

## Concentrated Power Without Responsibility



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*I*n this chapter, I want to review the decline of American democracy; propose that the American power elite is more interested in control than domination; suggest that September 11 further unleashed three virulent forces—commercial materialism, corporate welfarism, and diminution of civil liberties; warn that, as a result, public resources have been misallocated; set out an alternative foreign policy, based on assertive and anticipatory peace strategies, not war and belligerent provocations; and propose better-organized forms of strong resistance and advocacy for alternative policies.

### THE CLOSING DOWN OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Relentlessly, American democracy is being closed down.

What was done in 1965 with my book *Unsafe At Any Speed*—with the hearings before the Ribicoff Committee, bringing the executives of General Motors to the hearing, swearing them under oath to tell the truth and resulting in the enactment of the Motor Vehicle and Highway Safety Laws which, irregularly enforced, have saved over a million lives in the United States, and more abroad, by manufacturers having to meet our standards—could not be done today. The follow-through from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* could not happen today.

None of the institutional changes made by people who started out anonymously—with nothing but a credible case to make against an injustice or hazard—could happen today. We don’t have the congressional committees to do the job; and we don’t have the media to follow the issue on a regular reporting beat, as was the case with *Unsafe at Any Speed*. Nor has recent policy shown an interest in “homeland security” on the nation’s highways, workplaces, and the environment.

This is a sobering observation—because we are very good at establishing indicators that tell us what is happening in the economy by weekly increments or decrements. But we are poor in developing standards by which we measure the rise or decline of our democracy and its democratic processes, both procedurally and through the substantive output that comes from an open society. Yet on many fronts, the signs are unmistakably clear. The economy is growing while poverty is increasing. The economy is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, thus leading to masses of capital being unproductively invested and instead redirected into the casino capitalism we have seen in financial and other markets.

Access to our courts—whether it is legal services for the poor, their class actions, or other systemic litigation—is now prohibited. The rights of wrongfully injured people against their perpetrators, under tort law, are being relentlessly squeezed.

As Robert McChesney and John Nichols discuss in chapter 30, the media are in the hands of fewer and fewer conglomerates; we are down to seven giant conglomerates controlling most of the circulation and most of the viewership and listenership. One radio conglomerate owns 1,300 radio stations. Ten years ago, no company could own more than a dozen or two radio stations. So what we are hearing and seeing is syndicated pap indentured to corporate advertising interests and a reduction in local coverage, local reporting staffs, and local stations generating their own material. Amy Goodman has much more to say about radio in chapter 33.

We have seen a decline in our democracy in terms of the commercialization of elections, where money now speaks much more strongly than it did twenty, thirty, or forty years ago. Basically, candidates, elections, and governments have been corporatized. We are seeing a decline in our democracy in the relentless propaganda that devalues public enterprise and public investment and that thinks that privatization, or more accurately corporatization, should swarm over the entire political-economic system.

Yet it is public enterprise and public investment that made our transportation system possible, our communication system possible, our health care science system possible—and that made possible the burgeoning industries like aerospace, semiconductors, biotech, and much of the pharmaceutical industry. Without government research and development, little of this would have happened. That is why the present situation is so out of control. Because we don't have a major-party opposition pattern in place that speaks truth to propaganda.

We don't have fearless chairpersons of congressional committees, as was the case in the 1960s and early 1970s, overseeing and investigating—like Senator Fred Harris, Senator Gaylord Nelson, Senator Frank Church, Senator Abe Ribicoff, Senator Wayne Morse, Senator William Fulbright, and congressmen John Moss and Benjamin Rosenthal—there are few replacements here. So what we have seen is the Federalist concept of separation of power and countervailing powers in our government being converged into a one-party state in most congressional and senatorial juris-

dictions, and heavy power located in the executive branch. The Patriot Act, which only had one dissenter in the Senate, Senator Russ Feingold, was followed by the stampeding assent of the Democrats. In recent years, one piece of legislation after another, serving large corporate interests, passed the Democratically controlled Senate and the Republican-controlled Senate.

## AMERICA IS INTERESTED IN CONTROL, NOT DOMINATION

What has happened is, I think, a new version of concentration of power worldwide. Until the occupation of Iraq, the United States was not interested in domination. It was interested in control. Domination, British and French and Portuguese empire-style, involves constantly having to visibly justify the domination and involves some responsibility for the natives because the troops are there—in India and Africa. Control achieves the same objective without any responsibility and with minimum visibility. This pattern of splitting ownership from control also has been the evolution of our property system in the United States.

Corporate interests like Michael Milken weren't really interested in owning the billions of dollars repositied in savings and loans by millions of workers. Milken was interested in just controlling the investment of that money. And so throughout our political economy, the people legally own the public airways, but the broadcast industry controls them. The people legally own the public lands that run through America, but the mining interests, timber, and energy interests and others control their disposition. Public revenues are turned into corporate assets and profits via vast varieties of direct and indirect corporate welfare from stadiums to bailouts, from giveaways to tax shelters and subsidies.

The people, through their labor pension funds, own one-third of the stock on the New York Stock Exchange, but the Board of Directors, the insurance companies, the banks, and the corporations like IBM control the workers' \$5 trillion or so of pension money. This pattern makes the controlling process much more difficult to challenge because it's not domination, it's not ownership, it's control. And such control is the exercise of concentrated power without responsibility.

In foreign policy, this pattern has been perfected under both Democratic and Republican regimes. It involves moving in, achieving military objectives, and then leaving the country in wreckage. It involves destabilizing countries like Cambodia and Zaire and leaving the internecine slaughter behind for the natives to suffer. Cutting and running—striking and running—has been the pattern, right through Afghanistan, which is now 99 percent controlled by violent warlords whose forces are engaged in predatory activity, pillage, rape, and looting. Cutting and running—even the first road-building project took two years to get underway, the first

road-building project between Kabul and Kandahar. Of the money that was promised the Kabul government only a portion has been extended, and certainly not for what has been called rebuilding or reconstruction—as the financial minister of the Karzai government, Ashraf Ghani, has pointed out time and time again.

The massive failure of intelligence agencies, whose annual budgets now total more than \$30 billion, to uncover the tracks of the attackers who left their tracks all over the country for four years prior to September 11, has not resulted in a serious review of the performance of these intelligence agencies, as Ray McGovern carefully documents in chapter 3. The budgets of intelligence agencies have been expanded. That was the reward for what prudent commentators are calling one of the greatest intelligence failures in our history. They failed to listen to their field office reports to Washington, from people like FBI agent Coleen Rowley (see chapter 29).

### SEPTEMBER 11 UNLEASHED THREE VIRULENT FORCES

September 11 came, and the aftermath of that massacre unleashed three virulent forces in American society, which had already been underway but are now in the process of running amok. The first is commercial militarism. This is an opportunity pointed out in the notorious *Wall Street Journal* editorial, shortly after September 11, while rescuers were still trying to enter the wreckage of the World Trade Center. The *Wall Street Journal* wrote an editorial to American business saying, in effect, go for it: this is a great opportunity—you can get your taxes reduced, you can get regulation reduced, you can get law enforcement reduced, you can get immunity.

The commercial militarists were one arm of that exhortation, and they saw an opportunity to push faster through Congress military weapons systems designed for the Soviet Union era of hostility—weapon systems that are distinctly not tailored to the new threat Mr. Bush was describing. And so we saw hundreds of billions of dollars in the pipeline for weapons like the F-22 and other weapon systems, which were either unnecessary, redundant, or wouldn't work—even by standard military strategy yardsticks, weapon systems condemned both inside the Pentagon and by retired admirals and generals—some of them part of the Center for Defense Information. The critical supply and logistical shortcomings in Iraq for United States infantry further raised questions about the way the American government spent taxpayer dollars over recent years.

The second virulent force was represented by the corporate welfarists, who began blaming everything on September 11 in order to demand all kinds of privileges—subsidies, handouts, giveaways, immunities, and tax benefits. The insurance industry moved in this direction—and the airline industry immediately succeeded in this direction for billions of tax dollars as they laid off 80,000 workers.

The insurance industry illustrates my father's answer to the question, "Why will capitalism always prevail?" He asked us that question when we were children. And his answer was, "Because socialism will always be around to save it." That's what terrorism insurance is all about and that is what the national subsidy state is all about—with their guarantees of loans, with their cash subsidies, with their tax expenditures—an indirect way that Washington writes a check to big business. These are giveaways of natural resources and public research and development—to the drug, oil, gas, timber, and hard rock/mining industries. So there is a vast expansion of this corporate welfare demand, with thousands of lobbyists swarming over Capitol Hill.

The third virulent force was symbolized by John Ashcroft. These are people who are damaging civil liberties and due process for trials in the name of what they conceive to be national security. The major expression of the autocratic ideologues was October, 2001, when the notorious Patriot Act was passed, an act that remarkably shifted authority away from the judiciary, our final review branch of government, to the executive branch; shifted additional authority from the Congress to the executive branch; and allowed unbridled discretion in defining the term "terrorism" and in defining material aid to terrorists. The act allowed such broad discretion that it is hoped that even the Rehnquist court will declare part of the statute unconstitutional. Its provisions perfunctorily allowed search warrants of homes and businesses without telling the owners or occupants, breaching the confidentiality of grand jury proceedings, and a massive indiscriminate invasion of personal information. On the ground, there were arrests without charges, imprisonment without attorneys, indefinite detentions of material witnesses, and prosecutorial misconduct in trials.

The act strengthened the 1996 violation of civil liberties, passed under the Clinton administration, and took it to new depths of autocratic control. It also provided the basis for the emergence of a new operation in the Pentagon called the Total Information Awareness Program, temporarily suspended by an alarmed Congress. This dragnet program, of course, does not apply to the administration, in terms of total information awareness. It applies to 290 million Americans and people in residence here. (For more on the Patriot Act, see Richard Leone, Yvonne Scruggs-Leftwich, and Coleen Rowley in chapters 27, 28, and 29.)

These three virulent forces show no signs of abating, no signs of significant other-party challenge, and in the due-process area only signs of judicial rejection—still subject to final appeal.

## RESOURCES CONSEQUENTLY HAVE BEEN MISALLOCATED

The corporate welfarists and the commercial militarists are devastating the allocation of public budgets—away from economic and health necessities, environmental programs, public-works repairs, educational programs, and marketplace and other safety programs.

In the two years since September 11, 2001, about 500,000 Americans have died from preventable causes in just four areas: highway crashes, air pollution, medical malpractice, and occupational safety. Every year, 58,000 people die from occupational safety hazards, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration; 65,000 people die from air pollution, according to the Environmental Protection Agency; 80,000 people die from medical malpractice, the grossest form, just in hospitals, not in emergency rooms, or clinics, or doctor's offices, according to the Harvard School of Public Health. And some 42,000 people die on the highway, according to the Department of Transportation.

Now, this is not the end of it. About 200,000 children a year are damaged—brain damaged or otherwise, by the ingestion of lead-contaminated paint coming off their crumbling apartment walls, or lead-contaminated drinking water. Asthma has taken an awesome toll of children. By any definition, these are weapons of mass destruction. By any definition, these are preventable forms of violence. By any definition, they should have commanded the attention of the President of the United States. Instead, they commanded the diminishment of their budgets, their visibility, and White House support. And so now the word “terrorist” is not only monopolizing the concept of demonstrative violence that is preventable in our country—not to mention abroad—but is being applied to any insurgency and any resistance to any autocratic or dictatorial regime not supported by the U.S. government and its multinational corporate patrons.

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact of these forces on our society. But let me try to put them in historical perspective. Watergate was a picnic compared to what's going on today. McCarthyism was minimalist compared with what's going on today. McCarthy had no law enforcement power, although he launched a mass-hysteria witch hunt. He was not attorney general. He could not unleash the police—no matter how many supporters he may have had with his red-baiting. The first step, here, is to recognize the gravity and the relentless institutionalization of these assaults on our democracy and of these assaults on our constitutional separation of powers.

It is hard to remember a time when the executive branch was more dominant—more unjustifiably dominant, I might add—than it is today. It was dominant in World War II, but there was a broad consensus and, one might add, a fairly elaborate justification. What is the justification today, other than the political polls and rewards, the political distractions from addressing domestic necessities, and the personal, psychological profile of the president?

## THE PUBLIC NEEDS TO DEBATE PRIORITIES AND SYMPTOMS

This brings me to the next area of commentary—a very sensitive one. There are very elaborate standards for mental illness in our country. They are being evaluated, revised,

and changed. But they apply exclusively to individuals. They do not apply to institutions. Yet institutions should be subjected to standards of mental health and mental illness. When corporations refuse to have their deadly pollutants curtailed, decade after decade, knowing the death and injury and property damage they cause, those are mentally ill corporations. When drug companies like Bristol-Myers Squibb are subsidized by tax dollars and given the results of the research at the National Cancer Institute free, and when they then charge patients \$14,000 for six treatments for ovarian cancer, that is a form of corporate mental illness. Perhaps a form of kleptomania.

People react to anthropomorphic evaluations. The reason why they are much more scared of street crime than they are of a city, daily being smogged with larger and broader devastation to health and safety, is because they can envision a street criminal—it's anthropomorphic. And we need to apply anthropomorphic standards to our impersonal governmental institutions, as well.

A while back on *60 Minutes*, Mike Wallace was interviewing Bob Woodward. The interview was unique in the sense that it was interspersed with recorded segments of the interview that Mr. Woodward had with President Bush. President Bush was heard on that program saying the following: "I don't have to explain or make explanations for what I say; others who say things to me have to explain what they say." He said it himself. He said he makes decisions based on his gut instinct. Now that is a personality who needed to be clinically examined, because of the power of the presidency. Those were his own words, not the projection of some two-dollar psychiatrist. He said it again and again.

Those were serious symptoms of messianic militarism and corporatist mania being observed in the White House. And, as often reported in the media, those symptoms were so monomaniacal in terms of single-minded focus that they produced conditions and misallocations of priorities that endangered and depleted our country from within and without. The public assessment of the Bush White House and the default of the Democratic Party must be made not simply in a defensive posture of our civil liberties being eroded, our privacies being invaded, and our priorities for people in dire need being disregarded. They must be made in an affirmative manner, namely recent American foreign policy and its domestic blowback against this country—seriously, relentlessly—as well as the rest of the world.

#### WHAT IF FOREIGN POLICY WAS BASED ON PEACE, NOT WAR?

A few comments on the nature of our foreign policy. We have blown the nineties. The nineties were a spectacular opportunity to do it right—economically, politically, and internationally. We had no major enemy. More than that, our major enemies were on their knees. The Soviet Union had been broken up and was totally introverted with its own problems—begging for disarmament in return for some economic aid. The communist

regime in China was busily transforming criminal communism into criminal capitalism. There were some elements in the military-industrial complex that were looking for a major enemy but couldn't find one until it became apparent that it was a terrorist gang known as al Qaeda, whose power has been widely exaggerated to date.

General Douglas MacArthur warned us in 1957 about a government exaggerating foreign threats in order to expand military budgets. Under the greatest man-hunt in history, a widely dispersed, decentralized, suicidal, fanatical, and organized international terrorist organization had not struck back in the United States, as of the writing of this book. Was this because its ability was exaggerated? That's an important question that is never asked on the media. But we know every year roughly how many people are going to die on the highways, in the hospitals from medical malpractice, from the environment, in the workplace, and from malnutrition. We have no way of actually predicting the terrorist attacks, but vastly more funds are expended than on the routine annual casualties noted above.

And yet what has happened is that the concentration of power in the nineties made it impossible for our democracy to flower and for our foreign policy to extend the best from our country. There is no country in the history of the world that has had such an opportunity to help the world and itself and blown it on a more grand scale than the United States government has done. Recent foreign policy has been almost entirely militaristic and unilateralistic. It was conducted in an offensively rhetorical manner that doesn't play around the world. From worldwide support right after September 11, much of the world has turned against our government.

A foreign policy that will spend more on the wheels of another B-2 bomber than it will spend on malaria research has priority problems. Leaving aside Social Security and Medicare, about one half of the American government's discretionary budget is now military expenditures, with no major enemy. What would the U.S. foreign policy be if it was based on the ultimate national security, which is global justice?

The attackers on September 11 did not come from Scandinavia. They came from societies that have been brutalized—societies run by dictators, too often supported and armed by the United States. They came from conditions that even conservatives have commented on as breeding grounds for this kind of terrorism. Still, as Ray McGovern discusses in chapter 3 and Jeff Faux in chapter 20, the taboo in this country was never ask why they did it because that was twisted into an interpretation of rationalizing what they did. If you don't ask why these people are doing these things, you will *not* understand how to prevent a recurrence.

And so our foreign policy does not spend resources on waging peace, which is an elaborately thoughtful and strategic challenge. It spends huge resources preparing for or engaging in war. It spends very little on global infectious diseases that are killing millions and heading toward this country in drug-resistant strains, such as tuberculosis and virulent flu strains. It spends very little money on leading the world in energy renewability and solar energy—which would have enormous beneficial

consequences, not only for the preservation of land resources and water and air resources but also for the ability of solar energy to reach territories for economically productive activity.

We do little to expand and illuminate the genius of the Third World other than to give out HB1 visas and promote a massive brain drain to this country. And, therefore, we cannot and do not elaborate the great contributions of Paulo Freire in literacy education, or of Hassan Fathy in showing illiterate Egyptian peasants how to build simple, elegant housing from the soil under their feet, or the micro-credit successes of the Grameen Bank started by Mohammed Yunis in Bangladesh. Recent American policy has seen tens of millions spent on dubious propaganda to build democratic attitudes in the Middle East—at the same time that donations to the venerable American universities of Beirut and Cairo have been starved.

Instead, it's the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that are the fountainhead models of economic development. They are patent failures, often condemned as such by more than a few internal World Bank critiques. Instead, we have the World Trade Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement, which subordinate health, safety, and environmental standards to the imperatives of international commerce within secretive autocratic procedures in Geneva. Harmonization communities and closed-door tribunals further undermine domestic sovereignty in a race to the lowest common denominator. These institutions are shaped, nurtured, and supported by multinational corporate strategies of international trade and investment.

## RESISTANCE: THE NEED FOR ORGANIZATION AND AGGREGATION

When people ask us why there isn't more resistance in this country, I have three observations, very quickly. One, there are very few organizers. No social movement can ever advance without full-time, paid organizers—whether it's the civil-rights movement, the labor movement, the women's suffrage movement, or the Farmer-Populist Progressive chapter of our history. You ask yourself—there were many rallies around the country against the war in Iraq. But how many organizers were around on Monday morning?

The second is that people who are resisting are not putting enough of their resources to support these organizations long-term. Rallies of 100,000 to 200,000 people should not just leave crushed Coke cans and other debris on the area where they rallied and marched. They should lead to the hiring of more full-time organizers in permanent offices. Major resistance movements are based on very mundane things, like sign-up sheets, passing the bucket, remembering that there are weekdays following weekend rallies.

Third is the lack of aggregation. Aggregation is a little-known tool of social change. When physicians put full-page ads against the war in Iraq and when labor people, military people, and clergy sign petitions and put notices in newspapers, there is a need for all of these groups to coordinate and follow up. Usually that doesn't happen. Protests are here today, gone tomorrow, with few ripples (see [www.EssentialAction.org](http://www.EssentialAction.org)). There is no aggregation; there is no synergy which keeps the galvanizing momentum visible.

It is aggregation, then, that is so important in terms of any strategy to redirect American foreign policy, to wage peace everywhere and to make the peoples of the world the top priority, not corporate greed or bureaucratic indifference.

Organizations such as MoveOn.org (chapter 31) and MediaReform.net (chapter 30) have integrated electronic organizing with grassroots organizing, online advocacy with online fundraising, and follow up with some early aggregation. There are prospects and precedents, then, for resistance to build on in the future.

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