

Three Pillars of a Revived Republic

Exclusive: As local governments shut down more Occupy encampments, the movement for the “99 percent” is at a crossroads. Some supporters advocate more civil disobedience; others urge a shift toward media outreach; and still others want a move into politics. But Robert Parry notes that all three approaches may be required.

By Robert Parry

American progressives are buoyed by Occupy Wall Street’s success in shifting the political debate from Republican demands for government austerity to the issue of concentrated private wealth at the top, but the question of what to do next is fraught with risks.

The discussion appears to be breaking down into which of three approaches should be pursued: activism (and civil disobedience), electoral (and legislative) politics, or outreach (via a stronger media infrastructure). Often the three are presented as somehow exclusive of one another.

For instance, the case for more aggressive activism often pits that priority against electoral politics and media outreach. Common arguments are that electoral politics were tried with Barack Obama’s 2008 election and failed, and that there’s already plenty of information in the public domain, so that doesn’t have to be a focus.

However, what these arguments miss is that all three components are necessary pillars for constructing a more equitable American society.

Clearly activism can dramatize social and political ills as the nationwide Occupy protests have done in their criticism of income disparity, out-of-control militarism, and erosion of civil liberties. Yet, the explication of these problems must go beyond carrying signs at rallies.

To have broad resonance, these narratives must be conveyed in a multiplicity of ways to the American public, which currently is fed a steady diet of contrary information from the powerful right-wing media and from much of the mainstream press.

In my view, one of the core mistakes of the progressive movement in the 1970s was after the Vietnam War ended to close down, sell off or downsize its media infrastructure of underground newspapers, radio stations, magazines, video production, think tanks and even a national wire service.

At the time, the Left had a strong advantage in its media outreach, which provided independent information to millions of young Americans and also put pressure on mainstream outlets to address some of these facts. Yet soon, key outlets like Ramparts and Dispatch News disappeared, and others like The New Republic continued to publish but under new neocon management.

Much of the Left bought into the notion that the key to the future was local organizing around local issues, under the banner “think globally, act locally.” Meanwhile, the Right, which was then in disarray, rebuilt itself by launching or buying up media outlets for outreach to the American people, essentially giving the Right the ability to frame national debates and rally nationwide support.

The Right’s Success

Three decades later, the results should be obvious. Union organizers have even complained that when they visit the homes of their members, they hear Fox News on the TV. Many middle-class salesmen and commuters have had their political views shaped by listening to right-wing talk radio as they drive from city to city.

Without the Right’s enormous advantage in messaging, it would be impossible to explain why so many working- and middle-class Americans support policies that help the super-rich and hurt average people. Yet, the Left and especially wealthier progressives have done little to counter this dangerous imbalance.

So, the current proposal to emphasize activism over media under the assumption that Americans already “get it” and don’t need to have problems and possible solutions explained has been tried and it has failed. Indeed, many Occupy protesters recognized the value of information by making “people’s libraries” proud centers of their encampments.

The second argument for a near-exclusive emphasis on activism is that electoral politics and legislative reforms are a waste of time and that Democrats are as corrupt (or as “corporatized”) as Republicans; that the only value from an election would be to mount a third-party campaign. But that approach, too, possesses a troubling and tragic history.

In 1968, for instance, the American Left had plenty of reasons to be furious with the Democratic Party. President Lyndon Johnson had dramatically expanded the Vietnam War and the party bosses who still controlled much of the nominating process had pushed through Vice President Hubert Humphrey as the Democratic standard-bearer while young activists were getting clubbed in the streets of Chicago.

Thus, many leaders on the Left advocated either sitting out the election or

voting for third-party candidates as a way to express their fury with the Democrats, even if that meant Richard Nixon would get elected. But what the Left's strategy unintentionally did in 1968 was to enable Nixon to block Johnson's negotiated end to the Vietnam War and thus extend the bloodshed for four more years.

We now know from declassified records and first-person accounts that Nixon's campaign realizing how close Johnson was to ending the bloody conflict went behind the President's back and got South Vietnamese leaders to boycott the peace talks.

In other words, Nixon, who had deceptively positioned himself as the peace candidate with a "secret plan" to end the war, was really planning an expanded conflict with the goal of getting South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu a better deal than Johnson was ready to sign.

Having sabotaged Johnson's pre-election peace deal, Nixon then eked out a narrow victory over Humphrey and pursued the Vietnam War for another four years before finally accepting settlement terms nearly the same as the ones Johnson was prepared to take in 1968. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Richard Nixon's Darkest Secret](#)."]]

In the interim, another 20,000 American soldiers died along with an estimated one million more Vietnamese. Nixon's invasion of Cambodia also destabilized that country, leading to the rise of the hyper-violent Khmer Rouge and the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians.

At home, the United States was torn apart as Nixon pitted the "hard-hats" against the "hippies" and his "silent majority" against those who took to the streets seeking to stop the killing. Parents were turned against their children and hatreds that Nixon engendered poisoned U.S. politics up to the present day.

Bush v. Gore

A similarly unintended bloody consequence resulted from Ralph Nader's Green Party campaign in 2000. At the time, many on the Left were frustrated with the Clinton administration's centrist policies and angry about its military intervention in the former Yugoslavia. They wanted to show their anger by depriving Vice President Al Gore of their votes.

So, Nader campaigned on the slogan, "not a dime's worth of difference" between Al Gore and George W. Bush, this despite Gore's advocacy for strong action on global warming while Bush, an oil man, opposed international efforts to address the looming crisis. Bush's election also meant putting the neocons back in power as they itched for a more militaristic policy in the Middle East.

Ignoring these risks from a possible Bush presidency, Nader even campaigned in crucial swing states such as Florida.

The result was that Gore's vote was diluted enough to put Bush in a position to steal the election, especially in Florida where later studies showed that Gore should have narrowly won but "lost" because his margin was so slim that Bush could rely on his brother Jeb's allies in Florida and his father's friends on the U.S. Supreme Court to hand him the state's decisive electoral votes.

If the bulk of Nader's votes had gone to Gore, the Vice President's margin in Florida would have almost surely been too large for Bush to steal the state. [For more on Election 2000, see [Neck Deep](#).]

The consequences of Bush's "victory" were devastating for the United States and the world. Arguably, Bush's neglect of the climate crisis one of Gore's top priorities may turn out to be the worst of these, since Bush's inaction may contribute to the collapse of human civilization in the decades ahead.

But there was other, more immediate harm. Through radical tax cuts, Bush accelerated the concentration of wealth at the top, and by turning a large federal surplus into a massive deficit Bush advanced the right-wing goal of defunding government programs. If Republicans get their way, social safety net programs, including Social Security and Medicare, will be cut to shreds, leaving the sick, the poor and elderly to suffer.

Although it can't be known for sure that Gore's alertness to al-Qaeda's threats would have averted 9/11, it's extremely unlikely that he would have reacted the way that Bush and his neocon advisers did, by trampling constitutional rights and justifying attacks against foreign countries on false pretenses.

Last decade, Gore was one of the few national figures to speak out forcefully against both the violation of civil liberties and the invasion of Iraq. Yet, it was Bush, not Gore, who was in the White House, and that meant horrible deaths for possibly more than a million people in Iraq and elsewhere.

Hard Reality

So, the hard reality is this: differences between Republican and Democratic candidates even if some on the Left view them as not worth a dime can mean life or death for millions of innocent people around the world. Even if the two candidates' policies were identical, temperament would also be important, since the U.S. president controls a nuclear arsenal that can literally end all life on the planet.

For American voters to pretend that they don't have a responsibility to select

the “lesser evil” among realistic choices for president is reckless. It is putting one’s sense of outrage or one’s desire for purity ahead of the well-being of people around the world.

If today’s polls are correct, it also appears the presidential choice in 2012 may be between President Barack Obama and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

As angry as some on the Left are with Obama and as much as they want to punish him for some of his policies the reality is that to do so could well mean that Gingrich with his radical plans for Social Security, Medicare and the poor will be empowered to implement them. Remember, Gingrich and his allies dismissed the Occupy protesters as losers who needed a bath.

A Gingrich presidency also would mean that neocons would again be given the reins of the U.S. military with a new war with Iran in their sights.

And there is Gingrich’s personality. Those who know him well often note his impulsive megalomania, his penchant for destructiveness, his readiness to demonize his adversaries, his tendency to make up facts, and his reckless talk about difficult social issues, like his recent denigration of poor children.

At a campaign stop in Iowa on Thursday, Gingrich said, “Really poor children in really poor neighborhoods have no habits of working and have nobody around them who works so they have no habit of showing up on Monday [for school]. They have no habit of staying all day, they have no habit of ‘I do this and you give me cash’ unless it is illegal.”

Gingrich sees himself as a figure of grand historical destiny and bristles at the slightest of slights, such as when President Bill Clinton gave him a seat near the rear of Air Force One. Gingrich’s strange mix of bizarre policy prescriptions and severe personality flaws could make him an extremely dangerous man to entrust with the powers of the U.S. presidency.

His petty vindictiveness could make him a modern-day Richard Nixon or worse. Millions could die or suffer unnecessarily under his presidency.

In other words, electoral politics do matter. Whether one likes it or not, elections are the way the United States apportions power and that power impacts the world. It also affects the well-being of Americans, as we have seen tax cuts and deregulation from Ronald Reagan through George W. Bush contribute to today’s economic crisis.

But the answer surely is not simply to trust the ballot. An elected politician, no matter how well-intentioned, can do little if the population is being systematically disinformed or if those who do understand the stakes behave as

passive observers. Similarly, honest media alone has little impact if it's just consumed by people who don't act on it.

And, activism by itself won't have a lasting impact if most Americans see the message as overly simplistic, impractical or lacking policy substance. At some point, successful activism over the centuries has reached out through the available media of the day to persuade a larger audience and to achieve concrete policy changes designed to make life better.

So, a realistic and responsible approach to the future requires upholding all three pillars simultaneously: activism, media out-reach, and electoral politics. No one pillar alone can achieve much. Each alone will almost surely fail. But all three can support a revitalized democratic Republic.

[For more on related topics, see Robert Parry's *Lost History, Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a three-book set for the discount price of only \$29. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
