is the domain of the richest one one-hundredth

DoSomething! Check out these great groups

America’s founders did not hand us a People’s democratic republic—only the chance to build one. Today’s corporate and political elites are trying feverishly to yank that chance right out from under us. We cannot just shout, “Fight back!” That’s futile—unless it comes with the democratic tools and structures to help ordinary grassroots people battle the bastards effectively. Luckily, all sorts of top-notch progressive groups exist to do just that. The following is but a sampling of the wealth of resources we have on our side. Choose one (or six, or all, or make your own list), then *do something*.

- **350.org**
www.350.org
- **American Independent Business Alliance**
www.amiba.net
- **Blue Green Alliance**
www.bluegreenalliance.org
- **Center for American Progress**
www.americanprogress.org
- **Center for Media and Democracy Projects**
www.prwatch.org
www.sourcewatch.org
- **Common Cause**
www.commoncause.org
- **Citizens for Tax Justice**
www.ctj.org
- **Color of Change**
www.colorofchange.org
- **Fighting Bob**
www.fightingbob.com
- **Institute for Policy Studies**
www.ips-dc.org
- **Media Matters**
www.mediamatters.org
- **Move Your Money Project**
www.moveyourmoneyproject.org
- **Occupy Together**
www.occupytogether.org
- **National People’s Action**
www.npa-us.org
- **People for the American Way**
www.pfaw.org
- **Public Campaign**
www.publiccampaign.org
- **Public Citizen**
www.citizen.org
- **Public Interest Research Group**
www.uspirg.org
- **Rebuild the Dream**
www.rebuildthedream.com
- **US Federation of Worker Cooperatives**
www.usworker.coop
- **We The People Campaign**
www.wethepeoplecampaign.org
- **Wellstone Action**
www.wellstone.org

of the one-percenters—fewer than 15,000 households. They now gobble up six percent of all US income—the biggest piece ever consumed by America’s mega-rich.

JOBS

Unemployment has never been so high for so long after a recession formally ended as we’re presently experiencing. Especially damaging (both to individual families and to our country) is long-term unemployment—a record—4.4 million out-of-work Americans today have been jobless for a year or more. Corporate executives (now euphemistically referred to as “job creators” by GOP politicians) are sitting on \$2 trillion in cash. But rather than investing that in the actual creation of, you know, jobs, corporations are in Washington lobbying for new, multibillion dollar tax subsidies as the price for even beginning to think about hiring people.

Hundreds of corporations are openly saying that even when they do have some jobs to fill, they will not take applications from people who’ve been out of work for more than six months (the cold assumption is that such unfortunates would have fallen too far behind in skills and contacts to be valuable). At the same time, workers are being told that in the new corporate order they must expect long periods of joblessness. Meanwhile, congressional Republicans are demanding major cuts in both job training and unemployment programs.

WAGES

Nationwide, for every job opening these days, there are five applicants vying for it (however, jobseekers report a much tougher reality, with openings typically drawing 50 or more applicants for each position). With so many unemployed and underemployed Americans, workers are having to take any pay level they can get, allowing top executives to jack up profits (and executive paychecks) by paying low wages. Indeed, in a July report on major US corporations, a JPMorgan Chase analyst found that about 75 percent of recent increases in profit margins (now at the highest levels since the 1960s) come from knocking down worker pay and benefits.

Harold Meyerson, the excellent editor-at-large for *American Prospect*, reports that “because labor is cheap and workers have no rights,” the US “is becoming

the new China.” European corporate giants are moving jobs to the USA because our political leaders allow them to pay much less and abuse workers, which they’re not allowed to do in Germany, Scandinavia, etc. “Slumming in America,” Meyerson writes, “is fast becoming a business model for some of Europe’s leading companies.”

EDUCATION

Even robber barons of the 19th century recognized that public access to education was in America’s best interest, as well as their own. No more. From corporatists, right-wing ideologues, and even from many Democratic officeholders, the loudest political cries today are for slashing school budgets, eliminating classes and programs, busting the middle-class pay and benefits of teachers, outlawing collective bargaining, jamming more kids into each class, cutting school taxes, and... what the hell, just privatize the whole shebang. As one exasperated school official told the *New York Times*, “Every year we say: ‘What can we cut?’ We’re starting to eviscerate education.”

Of course, what’s really being eviscerated is opportunity for children, along with upward mobility, potential genius, an informed citizenry, and “domestic Tranquility.” Can they even spell s-t-u-p-i-d? Among the worst offenders are not the know-nothings, but high-tech honchos. They whine endlessly that public schools must do a better job of developing skilled workers for their industry. Yet, when they open or expand corporate operations in a community, their first demand is to be exempted from paying taxes to the local school district.

COMMUNITY

Last month, Stanford University issued a “map of prosperity,” based on family income in the various neighborhoods of America’s 117 largest urban areas. It confirms the middle-class decline, with nearly a 20-point drop since 1970 in the percentage of our people living middle-class lives (down from 65 percent to only 44 percent today).

The significance is not merely the increase in the number of people who’ve fallen into poverty (up by over 13 million in just the past decade), but that the widening separation between the rich and the rest of us is producing a two-tiered society with a shrinking sense of shared community. The wealthy (including nearly all

CONGRESS’ APPROVAL AT NINE PERCENT

CONGRESS. How small-minded is it? How tangled-up in a right-wing ideological knot is it? How subservient to corporate lobbyists is it?

The answers to these three questions are: pizza, tomato paste, and spuds.

At a time when doctors and nutritionists are sounding a national alarm about a diabetes epidemic caused by gross obesity, including in children, the Congress of the United States of America, in all of its majesty, has killed an effort by the Agriculture Department to make school lunches healthier. Why?

One, Congress is incapable of meeting America’s big needs, so it’s rationalizing its existence by messing with the small stuff. Two, Congress’ right-wing ideologues are so batty that they even oppose federal rules to improve our children’s health. Three—and most significant—the french fry lobby, tomato paste lobby, and frozen pizza lobby put big bucks into congressional campaigns, and they pulled the strings of our lawmakers. So, the financial interests of corporate powers—including Coca-Cola, ConAgra, and Del Monte—have overridden the interest of America’s school kids.

Yet, members of Congress still say they can’t figure out why their public approval rating has crashed to an all-time low of nine percent. Nine! Good grief—as Sen. Michael Bennet recently pointed out to his colleagues, oil giant BP, at the height of its disastrous contamination of our Gulf, held on to a 16 percent approval rating, the IRS gets a 40 percent rating on its job performance, and even America going communist draws 11 percent support.

The real question is, who is in the nine percent that approves of this Congress? I’m guessing they’re relatives, staffers, and the two Koch Brothers. Plus, of course, corporate lobbyists.

The Hightower LOWDOWN

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The Hightower Lowdown (ISSN 1524-4881) is published monthly by Public Intelligence Inc., 375 South End Ave #14P New York NY 10280. ©2011 in the United States. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY. Subscriptions: 1 year, \$15; 2 years, \$27. Add \$8/year for Mexico or Canada; add \$12/year for overseas airmail. Back issues \$2 postpaid. Allow 4-6 weeks for receipt of first issue and for all subscription transactions. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: *The Hightower Lowdown*, P.O. Box 20596, New York, NY 10011.

Moving? Missed an issue? Call our subscription folks toll-free at (866) 271-4900 or write lowdown@pipeline.com. Send us fan mail or hate mail at: P.O. Box 20596, New York, NY 10011 or editors@hightowerlowdown.org.

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AMERICA BIFURCATED

THE RICH, as F. Scott Fitzgerald put it, “are different than you and me.”

If you doubt it, go shopping. Specifically, make two outings into the wonderful world of retail. Start with middle-of-the-road stores, such as Bealls, Walmart, and Target. You’ll find customers, but fewer than normal, and they’re spending less than a couple of years ago. Paycheck-to-paycheck families are barely holding on, worried about their jobs, mortgages, gas and food, and other basics.

This is not going to get better anytime soon—corporations aren’t hiring, wages are stagnant or falling, prices of basics keep rising, and people’s savings are depleted. In response, Walmart officials say they’re not passing on price increases like they always have, and they’re offering a lay-away payment program this season so their hard-hit customers can purchase a few holiday gifts. They note that many shoppers are saying they won’t even have much in the way of special holiday meals this year.

Now, check the scene at Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, and other upscale stores, where the stock market set goes for stylish shoes, designer gowns, and the like. Blessed with executive salaries and a good tailwind from the Dow, these high-end shoppers are flocking to their high-end retailers, and no one is rummaging for bargains or looking for discounts. “Full-price selling,” exults the CEO of Saks, “is at record levels.” Trying not to gloat, he adds: “I feel good about the luxury consumer.”

The industry refers to this widening divide as “a bifurcated market.” We’re in a bifurcated America, with the hard-pressed many going one direction and the flush few going another.

lawmakers and governors) literally do not live with us, instead flocking together into pockets of affluence. Rising inequality is creating an isolation of the prosperous, who have no real interaction with the middle class and poor and no identity with our wants and needs.

Thus, when economic and social policies are considered in our national and state capitals, the likes of Wall Street, Big Oil, and the super-rich are taken care of immediately. Millions of jobless Americans, on the other hand, are told to wait for pie in the sky when they die; the minimum wage is allowed to wither to a sub-poverty level, with less buying power today than at any time since 1956; budgets for public libraries and parks are axed, shutting people out and forcing closures; Head Start, food stamps, and other effective anti-poverty programs are on the chopping block, even as the need for them soars; and even such a screaming need as good health care for all is treated as too much for our society to attempt, much less achieve.

Let’s do something big

Is there no hope, then? Of course there is. There’s hope in the great majority of Americans who oppose what the present crop of pathetic leaders are doing and who support doing what those feckless leaders are failing to do. There’s hope in the thousands of extraordinary (dare we say exceptional?) local actions that ordinary people are taking—from building green economies to voting overwhelmingly that a corporation is not a person, as 75 percent of Missoula, Montana voters did last month.

There’s hope in the ongoing Wisconsin rebellion that has already defeated two thuggish state senators and is now going after the imperious Gov. Scott Walker. There’s hope in the 61 percent grassroots victory in Ohio on November 8 to throw out the repressive anti-labor law that the ego-bloated, Koch-fueled Gov. John Kasich tried to hang around the people’s neck. There’s hope in the Occupy protest that is so big and so deeply felt by so many angry/hopeful people that even such forces of autocracy as Mayor Mike Bloomberg cannot make it go away. And there’s hope in still more uprisings that are coming—coming from such corners as frustrated jobseekers; tens of thousands of misused war veterans returning from the Mideast to mistreatment at home; hundreds of thousands of homeowners being mercilessly foreclosed

on by bailed-out bankers; and others who’re simply fed up with the corporados and political flim-flammers who’re knocking ordinary Americans down and holding America back.

You’ve probably seen this bumpersticker: “If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.” I sense that a critical mass of people is now paying attention. I also find that the thing we Americans have the most of is the very thing our failed leaders have the least of: bigness of spirit.

Shouldn’t we repair and extend our nation’s crumbling school buildings, bridges, water systems, and other parts of the essential infrastructure? “Yes!” shout an overwhelming majority of Americans (a 2009 poll even found that 74 percent of Republicans are willing to swallow a tax hike to get going on this). How about a moon-shot style, 10-year national effort to free America from dirty fuels by converting to energy conservation and renewable power sources? “Let’s do it!” say the people. High-speed rail connecting our cities? “Yes we can!” Reclaim our democracy by banning corporate money from our elections? “Sign us up,” say 84 percent of Americans who support a constitutional amendment to do it.

While it can be disheartening to see the smallness of those in power, don’t let it get you down, for they want us to become so disheartened that we give up. Better that we turn their failure into our inspiration for more agitation. After all, they’re the ones who’re wrong—wrong about the can-do power of the people they pretend to lead, wrong about the depth of this nation’s historic commitment to egalitarianism and the common good, wrong about what they think they can get away with.

Our task is to confront them again and again, shoving back until we shove them out. Confront them in the coming election—demand from every candidate for every office why their idea of what Americans can do is so small. Confront them in the workplace, the media, the pocketbook, the schools, the shareholder meetings, the public forums, the streets... everywhere.

There are dozens of effective grassroots groups engaged in this essential democratic shove-back on all kinds of fronts. Join the action—the groups need you, and so does our democracy. To get started, see the *Lowdown* “Do Something” box for contact information on just a few of those groups.

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13:12 December 2011

