

Strangling the Republic

For several decades, Corporate America has been squeezing the life out of what's left of the democratic Republic, applying steady pressure from well-funded right-wing media and political groups. This year, under the cloak of *Citizens United*, the deed might finally be completed, observes Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

"The Hostile Takeover" of the United States by Corporate America and the plutocrats is now well advanced and brazen. Corporations and their CEOs have achieved unprecedented power. Of the world's 100 largest economies, 51 are now global corporations. And they have created a different world.

A 2005 Citigroup report to its investors advised: "the World is dividing into two blocks, the Plutonomy and the rest." [Plutonomy is defined as a country where economic growth is powered by and largely consumed by the wealthy few, a condition now associated with the United States.]

A super-elite has been created that, writes Chrystia Freeland, view themselves "increasingly as a global community, distinguished by their unique talents and above such parochial concerns as national identity, or devoting 'their' taxes to paying down 'our' budget deficit."

In the United States, the super-rich of Corporate America, who seem to have detached themselves from national loyalty and obligations, can now promote or destroy a U.S. politician or a political party.

While Big Business has basically co-opted the Republican Party, both parties have fallen prey to corporate control. Author William Greider notes that President Barack Obama "inherited the Democratic Party's awkward straddle between monied interests and working people."

Charles H. Ferguson, producer of "Inside Job," the Oscar-winning documentary on the Wall Street meltdown, puts it strongly: "both political parties have been remarkably clever and effective in concealing" the new reality that the United States is becoming "a declining, unfair society with an impoverished, angry, uneducated population under the control of a small ultra-wealthy elite."

Over the last several decades, the United States has undergone one of the most radical social and economic transformations in its history, leaving the masses ripe for "religious and political extremism," Ferguson writes.

The system is unstable, and driven deeper and deeper into the pockets of

Corporate America, especially its financial sector where, Ferguson writes, “there is now abundant evidence of widespread, unpunished criminal behavior.”

“The rise of predatory finance,” he says, “is both a cause and a symptom of an even broader, and even more disturbing, change in America’s economy and political system.”

Ferguson’s film, “Inside Job,” explains how the ongoing financial collapse that began in 2008 was caused by “the criminal greed of the global financial elite that ordinary citizens had (unwisely) trusted, empowered by government deregulation and by the viral spread of rapacious free-market ideology.”

The financial sector is the core of a “new amoral financial oligarchy,” he says, “that has profoundly changed American life.”

Going Back Decades

Fundamental changes in America’s economics and politics were underway in the 1970s. By 1980, the political parties were dead and “the old-style bosses were out,” writes Danny Schechter.

They had been replaced by a “new style media-driven system a whole retinue of advertising specialists, market researchers and pollsters” – a “presidential electoral complex,” almost on the same scale as the military-industrial complex, he says.

“Politics is now a growing industry with money and politics more joined at the hip than ever,” says Schechter. The overriding goal is to keep big money flowing into the bank accounts.

Prior to the 1970s, a member of Congress who aspired to a position such as a committee chair got it mainly through seniority and service. But the system changed – they started having to put money into the party coffers in order to get ahead, a topic studied by political scientist Thomas Ferguson.

“Both major parties now operate virtually a ‘posted price’ system in which representatives essentially have to buy their committee chair slots by raising money for their colleagues and, crucially, for the national party political committees,” states Ferguson, a professor at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

The whole political system has become dangerously corrupted. Harvard Law professor Lawrence Lessig calls it “dependency corruption.”

Thomas Jefferson expressed similar concerns about the emergence of corporate power nearly two centuries ago, in 1816, saying: “I hope we shall crush in its

birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial of strength, and bid defiance to the laws of our country.”

But Jefferson could never have imagined how prescient his early warnings were, as today America’s democratic process is increasingly dominated by moneyed interests.

“Political sovereignty is largely replaced by economic sovereignty as corporate power takes over the reins of governance,” notes cultural critic Henry A. Giroux.

“Our government, which used to be in the business of protecting us,” author David Sirota wrote in 2006, “now sits by and allows us to be abused, or worse, actually helps the abusers. Government’s business has become protecting business, not people.”

“There is supposed to be a counterweight,” Sirota states, “a government separate from Big Business whose job is to prevent the corporate profit motive from destroying society.”

In the United States, Sirota emphasizes, corporations aren’t supposed to be allowed to pursue “the relentless, single-minded pursuit of profit, no matter who gets shafted.”

We have a Congress that has become “a forum for legalized bribery,” writes New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman. The financing demands of political campaigns have made that almost unavoidable.

Permanent Campaigns

We have become victims of the “permanent campaign,” Danny Schechter reminds us, the idea attributed to Pat Caddell, one of Jimmy Carter’s advisers who reportedly first used the phrase in 1979.

The nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics’ Open Secrets tracks money in U.S. politics and its effect on elections and public policy. According to Open Secrets: Abraham Lincoln’s 1860 campaign spent \$2.8 million, in inflation-adjusted dollars. The expenditures of the 1976 presidential candidates totaled \$66.9 million.

To get to the White House in 2008, the costliest political campaign in history, Barack Obama spent \$730 million, 260 times what Lincoln spent, and twice what George W. Bush spent in 2004. The 2012 Obama campaign, which reportedly does not take PAC money, is believed to have a goal of \$1 billion.

The average cost of winning a House race in 2008 was over \$1 million, and almost \$6.5 million for a Senate seat. It has been said that members of Congress have to allocate half of their time to raising funds for the next election.

Who invests in an election is as important as the amount invested. In the 2010 midterm elections, the average contribution of the One Percent of the One Percent group was \$28,913, more than the national median individual income of \$26,364.

The latest estimate for the minimum amount spent by both sides in the Gov. Scott Walker "recall election" in Wisconsin: \$63.5 million. Most of that investment came from billionaires and corporations and the vast majority went to support Walker.

Walker received \$500,000 from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce alone. The Republican Governors Association Right Direction Wisconsin PAC received \$1 million from billionaire David Koch in February.

Karl Rove's "American Crossroads" Super PAC, the Koch brothers, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce plan to funnel \$1 billion of corporate money into buying the White House and Congress this November.

How serious are the stakes of the 2012 election? In the 2012 election cycle, outside groups are expected to invest more than triple what was spent in 2008. Journalist Joe Hagan sees the 2012 campaign as an ugly "coming tsunami of slime."

Money, Money

Money buys access. Money buys policies. Who pays more, gets more. The ballooning cost of elections has left the candidates indebted to those with the biggest pockets, with the result that the lower- and middle-class American voters are left with almost no voice in Washington.

Writer Douglas Rushkoff points out: "Commerce is good. It's the way people create and exchange value. Corporatism is something else entirely. Though not completely distinct from commerce of the free market, the corporation is a very specific entity, first chartered by monarchs for reasons that have very little to do with helping people carry out transactions with one another.

"Its purpose, from the beginning, was to suppress lateral interactions between people or small companies and instead redirect any and all value they created to a select group of investors."

The goal of corporations is the same today. For Rushkoff, "the real lesson of

the Twentieth Century is that the battle for total social control would be waged and won not through war and over repression, but through culture and commerce.

“Instead of depending on a paternal dictator or nationalist ideology, today’s system of control depends on a society fastidiously cultivated to see the corporation and its logic as central to its welfare, value, and very identity.”

The January 2010 Supreme Court decision of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* has been called the “absolute worst and most dangerous” in our lifetimes. The decision permits corporations, unions and issue-advocacy organizations to spend unlimited amounts of money from their treasuries on independent political expenditures in support of or opposition to a candidate.

The Super PACs are a new type of PAC allowed by the Court’s ruling. Casino tycoon Sheldon Adelson and family contributed \$20 million to Newt Gingrich’s Super PAC, Winning our Future.

Corporation donations are on the rise but the exact amount is unknown. On June 13, Laurence Tribe, one of the nation’s pre-eminent legal scholars, offered legal language that he suggests will allow citizens to unite and undo *Citizens United*.

According to columnist E.J. Dionne, the Supreme Court decision is best understood as part of “a larger initiative by moneyed conservatives to rig the electoral system against their opponents.”

It is no secret,” writes David Schwartz, “that the Koch brothers and others of the super-rich seem to have undertaken a final push to consolidate control through the conversion of a marginally democratic to an essentially fascist state; extreme right-wing, authoritarian, and demagogic.

“This kind of government is ideal for control of a populace by the moneyed elite. To carry this out requires the employment of many ‘kept’ politicians to excite and misdirect scared and angry and ignorant voters.

“Lest the citizenry realize who stole their money and storm their castles with torches, the rapacious elite need politicians who will carry out the work of re-directing anger at teachers, or labor unions, or the poor.”

The Blame the Victim syndrome is alive and well. The anti-government corporatists have done an effective job with their propaganda.

Rolling Stone’s Rick Perlstein writes: “The party of conservatism, the Republicans, has labored mightily ... to convince the populace that it is business, in fact, operating according to the profit motive, that is the

generous protector of middle-class interests.”

That their case is contradicted by history has gone unnoticed. The result of the Right’s propaganda and a weak, intimidated Left is an American society that appears to have forgotten the principles of a democracy and a republic. The society has become confused, internalizing the values of corporations as their own. This is what Occupy Wall Street asks Americans to examine.

Writer Chrystia Freeland points out: “The lesson of history is that, in the long run, super-elites have two ways to survive: by suppressing dissent or by sharing their wealth. It is obvious which of these would be the better outcome for America, and the world.”

As former MSNBC host Cenk Uygur said in 2011: “There is only one issue in this country: Campaign Finance Reform.”

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Julian Assange's Artful Dodge

Exclusive: Faced with extradition from London to Sweden to face sex-abuse allegations, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange fled to the Ecuadorian embassy and asked for asylum, what ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern considers an artful dodge to avoid possible U.S. persecution.

By Ray McGovern

Barring a CIA drone strike on the Ecuadorian embassy in London, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's sudden appeal for asylum there may spare him a prison stay in Sweden or possibly the United States. Assange's freedom now depends largely on Ecuadorian President Rafael Vicente Correa Delgado, a new breed of independent-minded leader like Venezuelan President Hugo ChÁvez.

Correa has been a harsh critic of U.S. behavior toward Ecuador and its Latin American neighbors as well as an outspoken fan of WikiLeaks. Atypically for the region, Ecuador is not a major recipient of U.S. economic or military aid, so Washington's leverage is limited. This suggests that the Ecuadorian government may decide to defy Washington, accept Assange's request for asylum, and have him flown to Ecuador pronto.

In which case, most British "justice" officials will probably say good riddance and breathe a sigh of relief, literally. They have been holding their noses for weeks against the odor of their obeisance to U.S. diktat, after the British High Court rejected Assange's argument that he should not be extradited to Sweden.

Although Swedish "justice" officials have not charged Assange with any crime, they insist that he be extradited to face questions resulting from allegations by two women of sexual assault. This is widely, and in my view correctly, perceived as a subterfuge to deliver Assange into Swedish hands to facilitate his eventual extradition to the U.S. to face even more serious charges for publishing classified information highly embarrassing to Washington.

There have been persistent reports that Assange has been the target of a secret grand jury investigating disclosures of classified U.S. documents allegedly slipped to WikiLeaks by Army Pvt. Bradley Manning. A leaked 2011 e-mail from Fred Burton, a vice president of the private intelligence firm Stratfor, informed colleagues that “we have a sealed indictment on Assange,” but that claim has not been confirmed. Manning, however, is facing a court martial for allegedly leaking U.S. documents to WikiLeaks.

Giving the Brits the Slip

Interesting, is it not, that Assange, just days before he was to be extradited to Sweden, was able to (I guess) slip out of his ankle monitor, sneak through the cordon of Bobbies on watch at the estate where he was under house arrest, dodge other Bobbies and security chaps, and hit pay dirt inside the Ecuadorian embassy.

There is no denying that Assange is a clever chap. But unless you think him some kind of Houdini, there has to be some more likely explanation as to how he slipped through the various police checkpoints and walked into the embassy, which is located behind the popular Harrods department store in London.

Were the British security forces all out for tea? Or were they just as happy to have the Assange case and all the pressure from Washington focused elsewhere?

Certainly, the British had enough clues that, *in extremis*, Assange might attempt to make it to the Ecuadorian embassy. In late November 2010, Ecuadorian Deputy Foreign Minister Kintoo Lucas publicly offered Julian Assange residency in Ecuador, saying that Ecuador was “very concerned” by information revealed by WikiLeaks linking U.S. diplomats with spying on friendly governments.

“We are open to giving him residency in Ecuador, without any problem and without any conditions,” Mr. Lucas said.

President Correa promptly backtracked, saying that Kintoo Lucas’s remarks were unauthorized and that no formal invitation had been extended to Assange, and noting that residency for him would require legal review in the event he requested it. (This came just one week before Assange was arrested, imprisoned, and then put under house arrest.)

Now I’m Requesting It

Ecuador’s embassy in London, announcing Assange’s arrival Tuesday afternoon, said he was seeking asylum, and added:

“As a signatory to the United Nations Universal Declaration for Human Rights,

with an obligation to review all applications for asylum, we have immediately passed his application on to the relevant department in Quito," Ecuador's capital. "While the department assesses Mr. Assange's application, Mr. Assange will remain at the embassy, under the protection of the Ecuadorian government."

The embassy added that the bid for asylum "should in no way be interpreted as the government of Ecuador interfering in the judicial processes of either the United Kingdom or Sweden."

Temporizing diplomatic phrasing of this kind seems *de rigueur*, as President Correa and his associates take time to choose how to react to the *fait accompli* of Julian Assange in Ecuador's custody. In Quito, Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Ricardo Patino told reporters that his country "is studying and analyzing the request [for asylum]."

Like Mother, Like Son

Assange's mother not only applauded her son's decision to seek asylum, but summed up the situation concisely, telling the press:

"I hope Ecuador will grant him asylum, and if not, another third-world country. I hope the third world can stand up for what's morally right when the first world can't and won't because they've got their snouts in the trough, rolling over for U.S. greed and big business.

"Julian is a political prisoner, a journalist, a publisher of the truth about corruption, war crimes, kidnapping, blackmail, and manipulation. He remains uncharged and unquestioned on a crime which, if you explore it, has absolutely no basis. Of course he would seek asylum."

She added that her son was a victim of decisions by the United States, Britain, Sweden and Australia to abandon proper legal process.

How 20th Century!

Abandoning proper legal process? Such thinking seems so, to borrow words from the eminent legal scholar Alberto Gonzales, so "quaint," so "obsolete," so pre-9/11! Abandoning proper legal process post-9/11 has become the "new paradigm" adopted not only by the Bush, but also by the Obama administration.

Not only is Julian Assange within his rights to seek asylum, he is also in his right mind. Consider this: he was about to be sent to faux-neutral Sweden, which has a recent history of bowing to U.S. demands in dealing with those that Washington says are some kind of threat to U.S. security. Glenn Greenwald on Tuesday provided an example:

“In December 2001, Sweden handed over two asylum seekers to the CIA, which then rendered them to be tortured in Egypt. A ruling from the U.N. Human Rights Committee found Sweden in violation of the global ban on torture for its role in that rendition (the two individuals later received a substantial settlement from the Swedish government).”

For those of you thinking, Oh, but that was under the Bush administration and that kind of thing is over, think again. In 2010 and 2011, the hysteria surrounding WikiLeaks’ disclosures of U.S. misconduct and crimes around the world brought cries from prominent American political figures seeking Assange’s designation as a terrorist, his prosecution as a spy and even his assassination.

Rep. Peter King, R-New York, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, has called for WikiLeaks to be declared a terrorist organization and Assange to be prosecuted under the Espionage Act of 1917, a position shared by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California, chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who wrote in a Wall Street Journal op-ed:

“The release of these documents damages our national interests and puts innocent lives at risk. He should be vigorously prosecuted for espionage.”

Others have gone even further, demanding that Assange be put to death, either by judicial or extrajudicial means. For instance, a former Canadian official Tom Flanagan has urged Assange’s assassination.

Former Alaska governor Sarah Palin denounced Assange as an “anti-American operative with blood on his hands” and said he should be treated no differently than an al-Qaeda terrorist.

In a Facebook posting, Palin said Assange was no more a journalist than “the ‘editor’ of al-Qaida’s new English-language magazine Inspire is a ‘journalist.’” She added: “His past posting of classified documents revealed the identity of more than 100 Afghan sources to the Taliban. Why was he not pursued with the same urgency we pursue al-Qaida and Taliban leaders?”

So, put yourself in Julian Assange’s place. If the *New York Times* accurately described President Barack Obama as saying it was an “easy” decision to authorize the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen alleged to have participated in terrorist operations against U.S. targets, how confident would you be that the onetime constitutional scholar would resist the political pressure to get rid of you?

A drone strike over London can be ruled out. But Assange understandably could fear a covert operation by Britain’s FBI and CIA counterparts, MI-5 and MI-6, to eliminate him “with extreme prejudice,” in old CIA parlance.

As melodramatic as that might sound, it should be remembered that nine years have gone by since British Ministry of Defense biologist and U.N. weapons inspector Dr. David Kelly's "suicide." Yet there remains considerable circumstantial evidence that his "suicide" was not self-inflicted.

Kelly was found "guilty" of disclosing accurate information regarding the bogus nature of the "evidence" of Iraqi WMD and, conveniently, was removed from the scene, supposedly by his own hand. Ecuadorian embassy dwellers may wish to hire beekeepers to taste the foie gras, truffles, or cakes ordered from nearby Harrods.

Correa on TV With Assange

Four weeks before Assange sought asylum, he interviewed Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa for Episode 6 of *The World Tomorrow* (Assange's program Tuesdays on RT). Assange asked Correa why he has advocated that WikiLeaks release all its cables. Correa responded:

"First, you don't owe anything, have nothing to fear. We have nothing to hide. Your WikiLeaks have made us stronger" with the damaging revelations showing the attitude of the U.S. embassy toward the sovereignty of the Ecuadorian government.

Correa continued: "On the other hand, WikiLeaks wrote a lot about the goals that the national media pursue, about the power groups who seek help and report to foreign embassies. Let them publish everything they have about the Ecuadorian government. You will see how many things about those who oppose the civil revolution in Ecuador will come to light. Things to do with opportunism, betrayal, and being self serving."

Correa made the point that when WikiLeaks cables became available to the national media in Ecuador, they chose not to publish them, partly because the documents aired so much "dirty linen" about the media themselves. He added that when he took office in January 2007, five out of seven privately owned TV channels in Ecuador were run by bankers. The bankers were using the guise of journalism to interfere in politics and to destabilize governments, for fear of losing power.

Ecuador and the United States

Correa, 49, educated in Belgium at the Universit  Catholique de Louvain and at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign (for four years, where he earned both a masters and a PhD), said he "admires the American people a great deal." But the U.S. government can be a different matter.

Assange and Correa discussed Correa's decision to send the U.S. ambassador, Heather Hodges, packing as a result of the disclosures in the WikiLeaks cables, as well as her "arrogance," and the Ecuadorian president's unilateral closure of the U.S. military base at Manta.

Still, Correa seems to have had high hopes that things would improve under the Obama administration. The Ecuadorian president once commented that Hugo ChÃavez's description of George W. Bush as Satan was unfair to the Devil and that the previous administration had made Latin America "invisible."

Regarding Ecuador's general relationship with the U.S., Correa underscored on Assange's program that it must be "a framework of mutual respect and sovereignty." That wished-for mutual respect and especially Washington's regard for Ecuadorian sovereignty are likely to be put to the test in the coming weeks.

Hillary Clinton may be having second thoughts about the energy she expended earlier this month on her first visit to Sweden as Secretary of State. If Assange succeeds in skirting Sweden and makes it to Ecuador, she may now have to put Quito back on her travel schedule.

A Clinton visit to Ecuador two years ago was marred by protests, but she found President Correa a gracious host. But that was before WikiLeaks disclosed Ambassador Hodges's pejorative comments on Correa et al. and Correa decided to expel her from the country for "arrogance."

Correa does seem to have developed an allergy to arrogance, so Clinton may wish to consider sending someone in her stead to try to persuade Ecuador to surrender Assange to the tender mercies of American "justice."

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. An Army officer and intelligence analyst for 30 years, he now serves on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS). Full disclosure: he also served on the nominating group of Sam Adams Associates for Integrity in Intelligence that selected Julian Assange for SAII's annual award in 2010.
