

Thieves in High Places: They're Stealing Our Country, and It's Time to Take It Back



Jim Hightower

About a year ago, I saw a bumper sticker on a pickup truck in Austin, Texas, that said: “Where are we going, and what am I doing in this handbasket?”

Most people in the country, I find, have a strong sense that something fundamental is happening here, something that is bad for them and bad for our country. I think we're in another of those “when in the course of human events” moments that Jefferson wrote about, a moment in which it's not King George III in England, it's not royalty, but global corporate power that is usurping our democracy and usurping decision-making over every aspect of our lives.

The founding ethic of the common good is the idea that we're all in this together. But the conservatives are supplanting the ethic with a new ethic of greed that says: I've got mine; you get yours; never give a sucker an even break; caveat emptor; I'm rich and you're not; adios, chump. That's pretty much what it comes down to.

They're separating the good fortune of the few from the needed fortune of the many. We see it in plutocratic actions that they take: There is the tax giveaway, more than a trillion dollars now to the top one percent of wealth-earners in our country, at the same time they provide zero to the twelve million children of working families who do indeed pay income tax. Meanwhile, while they're shoveling money up to the very top, there was a net loss of more than two million jobs from 2001 to the end of 2003. Ten million people are presently unemployed, and there was a 184 percent increase in long-term unemployment from 2001 to the end of 2003. I mean, imagine what they would have been doing if they had actually won the 2000 election.

Then of course there is the growing autocracy: The Homeland Security Act, Patriot I, and now Patriot II. It's not a very pretty sight at all.

We see it in a lot of other ways: The new imperial presidency, the executive authority that's being asserted and, I'm ashamed to say, that the Congress is going along with, allowing it to happen. Those are the edicts and directives that are coming out

of the White House, many of them late in the evening on Friday, when the media doesn't get a hold of them and there's no chance for other people to react.

In my book *Thieves in High Places*, I wrote a little section in which I took the sum of the environmental edicts that occurred from March of 2001 when they came into office to March 2003, just a two-year period of time. It's not the individual items that are significant here. It's the impact of the whole volume of this. The edicts coming out of the White House are fundamentally changing the rules of the game, which are being bent more and more in favor of the plunderers and the spoilers and the speculators out there.

THE WOBBLYCRATS AND AUNT EULAH

The rich need representation too, so they have it in the White House. But where's my party? Where's the Democratic Party? I was elected to two terms in the state of Texas on the Democratic ticket, much to the amusement of the people down there, but nonetheless there I was, and proud to have been so, and proud to be a Democrat in the old Democratic tradition.

But now it's become the Wobblycrat Party, too willing to go along with the corporate interests. I'll tell you a personal story. My old Aunt Eulah used to farm up in northeast Texas in Bonham, on the Red River. The congressional districts of Carl Albert, Sam Rayburn, and Wright Patman were adjacent there, back in the old populist days, right along that river.

So we do have a history that we can look back at with some pride. My Aunt Eulah's husband, Ernest, died early, about fifty years of age, and Eulah had to leave the farm. She moved in with her daughter, Velma, down at Maude, Texas, and worked as a waitress in the Maude Cafe there. Well suddenly, much to our amazement, Eulah disappeared. She just up and poof, she was gone. We didn't know what had happened. But we finally learned that a Mr. Green (we never did learn his first name), a traveling salesman and an apparently dazzling figure, came through to the Maude Cafe, swept Eulah right off her feet, and just hauled off with her.

We finally got a postcard from Cheyenne, Wyoming. Mr. Green had taken Eulah to the Cheyenne Rodeo and Eulah was just giddy beyond belief. She had never seen such a thing, and she was just filled with romance and said that they were next going to Oregon. Just a few days later we got a mournful telephone call from Eulah, late at night. In Oregon, Mr. Green had come to understand that Eulah did not inherit any money from husband Ernest and the farm. They were tenant farmers. So Mr. Green took off and we had to send bus money to bring Eulah home with us.

I think of my Democratic Party in terms of Eulah and Mr. Green. Mr. Green has run off with the Democratic Party and I'm wondering, if we sent bus money would they come home? They have been swept off by lobbyists and corporate

money, the same money that the Republicans take. And they've taken off their old Sears Roebuck work boots and strapped on the same Guccis and Puccis that the Republicans are strutting around in.

LET'S BLOW THE FOAM OFF THAT BEER

Not too long ago, Tom Daschle was asked on one of the Sunday morning yackety-yak shows why the Democrats didn't offer some sort of bold alternative to President Bush's latest tax cut for the wealthy, and Daschle said: "Well, you have to take one step at a time." And you think: Really? I mean, is this an AA program? In recent years, the White House didn't take one step at a time. It took great kangaroo leaps out there, changing our country. If the meek ever inherit the Earth, Daschle and gang are going to be land barons.

Then we heard from the Democratic Leadership Council types: Oh well, Bush was so strong, we couldn't fight him; we had to be more like him, in fact. He had all the money. He had the popularity. The media were behind him. He was the War President. And he had a mandate. All right, he didn't win the presidency actually in 2000, but in 2002, with the congressional off-year elections, he got a mandate. He won both houses of Congress.

Well, let's blow the foam off that beer about that 2002 "mandate." This is really important. I'm not big on numbers, but follow this briefly with me. These are numbers that Curtis Gans assembled in his great electoral research on the congressional elections of 2002. Some 33 percent of eligible voters voted in congressional elections in 2002—33 percent. Of those, 17 percent of the eligible voters chose Republican candidates, 15 percent chose Democrats, and 1 percent chose "other." So there's the Republican mandate. That's it—17 percent of the eligible voters in America represent the Republican mandate, with which they now are trying to undo our democracy.

That is not a political juggernaut, 17 percent of the eligible voters. They can't get any more than that. In fact, that's the same 17 percent that the Republicans got in 1982, in the first off-year election under Reagan. Newt got a little better than that. He got 19 percent of eligible voters in 1994, when he swept to power and imploded under the force of his own ego. And that's as much as they're going to get, because they have a policy that Americans do not agree with. They're not going to increase their total above 19 percent of eligible voters.

Yet they won in 2002 essentially because the Democrats didn't run. George Washington Plunkett, a Tammany Hall boss at the turn of the last century, said: "The Democratic Party of the nation ain't dead, though it has been giving a lifelike imitation of a corpse for several years." That's where I think we are right now.

What was the bumper sticker for Democratic congressional candidates in 2002? It was: "Well, we support the tax cut for the rich too; and, yeah, we're behind the

homeland-security thing; and by the way, we're for the Iraq war, too, but we're not quite as enthusiastic as the White House is about it all. So vote for us." That didn't work. It's hard for the donkeys to win the race if they're going to carry the elephants on their backs. We have to have our own policies and appeal to our own folks.

GETTING WORKING STIFFS BACK INTO THE POLITICAL GAME

When I first came to Washington, just about the time the crust of the Earth was cooling some years ago, I worked at the Library of Congress Congressional Research Service, and subsequently left and was in Texas. There I got a call from somebody up there who said the new senator, Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, had sent an interesting request to the Congressional Research Service. The question was: "What is a populist? The senator thinks he might be one."

I might be the king of France, you know. I mean, it's one of those things—if you have to ask, you're not.

But this is in my view both the crisis and the challenge that we face today, that we face for our democracy. There's no populist party unabashedly and unequivocally offering to battle on behalf of the workaday majority of this country, on behalf of the two-thirds of Americans who are politically homeless right now. That's 121 million people who did not vote in the congressional elections.

Bob Dylan had that song: "The pump don't work 'cause the vandals took the handles." They've taken the handle from our electoral process. Workaday people don't have a lever to pull that has credibility, that says, "Your life is going to be different if you'll choose this party; we're going to stand with you."

So here's my wacky idea for you. Instead of the Democratic Leadership Council strategy of trying to weasel into office by siphoning off 1 or 2 percent of that 17 percent of those wishy-washy soccer moms and office park dads that the Republicans get, what if we began to talk like Democrats again and went after the 67 percent of the people who aren't voting? We don't have to get them all. What if we got 10 percent of them? Every election would be won if we won 10 percent of the people who presently are not voting. Those are our people.

My message is simple. We can't change America's policies until we change America's politics, and that means putting the working stiff back in the political game. Now, how you going to get them in the game? Well, here's another wacky idea: Let's appeal to their self-interest. I know the media jumps on any Democrat who goes to an African-American group or a Mexican-American group or a labor union or anything else and says, "Ah! They're pandering to their base." Well, the Republicans don't mind pandering to their base. I mean, damn right; political parties exist to pander to their bases. And we've got a bigger base than they do, by God.

NO MORE FIDDLE-FADDLE

So why don't Democrats appeal to their base again? They can do it by offering things that are good for America: health care for everybody, based on a single-payer system, not this fiddle-faddle where we've got this formula where certain seniors will be able to get some prescription benefits under this program or that program, but only at a certain level of income. I mean, the eyes glaze over. You don't understand what they're even talking about because they're not talking about you. Health care for everybody, that's our program.

Free education for everybody, from preschool through higher education, and higher education is defined as however you want to define it. That might be a mechanic's degree; it might be a chef's degree. You can be whatever you want to be; it's free. The GI Bill did that and it paid off enormously to our economy, it paid off enormously to the taxpayers, it paid off enormously to our country, and indeed to the world. Let's have a GI Bill again, but a bill for everybody.

What about tax reform based on eliminating the payroll burden on the working stiff and putting that burden on the wealthy people who ought to be paying for it? Now that would excite the taxpayers out there who are now not voting.

Public financing of elections, not the McCain-Feingold bill and then all the loopholes are built around that. We're going to publicly finance all elections. Put a program out there that people can see.

HOLY THOMAS PAINE

Well, I'm told, "Hightower, you can't talk like that any more, because since September 11, everything changed. You've got to set all those agendas aside, we've got to be united against the evildoers around the world, march in step, don't ask questions, be quiet." They actually say "be quiet." Some of our own progressive leaders have said "Well, hunker down, stay low, beneath the radar, and be quiet."

Well, holy Thomas Paine. I mean, since when do patriotic, freedom-loving Americans cover in quietude? If you don't speak out when it matters, when would it matter that you would ever speak out? This is the time.

Mark Twain said: "Loyalty to the country, always; loyalty to the government when it deserves it." Very different things. Now is the time to be speaking out, not just about the Iraqi situation and the endless war on terror in whatever country we're going to be assaulting next, but about this full agenda, about real national security.

Plus, we have no right to be quiet. Too many democracy fighters before you and me fought, bled, and died to make it possible for us to be noisy, to be agitators, to organize, and to protest. If we stay quiet, the autocrats and plutocrats win; democracy,

freedom, and justice lose. The opposite of courage is not cowardice; it's conformity. Even a dead fish can go with the flow, right? So what are we going to be?

Besides—and here's my happiest message for you—the American people don't want us to be quiet. They're roiling for engagement.

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE BELIEVE THIS STUFF

I come to you as a rare bird: a progressive optimist. I'm lucky because I get to travel a lot, and with my radio show and newsletter and other work that I do I don't just have to take information off of the television or out of the newspapers or just watch what's going on in Washington. If you look outward rather than inward, you would be a progressive optimist as well, because people want exactly what you and I want. We want our country back. We want it back from the greedheads and boneheads, the spoilers and speculators, the big shots and bastards who have stolen our country from us.

We also want the America that we thought we were born into, the America of egalitarian ideals based on the founding principles that I think include at least three things: economic fairness, social justice, and equal opportunity for all people. The American people believe in those things, deeply believe in them, and have them in their heart and in their gut. They don't always act on them because they're rarely appealed to by the political process.

But that's what all of our issues come down to. You can take any issue that you're dealing with, but it comes down to those principles of fairness and justice and equal opportunity for all people, and that's the program we ought to be taking to the American people.

Benjamin Franklin wrote, "America's destiny is not power, but light." And the light he was talking about was the light of justice, fairness, and opportunity for all people. That's what the world's people are looking to America for, yet they're seeing quite a different thing.

The people of the world are not mad at Americans. They're mad at American corporations and American government. They discern the difference, and we've got to begin to discern the difference here too and recognize the difference and go to the people themselves with those values of justice, fairness, and opportunity for all people. This is not just soft stuff. It's not just a feel-good sentiment. It's core to who we are as a people. In *Thieves in High Places*, I look at polling data in a section called "America the Possible." We hear, for example, that America has turned conservative. Well, on budget priorities, 67 percent of the American people prefer to have more spending on needs such as education and health care than to have the administration's latest tax cut. That's from an ABC News–*Washington Post* poll.

If there is to be a tax cut, 58 percent think it should be targeted to middle-income and low-income folks. Some 40 percent more think taxes should be cut equally for all

income brackets. Now, I'm not great at math, but that's 98 percent of the people who disagree with the tax cuts going to the wealthy.

On health care, 64 percent say it's the federal government's responsibility to make sure all Americans are covered. More than half say the government should create a plan to cover everyone, even if it requires a tax increase on them.

On public education, 71 percent say educational improvement should focus on reforming the existing public school system rather than finding an alternative. And 75 percent favor improving public schools over providing vouchers; 70 percent are willing to pay more in taxes if the money went to education; 84 percent would pay more in taxes if the money went specifically to raising teachers' salaries, reducing class size, fixing run-down schools, improving security, and putting more computers in classrooms.

On the environment, six out of ten say the government is doing too little to protect the environment from corporate plunderers. Only 10 percent say it's doing too much. And 67 percent feel strongly that our country should do whatever it takes to protect the environment.

This is not the conventional wisdom that we are getting from the establishment media. This is what the American people believe.

CHARLENE NELSON BEAT THE BANKERS

The American people basically agree with us, and we ought to be appealing to that deeply held belief. I've got better news in *Thieves in High Places*, in another section called "America the Beautiful." The news is that we don't have to create a progressive movement in America. It's already out there, and it's moving. It's fighting, and more often than not it's winning.

I write a lot about this in my newsletter, *The Hightower Lowdown*, which I put out monthly, about things that are happening out in the country that the establishment media is missing. Take, for example, the living-wage campaign. While Congress won't even address the minimum wage, more than 100 cities have passed living-wage ordinances, not \$6.15 an hour, but \$7.50, \$8.50, \$10.50, \$11.50, with health care and retirement benefits, indexed to inflation in some cases.

Washington state did it through an initiative on the statewide ballot and got 84 percent of the people to support a living wage indexed to inflation in that state.

Wal-Mart, you know, oh well, Wal-Mart's a beast of a corporation; you can't beat Wal-Mart. Well, that's hogwash. Wal-Mart is being defeated almost daily in this country. I was in Arizona recently, not a bastion of liberal thought. Food and commercial workers, teaming up with all kinds of other folks, including a lot of Republican neighborhood associations, defeated ten Wal-Marts in the last three years in the state of Arizona. It's happening all across the country, people standing up for their own communities, for the kind of businesses they want to have.

In recent years, Congress did nothing except exacerbate the privacy invasion by corporations and governments. In North Dakota, a woman named Charlene Nelson, thinking herself to be a conservative Republican, learned that they have a law there that a bank can't sell your credit information or your banking information without getting your written approval. So the bankers changed the law. They went to the legislature and got the law changed to where they could sell the information without consulting with you.

Charlene was outraged. She organized a petition drive and got an initiative on the ballot in six weeks, which is unheard-of in that state. The bankers pooh-pooed it and said, "Oh well, just this crazy lady out there," and in fact began to attack her personally. But suddenly the petition drive picked up steam. Charlene got phone calls from all across the country. She phoned the networks. They got her on talk radio. Her campaign began to expand. Bankers knew they had a problem. They put \$100,000 into the initiative. They did all kinds of crazy stuff.

But 73 percent of the people of North Dakota voted with Charlene Nelson against the banking establishment, and they got privacy put back. It can happen at a grassroots level, just one person standing up and rallying people and saying "No, we're not going to let you change what we are as a people. We're not going to let you just negate the Fourth Amendment and invade our privacy."

Four states already have public financing of elections: Maine, Arizona, Vermont, and Massachusetts (though Massachusetts won't finance it). In Maine they went through their first cycle of elections using public financing. The result was that one-third of their House and one-half of their state Senate were elected without taking any corporate money. That is going to change politics in that state. (Micah Sifry has more on Clean Money campaigns in chapter 36).

North Carolina has passed public financing for its judicial elections and New Mexico passed it for public-utility elections. The list of examples goes on and on, from sweatshop reform to food-system reform.

ROLLING THUNDER AND CAMP WELLSTONE

Enormous changes are taking place out at the grassroots level. Our job is to connect the parts to each other. People on one side of town who are fighting for a living wage don't know the folks on the other side of town who are battling a toxic waste dump, and they don't know the folks outside of town who are fighting against a hog factory.

So our job is to first go to the grassroots, and decamp from Washington, D.C. We need to put money into genuine grassroots efforts, and to put what we call "patient capital" out there, and to give groups time, because it takes time to build. My

friend Fred Harris once said you can't have a mass movement without the masses. And that has been our problem as a progressive movement. We've been trying to have a mass movement by talking to it from Washington, rather than by getting out with it at the grassroots level. That's our strength, that's where we have power. Those are our folks.

We've got to build coalitions at the grassroots level. I have made such connections with my Rolling Thunder Down-Home Democracy Tour. The tour gives folks a chance to put on democracy fests around the country. We provide speakers, musicians, and a sort of "how-to" template.

Rolling Thunder has been enormously successful because people want to get together. Not just high-tech politics but high touch. So these are like county fairs of democracy. They're day-long things. We intersperse speeches. We make the speeches short, by the way. You've got to do twenty-minute speeches, with music. We've got food from local restaurants and community groups. The community groups do the tabling and get people to sign up on petitions.

We have an action tent where people can take a dozen different actions right there that day. We collect everybody's e-mail addresses and feed them into the progressive cause. Some of MoveOn's e-mail comes from our organization and our efforts. Ben and Jerry come with their stuff and their toys. They have a "dunk-a-lobbyist" booth. There are all sorts of fun things that we do.

The slogan of the Rolling Thunder Tour is, "Let's put the party back in politics." It ought to be fun. Politics shouldn't be just a boring thing we do in the last month of an election. It ought to be something we do all the time, get people together, let them rub elbows with each other, and know that they've got a lot in common, and get them to continue on together. Part of the good news is that they do continue. They have conversation cafes. They have potluck dinners on one side of town, then another side, and then another side. They just keep it moving and keep the discussion building, and try to forge action coalitions at the grassroots level.

Molly Ivins, Barbara Ehrenreich, Michael Moore, Jesse Jackson Jr., Cornel West and all sorts of great people have teamed with us on Rolling Thunder. We've been to places like Austin, Seattle, St. Paul, Tucson, and Pittsburgh. This kind of thing needs to be kept going, to be made a permanent part of the political landscape because we need to get folks together. It's not enough just to talk to them as data in our computers. We physically need to talk to them and give them a chance to talk back and then to organize and train and keep that going.

Camp Wellstones are another example. They are a phenomenal and wonderful effort. Paul had 5,000 people who had been through his training—volunteers who were ready to hit the streets for his reelection. That was power. That was why he was going to win, particularly by reaching out to young people. Others, like Joel Rogers in Madison, Wisconsin, and Dan Carroll in Eugene, Oregon, are doing terrific work, approaching foundations and other funders to build training, outreach, and organizing strategies.

We need to have a message, messengers, and media outlets. We must find ways to talk to more and more people. That's a lot of what I do with my speechifying, newsletter, and radio show. I'm on about 125 radio stations now, which is good, and we're in major markets like San Francisco and through the Pacifica Network, Washington, D.C. We need to put more radio networks together. But it won't be easy, I can tell you. Clear Channel owns a third of all radio stations. It is not going to take my kind of programming. My radio commentaries have been kicked off stations that were bought by Clear Channel.

So we need to fight the FCC and the mainstream corporate media, working through the movement created by Robert McChesney and John Nichols (chapter 30). As part of the fight, I appear on the establishment media, like *Hardball with Chris Matthews* and do battle, as do Michael Moore, Molly Ivins, Al Franken, and many others.

But we can't fool ourselves that establishment media are going to be our venues. We need to create strong alternative venues and support those venues. We must find those radio stations that do have a license and a wattage to reach some people—and support those stations. We need to develop more grassroots speakers bureaus and newsletters to reach folks. It is guerrilla, almost door-to-door kind of work.

We need to model ourselves on the populist movement of the late nineteenth century, the last great grassroots political movement in the country. The movement created its own party, created its own financing system, was an advocate for labor, and backed women's suffrage. At the time, the populist movement also was shut out by the media. The establishment newspapers ridiculed the movement—so the movement created its own newspapers. A newspaper syndicate was created.

The populists also created a speakers bureau of 40,000 people. They had national speakers, regional speakers, state speakers, local speakers. On any given night, 40,000 people could hit the streets and give the message. We don't have forty people who are doing that today. Yet there are thousands of people who could do it. For example, we have speech teachers in high schools and community colleges and universities, all fully capable of teaching folks to make presentations. We could indeed have 100,000 people on the street, in the schools, in the Kiwanis Clubs, out there every day, talking about these issues and principles, reaching out to a still-broader constituency.

The other thing we need to have is money, through small donor contributions. MoveOn has had wonderful success in building small-donor lists. My newsletter has brought on 100,000 subscribers in three years' time. That's happened because, one, people want that kind of information. Two, it's a short publication, four pages. It doesn't just burden you, torture you, lying there on your coffee table. And three, it's cheap. You can get an initial subscription for ten dollars. We have found that people will give you ten dollars for anything, and it's more than \$9.95. You'll get more response for \$10.00 than \$9.95, and a lot more than \$10.95. \$10.00 is a magical number. I think \$20.00 is another level. People will give you that level of money.

We need a lot of people out there, and we must give them a reason to give that money. If we do, then we'll put a little "progress" back in "progressive."

Let me conclude with this thought. There's a moving company in my town of Austin that has an advertising slogan that I've usurped: "If we can get it loose, we can move it." That's fundamentally what our challenge is, I think. Just get it loose at the grassroots level, and the people will move it for themselves.

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