

Reality Bites Back

Exclusive: More than a Right-Left battle, the conflict for the world's future is between empiricists and fantasists, those who are committed to reality and rationality and those who happily embrace propaganda as truth. It is a struggle with global implications, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The war for the world's future pitting people anchored in reality against others free-floating in make-believe appears to have begun in earnest with the rationalists scoring some surprising early victories in what is sure to be a long and ugly fight.

In Israel's recent election, Yesh Atid, a new party of secularists, surged to a second-place finish on a platform that challenged the power of the ultra-Orthodox who have sought to impose a fundamentalist version of Judaism on large swaths of the country, including forcing women to sit at the back of buses and driving secular Jews out of some neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, a Republican presidential prospect for 2016, finally acknowledged the obvious, calling his GOP the "stupid party." And Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, another Republican up-and-comer, signed on to a bipartisan plan for immigration reform that included a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, what the GOP's nativist wing has long derided as "amnesty."

These various moves suggest some new respect for the real world. But the ugliness of what lies ahead was underscored at a legislative hearing in Hartford, Connecticut, on Monday when Neil Heslin, the parent of a child massacred in Newtown on Dec. 14, was heckled by pro-gun activists who claimed, falsely, that the Second Amendment guaranteed them the right to own assault weapons. (Not even today's right-wing-controlled U.S. Supreme Court says that.)

Republicans also haven't given up on their racist arguments about the need to rig election rules in ways to devalue or suppress the votes of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and other urban dwellers and to exaggerate the value of ballots cast by rural whites. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Return of 'Three-Fifths' of a Person."]

There is also no indication as yet that the Republicans will budge on other key elements of their "stupid" agenda, including their denial of the science on global warming, their pandering to pro-gun extremists and their resistance to

pretty much anything that President Barack Obama is for.

Still, pro-rationalists have to take some encouragement from small signs that the anti-rationalism of the Republican Party is beginning to crack. Fox News parted ways with former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as a commentator. The GOP's vice presidential nominee in 2008 – known for her know-nothingism – went the way of the crazy Glenn Beck. It seems that even right-wing propaganda on Fox has its limits.

The even faster disappearance of the GOP's chameleon-like 2012 standard-bearer, Mitt Romney, is another sign that Republicans want to forget the clown show of their last presidential selection process. It culminated in a national convention built on taking Obama's "you didn't build that" quote out of context. Any thinking person knew that Obama was referring to the broader national infrastructure of roads, bridges, etc., not to some individual's small business, but Romney pretended otherwise.

The Republican Party had reached a point where it seemed to relish the process of ginning up its idiotic "base" around outright lies. If it wasn't Palin yelling about non-existent "death panels," it was mogul Donald Trump and Sheriff Joe Arpaio questioning the Hawaiian birth records proving that Barack Obama was born in the United States.

Treating Americans as Simpletons

Of course, the GOP's decoupling from reality can be traced back many more years, at least several decades to the emergence of former actor Ronald Reagan who demonstrated how a casual relationship with the truth could work wonders politically. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[America's War for Reality](#)."]

But the substitution of right-wing ideology for reason advanced dramatically last decade under the presidency of George W. Bush, who empowered a clique of clever intellectuals known as the neoconservatives. The neocons treated the American people as simpletons easily manipulated through techniques of "perception management."

Aided by Fox News and abetted by a careerist mainstream news media, the neocons felt free to push any hot buttons that worked, scaring Americans with exaggerated stories of foreign threats and impugning the patriotism of anyone who got in the way. The invasion of Iraq to find non-existent WMD was one result.

Similarly, Republican presidents from Reagan through the two Bushes stocked the U.S. Supreme Court with ideologues who pretended to be "strict constructionists"

on the Constitution but actually applied shoddy scholarship to reach rulings in line with their political preferences.

For instance, Antonin Scalia and the three other right-wing justices, in an angry dissent regarding the Affordable Care Act, cited constitutional Framers Alexander Hamilton in support of their concern about the alleged overreach of Congress in regulating commerce.

In their dissent on June 28, 2012, they wrote: "If Congress can reach out and command even those furthest removed from an interstate market to participate in the market, then the Commerce Clause becomes a font of unlimited power, or in Hamilton's words, 'the hideous monster whose devouring jaws . . . spare neither sex nor age, nor high nor low, nor sacred nor profane.'" They footnoted Hamilton's Federalist Paper No. 33.

That sounded pretty authoritative. After all, Hamilton was one of the strongest advocates for the federal powers in the Constitution and here he was offering a prescient warning about "Obamacare" from the distant past of 1788. The only problem was that Scalia and his cohorts were turning Hamilton's words inside out.

In Federalist Paper No. 33, Hamilton was not writing about the Commerce Clause. He was referring to clauses in the Constitution that grant Congress the power to make laws that are "necessary and proper" for executing its powers and that establish federal law as "the supreme law of the land."

And Hamilton wasn't condemning those powers, as Scalia's opinion would have you believe. Hamilton was defending the two clauses by poking fun at the Anti-Federalist alarmists who had stirred up opposition to the Constitution with warnings about how it would trample America's liberties. In the cited section of No. 33, Hamilton is saying the two clauses had been unfairly targeted by "virulent invective and petulant declamation."

It is in that context that Hamilton complains that the two clauses "have been held up to the people in all the exaggerated colors of misrepresentation as the pernicious engines by which their local governments were to be destroyed and their liberties exterminated; as the hideous monster whose devouring jaws would spare neither sex nor age, nor high nor low, nor sacred nor profane."

In other words, Scalia and the three other right-wingers not only applied Hamilton's comments to the wrong section of the Constitution but reversed their meaning. Hamilton was mocking those who were claiming that these clauses would be "the hideous monster." [For details, see Robert Parry's [America's Stolen Narrative](#).]

Legal Wording to Go

Though Scalia is typically hailed by the Washington press corps as a brilliant legal scholar, he really is more of an ideological hack who reaches his conclusions based on what he wants the outcome to be and then picks out some legal wording to wrap around his judicial activism.

He did the same in using the Fourteenth Amendment's "equal protection under the law" principle to prevent a recount in Florida in Election 2000 and thus hand George W. Bush the presidency. He and four other Republican justices settled on their desired outcome and then went searching for a rationalization, no matter how ludicrous. [See the book *Neck Deep* for details.]

One of the motivations for the five partisan justices to make Bush the president despite the people's electoral preference for Al Gore was that Bush would then appoint more right-wing Republicans to the high court and thus perpetuate their ability to redefine the Constitution.

Thus, in 2008 and 2010, the right-wing majority reversed longstanding precedents regarding the interpretation of the Second Amendment as a collective right of the states to organize militias. By a narrow 5-to-4 majority, the Republican justices made it a personal right, albeit one that could be restricted by local, state and federal laws.

In 2010, the right-wing court also by a 5-to-4 vote unleashed the power of wealthy individuals to dominate the U.S. political process through unlimited financing of TV ads and other propaganda. The underlying motivation was that right-wing billionaires could then, in essence, buy elections for Republican candidates.

So, the nation's predicament in 2013 is that the Republican practice of using sophistry and spin to control the American political/media system is deeply rooted in the judicial, political and media structures. Millions of Americans having watched too much Fox News and listened to the likes of Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck believe strongly in a faux reality and get angry when their illusions are challenged.

Of course, it's not just the Republicans and the Right that are to blame for this mess. They, after all, have been doing simply what works for them politically. It is also the fault of the Democrats, the Left and the professional news media for largely abandoning this field of battle over reality, retreating in the face of well-funded propagandists and angry right-wing activists.

Yes, there also have been cases in which some elements of the Left and the

Democratic Party have opted to fight fire with fire, i.e. making up their own fact-free conspiracy theories to discredit Republicans. But the preponderance of this behavior has been on the Right.

Indeed, the emerging backlash against right-wing fantasists could represent an important turning point in the fight for the world's future. If thoughtful people will plant their flag in the firm ground of rationality and empiricism, they could create a rallying point for a new brand of politics, one based on pragmatism, realism and mutual respect.

Within such a political framework, there would still be vigorous debates over how best to address the world's problems including how big a role for government versus the private sector but those discussions would be based on facts, not nonsense. To build that future, however, rationalists must be as tough and determined as the ideologues.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

The Choice of Guns Over Butter

The American political system continues to ignore President Eisenhower's dour warning about the Military-Industrial Complex and embrace President Reagan's happy "We're No. 1" illusions. The long-term consequences of this choice have been devastating to most U.S. citizens and to the world, writes Gary G. Kohls.

By Gary G. Kohls

Years ago I read a newspaper story about an elderly man who lived in an impoverished area of Cleveland, Ohio. The man was a friendless loner who seemed to have no caring family members. Neighbors had noticed his mail piling up on his porch, and, with no responses to knocks on the door, they called the police who broke into the man's house.

What they found is an allegory for our time, especially after another, peculiarly American school shooting, the latest one involving non-hunting weapons and the gunning down of 26 defenseless little children and staff members at an elementary school.

The withered old man was found dead in his bed, surrounded by rifles, pistols and guns of every description. Boxes of bullets and cartridges were stacked on the floor. He had a knife in his cold, dead hand and an actual harpoon was leaning against his refrigerator, *which was empty*. In a nation of plenty and with grocery stores in the man's neighborhood, the well-armed man had starved to death.

He had fiercely exercised his precious Second Amendment rights but had ignored his neighbors, family and his health. He had apparently heard the National Rifle Association's sermons about defending one's property against intruders by lethal means if necessary but he had chosen to remove himself from civil society and starved to death, all alone in his well-defended room.

The man had wasted away, in a paranoid state, while "defending" himself against imaginary "others" who never did come to rob him. He had spent all of his money, including his Social Security and pension checks, on guns and ammunition, but he had spent nothing on food or life-sustaining activities. He was obsessed by the fear of burglars and thieves, and it had cost him his life.

And, what was perhaps a more tragic reality, he had been suspicious of his neighbors, all of whom were potential friends, although many were probably keeping their distance from the crazy old man with the guns.

Painful Lessons

Our paranoid, militarized and heavily armed nation will probably ignore the lessons that should be obvious from that story. The arms race that financially bankrupted the Soviet Union and morally (and nearly financially) bankrupted the United States during the Cold War, was run at the expense of the sick, hungry, under-employed, homeless and desperate people everywhere, including many who were living, unnoticed, in our own neighborhoods and in our local ghettos on the other side of the tracks.

Mutual fear of the "other" caused the two Superpowers and their allies to spend obscene amounts of money on inedible and unnecessary weapons systems. The training of tens of millions of "kill or be killed" warriors who were both spiritually and emotionally deprived and deformed (often for the rest of their lives) inevitably weakened the moral integrity of the nation as well, all in the name of "national security."

Contrary to what patriots who believe in American exceptionalism (and expect the rest of us to believe as well), America hasn't been able to afford both guns and butter without borrowing money in order to keep that delusion going.

The Pentagon's wars ever since the Reagan years have been mostly paid for with

massive amounts of borrowing and huge indebtedness rather than with increased taxes, and the return on that “investment” has been lousy. The investor classes and lending institutions were happy however for they are the ones who receive the guaranteed interest payments on the T-bills and Treasury bonds.

But the increasing number of under-water private citizens are finding themselves forced to use credit cards to even pay for basic human necessities like food, water, clothing, health care, shelter and education. The increasing amount of joblessness, homelessness, home foreclosures and bread lines shouldn't surprise anybody.

Emaciation of Militarized Nations

During the Cold War, the two saber-rattling superpowers each spent/wasted an irretrievable \$12 trillion. America spent trillions of dollars recruiting, training and retaining troops; researching, developing and producing expensive weapons systems; maintaining hundreds of budget-busting military bases in countries ruled by brutal dictators and friendly fascist states as well as quasi-democracies, all the while virtually ignoring the growing numbers of impoverished and under-privileged people of color who helplessly watched their health, savings, civil rights, jobs and food security wither and disappear.

America has been ruled by a powerful insider group of over-privileged, body-guarded, chauffeured and essentially conscienceless Wall Street elites who live in gated communities. They are also among the One Percenters who have been fingered by the Occupy Wall Street movement as the criminal culprits who created the financial mess America is in.

The so far unindicted and not yet behind bars One Percenters were responsible for the Great Recession, which may still become the 21st Century's version of the Great Depression. The nefarious corporations that are responsible for the economic crash of 2008 have, with their ill-gotten gains, bought and paid for most of the major media and also many of the bribed politicians and judges, all of whom are faithfully serving their paymasters by helping to implement their agendas in statehouses around the nation.

Most of these pro-corporate political leaders (both un-elected and elected, including five of the nine U.S. Supreme Court justices) are dutifully promoting their greedy agendas. These traitors to real democracy only preach fiscal responsibility when the bottom lines of their paymasters are at risk, but they never seem to act when people in the lower 99 percent are in a financial crisis including those needing jobs, healthcare, relief from Hurricane Sandy or protection from illegal foreclosures.

The moneyed ruling class, with large fortunes and investments to hide and protect, has conveniently forgotten that its Reaganomics-inspired predatory lending and the massive borrowing and spending tactics (the propaganda trick called “trickle-down” economics) sky-rocketed America’s national debt to its current unsustainable level.

The debt crises that follow are only being met with more borrowing and cutting spending for programs of social uplift, while never questioning the obscene, nearly \$1 trillion annual budgets that continue to bloat the Pentagon. National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) budget requests are, year after year, approved by nearly unanimous majorities of our chicken-hearted legislators of both political parties in the dark of night, when the daily news cycle is at hibernation status.

Chickens Home to Roost

And now, predictably, the chickens (in more than one sense of the word) have come home to roost. Strongly deluded that there is “glory” in war and with blank-check borrowing and spending on weaponry America has spawned tens of millions of sick, hungry, homeless, under-employed, under-educated, addicted, psychologically-traumatized and impoverished people, many of whom are conveniently hidden in inner cities that the out-of-touch policymakers never see.

Universal health care, which large majorities of the population desire, is habitually rejected by the powers that be in the medical, pharmaceutical and insurance industries. After all, the politicians who have been financed by such industries have great health insurance and health care themselves. So why would greedy One Percenters want to have their taxes go up to help those whom they have made sick, poor and hungry? (For that matter why should the One Percenters want to pay taxes that support public libraries and parks when they themselves have personal libraries and private playgrounds?)

“Let ‘em eat grass” was the fateful comment made to starving Indians by the thoughtless Minnesota territory Indian Agent who was later found dead with his mouth stuffed full of grass.

But America’s rapidly deteriorating infrastructure can’t and won’t be fixed while bloated and wasteful military budgets go unopposed in Congress. You can’t afford both guns and butter!

If you are seeing cuts to the programs that make life worth living, understand that much of the blame should be placed on the massive Pentagon borrowing and spending that has gone on every year since the massive increases in spending on

nuclear weaponry during the administrations of old 666 Himself, Ronald Wilson Reagan.

Who's in Charge?

What is the eventual outcome of putting a society's basic human needs last? Poor mental and physical health, poor educational opportunities, a poorly trained workforce, underemployment, drug use (both illicit and prescription), hopelessness, suicidality, homicidality, addictive behaviors (including gambling), domestic abuse, street gangs, prostitution, ignorance, malnutrition, desperation, poverty and, inevitably, anger at and a desire to retaliate against a system of government and corporate control that neglects its people and then shows no signs of remorse for having done so.

It shouldn't surprise us that the Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring movements have emerged and then were put down by the powers-that-be.

Are average Americans going to continue to be perpetually sickened and impoverished while blindly cheering our unaffordable #1 Military Superpower status? Are we going to continue to waste scarce resources on bankrupting wars and military occupations worldwide while refusing to make investments at home that would ensure a sustainable economy, a healthy planet and citizens whose physical and mental-health needs are met?

Are the weapons-makers, the gun-runners, the Pentagon, the FBI and the CIA (and the dozens of other intelligence agencies) really just expensive make-work jobs programs that protect the global investments of the obscenely-wealthy war-profiteering, multinational corporations that further impoverish the rest of society? Knowing that the "black box" budgets of the dozens of American intelligence agencies now approximate \$1 trillion a year makes one wonder if our nation has a military or if our military has a nation.

Are we going to continue ignoring the fact that wasteful war-industry jobs cost twice as much to generate and fund as jobs in health care, education, infrastructure repair or green technology? Are we going to continue to allow excessive military spending at the expense of the disappearing middle-class and an expanding lower class?

Are we going to continue fearing the wrath of the 800-pound gorillas of the One Percent that intimidate and threaten us into silence and inaction? Or are we going to courageously organize and band together to refuse to cooperate with the One Percenters?

Is It Too Late?

The military/industrial/congressional (MIC) complex that President Dwight Eisenhower warned us about in his farewell address has increasingly parasitized the U.S. economy since World War II, and it has proven to be disastrous for average Americans.

The MIC has caused the extinction of many family farms, family businesses and trade unions starting with Reagan, and it has created the heartless union-busting multinational corporations that yearn to pay slave wages to its workers.

The Complex has been behind the "fouling of the nest" (the poisoned environment) with tens of thousands of lethal, immune system destroying and cancer-causing industrial pollutants, radioactive waste disposal sites and toxic military dumpsites that will continue to foul the food, water, soil and air for generations unless effective programs are instituted.

Unsustainable levels of personal credit-card debt, college loan debt, healthcare debt and home mortgage debt among the lower 99 Percent, who were tempted, by predatory lenders, to imitate what seems to be the norm for the One Percenters, have resulted in an epidemic of home mortgage foreclosures, personal bankruptcies and homelessness.

Although it might already be too late, the lower 99 may finally be waking up and trying to reverse the nation's descent toward total economic collapse, at which time the One Percenters, with their fortunes intact, will snap up everything they covet at fire sale prices. However, for the nation as a whole, being armed to the teeth and universally feared and hated (because America's exploitative bullying behavior around the world) is not a sustainable path to global security.

Because of America's bullying behavior and its misbegotten generations-long over-spending on its weapons systems (that continues to victimize billions of people, including its own citizens), we will soon have nobody interested in rescuing us from our massive indebtedness and our self-imposed, suicidal path towards collapse.

Without a change, America is destined to become a despised pariah state a national version of that heavily armed dead man in Cleveland as the U.S. sinks further and further into moral and spiritual depravity.

We Americans have to stop deluding ourselves into thinking that we can spend borrowed money on both guns and butter. America cannot continue to go the route of empty refrigerators and lethal weapons everywhere.

Gary G. Kohls is a peace-and-justice activist and retired mental health

physician.

Capital Insiders Help Amgen

President Obama gave a ringing defense of progressive government and the good it can do for the nation and the people. But a little-noticed addition to the fiscal-cliff bill was a reminder of how politics can work to the advantage of corporate special interests, say Bill Moyers and Michael Winship.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

The inauguration of a president is one of those spectacles of democracy that can make us remember we're part of something big and enduring. So for a few hours this past Monday the pomp and circumstance inspired us to think that government of, by, and for the people really is just that, despite the predatory threats that stalk it.

But the mood didn't last. Every now and then, as the cameras panned upward, the Capitol dome towering over the ceremony was a reminder of something the good feeling of the moment couldn't erase. It's the journalist's curse to have a good time spoiled by the reality beyond the pageantry. Just a couple of days before the inaugural festivities, *The New York Times* published some superb investigative reporting by the team of Eric Lipton and Kevin Sack, and their revelations were hard to forget, even at a time of celebration.

The story told us of a pharmaceutical giant called Amgen and three senators so close to it they might be entries on its balance sheet: Republican Minority Leader **Mitch McConnell**, Democratic Senator **Max Baucus**, chair of the Senate Finance Committee, and that powerful committee's ranking Republican, **Orrin Hatch**. A trio of perpetrators who treat the United States Treasury as if it were a cash-and-carry annex of corporate America.

The *Times* story described how Amgen got a huge hidden gift from unnamed members of Congress and their staffers. They slipped an eleventh hour loophole into the New Year's Eve deal that kept the government from going over the fiscal cliff. When the sun rose in the morning, there it was, a richly embroidered loophole for Amgen that will cost taxpayers a cool half a billion dollars.

Amgen is the world's largest biotechnology firm, a drug maker that sells a variety of medications. The little clause secretly sneaked into the fiscal cliff bill gives the company two more years of relief from Medicare cost controls for

certain drugs used by patients who are on kidney dialysis, including a pill called Sensipar, manufactured by Amgen.

The provision didn't mention Amgen by name, but according to reporters Lipton and Sack, the news that it had been tucked into the fiscal cliff deal "was so welcome, that the company's chief executive quickly relayed it to investment analysts." Tipping them off, it would seem, to a jackpot in the making.

Amgen has 74 lobbyists on its team in Washington and lobbied hard for that loophole, currying favor with friends at the White House and on Capitol Hill. The *Times* reporters traced its "deep financial and political ties" to Baucus, McConnell and Hatch, "who hold heavy sway over Medicare payment policy."

All three have received hefty campaign donations from the company whose bottom line mysteriously just got padded at taxpayer expense. Since 2007, Amgen employees and its political action committee have contributed nearly \$68,000 to Senator Baucus, \$73,000 to Senator McConnell's campaigns, and \$59,000 to Senator Hatch.

And lo and behold, among those 74 Amgen lobbyists are the former chief of staff to Senator Baucus and the former chief of staff to Senator McConnell. You get the picture: Two guys nurtured at public expense, paid as public servants, disappear through the gold-plated revolving door of Congress and presto, return as money changers in the temple of crony capitalism.

Inside to welcome them is a current top aide to Senator Hatch, one who helped weave this lucrative loophole. He used to work as a health policy analyst for, you guessed it, Amgen.

So the trail winds deeper into the sordid swamp beneath that great Capitol dome, a sinkhole where shame has all but disappeared. As reporters Lipton and Sack remind us, just weeks before this backroom betrayal of the public interest by elected officials and the mercenaries they have mentored, Amgen pleaded guilty to fraud. Look it up: fraud means trickery, cheating and duplicity. Amgen agreed to pay \$762 million in criminal and civil penalties; the company had been caught illegally marketing another one of its drugs.

The fact that their puppet master had been the subject of fines and a massive federal investigation mattered not to its servile pawns in the Senate, where pomp and circumstance are but masks for the brute power of money.

Peter Welch, Vermont's Democratic congressman, has just introduced bipartisan legislation to repeal the half billion-dollar giveaway to Amgen. Its co-sponsors include Republican Richard Hanna of New York and Democrats Jim Cooper of Tennessee and Bruce Braley of Iowa.

The Amgen deal “confirms the American public’s worst suspicions of how Congress operates,” Representative Welch told us this week. “As the nation’s economy teetered on the edge of a Congressional-created fiscal cliff, lobbyists for a private, for-profit company seized an opportunity to feed at the public trough. It’s no wonder cockroaches and root canals are more popular than Congress.”

In his inaugural address, Barack Obama said the commitments we make to each other through Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security don’t make us a nation of takers. But the actions of Amgen and its cronies under the dome on Capitol Hill show who the real takers are, not those who look to government for support in old age and hard times but the ones at the top whose avarice and lust for profit compel them to take as much as they can from that government at the expense of everyone else.

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What to Make of Barack Obama?

Exclusive: In his Second Inaugural Address, President Obama offered a powerful rejoinder to the Right by arguing that progressive reform fits firmly within the Founders’ vision of a strong country advancing the “general Welfare” and securing “Blessings of Liberty.” But does his rhetoric reflect the real Obama, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

American progressives tend to have two conflicting views of President Barack Obama: one that he had good intentions but inherited a poisonous mess from George W. Bush and then faced partisan, even racist obstructionism, or two that he was always a phony with a great smile who turned out to be “worse than Bush.”

Of course, there is much middle ground in assessments of Obama among progressives as from other political perspectives, but some prominent critics on the Left have opted for the latter point of view and berate anyone who takes the more forgiving position as an Obama “apologist.”

In particular, critics of Obama’s foreign policy have viewed it as an extension of Bush’s endless “war on terror” and only a slight redesign of U.S.

imperialism, rather than a struggle by Obama to change the direction of America's militaristic state, albeit gradually, deescalating wars and elevating diplomacy.

For instance, Oliver Stone's Showtime documentary, "The Untold History of the United States," likened Obama's expansion of Bush's lethal drone program against suspected terrorists to President Harry Truman dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki near the end of World War II, both presidents inviting a reckless arms race, according to Stone. But is that a fair comparison?

Surely, the drone program raises troubling policy and moral issues, including the acceptance of targeted killings (or assassinations) as a routine practice of U.S. statecraft, an issue that Obama will have to address in his second term. (And one would have to be naive to think that assassinations have not been used by many presidents over the years, whatever euphemisms or middlemen were deployed.)

But drones simply don't represent the qualitative change in warfare that nuclear weapons did. Indeed, the idea of standoff attacks by a military, i.e. firing from remote locations outside the range of an enemy's reach, is as old as the catapult and has advanced through history from the longbow to artillery to aerial bombing to Cruise missiles fired from aircraft carriers far offshore.

It's true that drones may be the most extreme application of this age-old military tactic with strikes launched from the other side of the globe but drones don't compare with the introduction of nuclear warfare with its indiscriminate slaughter of civilians and the potential to exterminate all life on Earth. To put the two weapons advances in the same sentence is a bit like comparing Obama to Hitler, an extreme example of hyperbole.

Obama's 'Team of Rivals'

But there are other criticisms of Obama's foreign policy that have more merit, such as why he failed to break decisively from Bush's foreign policy after winning election in fall 2008. Still, that choice can be read in different ways: that he was too accommodating to the Establishment out of a sense of insecurity or that he shared its outlook.

The political reality that Obama confronted as a new President was that – even though Bush had been discredited in the eyes of most Americans – the Establishment, which had shared Bush's eagerness for war in the Middle East, remained in place. The editorial writers who had promoted Bush's Iraq War still dominated the opinion pages of the Washington Post and the New York Times, from the Post's editorial page editor Fred Hiatt to the Times' Thomas Friedman.

The major Washington/New York think tanks had padded their staffs with high-profile neocons, from Robert Kagan at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to Michael O'Hanlon at the Brookings Institution to Max Boot at the Council on Foreign Relations. Mainstream Democrats, like former Sen. David Boren and former Rep. Lee Hamilton, mostly urged Obama to opt for continuity over change, and more often than not, the mainstream media, even liberal-oriented outlets like MSNBC, followed the lead of the pro-war pundits.

So, after winning election, Obama bowed to these paragons of conventional wisdom who were then abuzz about the need to apply the lessons from Doris Kearns Goodwin's 2005 book about Abraham Lincoln, *Team of Rivals*. Official Washington's takeaway from the book was that the ever-wise Lincoln had surrounded himself with political rivals so he could benefit from their strongly held alternative viewpoints. And, in late 2008, Lincoln's supposed blueprint was hailed as the way to build Obama's new administration.

In the real history, however, some of Lincoln's Cabinet appointments were political payoffs promised at the Republican Party's Chicago convention of 1860 so Lincoln could secure the presidential nomination. Yes, Lincoln did cut political deals. And the national crisis of the Civil War may have tamped down the fires of ambitions within other "rivals."

In 2008, the danger of applying that ancient governing template to a very different era wasn't taken into account. The idea of Obama surrounding himself with powerful people who had profoundly different policy prescriptions was a recipe for trouble, since these "rivals" could and would sabotage him with leaks and other bureaucratic warfare if he veered off in his own direction.

But Obama with very limited management experience went along. To the applause of Washington's pundit class, he retained Bush's Defense Secretary Robert Gates; he kept on Bush's military stars like Gen. David Petraeus; and he named neocon-lite Sen. Hillary Clinton to be Secretary of State.

Faced with this line-up of heavy hitters, Obama predictably got shelled in 2009 when he wanted only a limited escalation and withdrawal plan for the Afghan War but was pushed into signing off on a broad counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, an approach favored by Gates and Petraeus with Clinton's support. The Pentagon denied Obama the more limited options he requested and then facing leaks about his "indecisiveness" he acquiesced to the Gates-Petraeus plan. He reportedly regretted his decision almost immediately. [For details, see Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative*.]

Focusing on Bin Laden

Also recognizing the longstanding Democratic vulnerability of being labeled “soft on defense,” Obama authorized the CIA under his close ally, Leon Panetta, to refocus U.S. counterterrorism efforts on eliminating al-Qaeda’s top leadership, most notably Osama bin Laden.

That led to an expanded use of Predator drones hovering in the skies over Pakistan and other countries where al-Qaeda operatives were seen as mounting terrorist attacks against the U.S. mainland. Drone missiles killed U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen as well as other al-Qaeda operatives (though bin Laden was slain by U.S. commandos airlifted deep into Pakistan).

The drones raised a variety of serious concerns, such as the risk of making war seem easy and cheap. U.S. boots could be kept on the ground at home with “pilots” handling “joy sticks” thousands of miles from the actual war zones. But this tactic of targeting groups of suspected terrorists did create political space for Obama to finish withdrawing from the war in Iraq and winding down the war in Afghanistan – despite harsh criticism from neocons and other pundits.

Belatedly, Obama also began replacing his initial Team of Rivals. Gates went into retirement in 2011; Petraeus departed amid a sex scandal in 2012; and Clinton is slated to be gone early in 2013.

So, there are two ways to view Obama’s foreign policy: one is that he let himself be hoodwinked by the hawks in his Team of Rivals but is now quietly extricating the United States from a decade of imperial wars, slowly steering the ship of state toward a more peaceful harbor, or two, he is just the latest manager of American imperialism with plans to reduce military operations in the Middle East only to expand them in Africa and Asia.

A similar duality of opinion persists about Obama’s domestic policies. In 2008-09, was he so terrified of tipping the world into a global depression that he swallowed his anger and acquiesced to bailing out Wall Street, or was he simply the latest Wall Street tool to become President with the singular goal of protecting Wall Street’s financial interests?

Did he get all that was politically doable on economic stimulus, the auto rescue and health-care reform in the face of intractable Republican and right-wing opposition or did he throw the fight on behalf of special interests?

If you wish to be generous toward Obama, you might add that just as the inexperienced president was entranced by the *Team of Rivals* illusion on foreign policy, he stuck way too long with another Inside-the-Beltway fantasy: the notion that he could somehow woo “reasonable” Republicans into putting aside partisanship and help him address a moment of grave economic crisis.

His courtship of Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine was particularly painful as he kept thinking he had a chance with her on health-care reform when she obviously was just stringing him along. Yet, to this day, Obama gets hectored by the likes of the New York Times' Maureen Dowd for not schmoozing enough with Republicans, as if playing poker with them on Wednesday nights would somehow lead them into bipartisan camaraderie the rest of the week.

The mainstream media continues to peddle this myth that bipartisanship is possible if only Obama tried harder, even when all the evidence indicates that the Republicans set out from the start to destroy his presidency and to deny him any achievements regardless of the toll that would take on the U.S. and world economies.

So, the fact that there has been almost no accountability in the Washington pundit class for a long train of failures has to be taken into account when evaluating Obama's first term. If Obama had struck off in a radically different direction on foreign or domestic policies, he would have encountered intense resistance not only from the Republicans, the Tea Party and the neocons but also from the mainstream media and other parts of the Establishment. Whether he could have maintained his political viability in such circumstances is debatable.

Perfection vs. Pragmatism

In that regard, the long-term decline of the American Left also must be factored in. A common refrain that I hear from folks on the Left is that America has no Left, at least nothing that compares to the power on the Right to reach out to millions of sympathizers via a sophisticated media apparatus and rally them into action.

Instead of having the capacity to mobilize supporters to fight for politically achievable reforms, the Left now even shies away from offering specific policy ideas, as happened with the Occupy protests in 2011. Long-term marginalization from practical politics has contributed to the Left's tendency to adopt the role of critic, acting as the avatar of perfection.

Giving his Second Inaugural Address, President Obama may have been speaking as much to the Left as to the Right when he declared: "We cannot mistake absolutism for principle, or substitute spectacle for politics, or treat name-calling as reasoned debate. We must act, knowing that our work will be imperfect. We must act, knowing that today's victories will be only partial, and that it will be up to those who stand here in four years, and forty years, and four hundred years hence to advance the timeless spirit once conferred to us in a spare Philadelphia hall."

Indeed, the answer to the question who is the real Barack Obama may not present itself until this second term plays out and possibly not even then. Even though his speech on Monday was the most ringing defense of liberal government that the American people have heard in decades, there will still be those on the Left who doubt his sincerity and will surely find evidence of inconsistencies in his compromises.

But the truth may be that Obama actually does believe in progressive governance, that he saw his Second Inaugural as his last big opportunity to make that case to the American public. In his heart, he appears to be a reformer, yet also a pragmatist, recognizing the many impediments and obstacles in the political terrain where he finds himself.

Yet, after a first term in which he seemed to cede too much ground, Obama took the rhetorical fight to right-wingers in his Second Inaugural, challenging their claim to be the true protectors of America's Founding principles, that they alone understand American "exceptionalism" and that they might even have to resort to armed insurrection against the constitutionally elected government of the United States to stop "tyranny" and "take back" the country.

To those delusions, Obama said: "Each time we gather to inaugurate a president, we bear witness to the enduring strength of our Constitution. We affirm the promise of our democracy. We recall that what binds this nation together is not the colors of our skin or the tenets of our faith or the origins of our names.

"What makes us exceptional, what makes us American, is our allegiance to an idea, articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.'

"Today we continue a never-ending journey, to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time. For history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they have never been self-executing; that while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth. The patriots of 1776 did not fight to replace the tyranny of a king with the privileges of a few or the rule of a mob. They gave to us a Republic, a government of, and by, and for the people, entrusting each generation to keep safe our founding creed. For more than two hundred years, we have."

Obama then made his case for continued reform within the constitutional framework: "Through blood drawn by lash and blood drawn by sword, we learned that no union founded on the principles of liberty and equality could survive half-slave and half-free. We made ourselves anew, and vowed to move forward

together. Together, we determined that a modern economy requires railroads and highways to speed travel and commerce; schools and colleges to train our workers.

“Together, we discovered that a free market only thrives when there are rules to ensure competition and fair play. Together, we resolved that a great nation must care for the vulnerable, and protect its people from life’s worst hazards and misfortune. Through it all, we have never relinquished our skepticism of central authority, nor have we succumbed to the fiction that all society’s ills can be cured through government alone. Our celebration of initiative and enterprise; our insistence on hard work and personal responsibility, are constants in our character.

“But we have always understood that when times change, so must we; that fidelity to our founding principles requires new responses to new challenges; that preserving our individual freedoms ultimately requires collective action. For the American people can no more meet the demands of today’s world by acting alone than American soldiers could have met the forces of fascism or communism with muskets and militias.

“No single person can train all the math and science teachers, we’ll need to equip our children for the future, or build the roads and networks and research labs that will bring new jobs and businesses to our shores. Now, more than ever, we must do these things together, as one nation, and one people.”

Reversing Reagan

Thirty-two years ago, when Ronald Reagan declared in his First Inaugural Address that “government is the problem,” the United States began a radical shift away from the lessons of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, the post-World War II “GI Bill” and Dwight Eisenhower’s constructive Republicanism the key elements that built the Great American Middle Class and achieved an unprecedented level of financial security for many Americans.

Behind Reagan, a resurgent Right sped off in a new direction, convincing many white middle- and working-class men that their interests lay more with the rich plutocrats than with struggling minorities and underpaid women, that the real victims in America were Ayn Rand’s supermen whose economic dynamism needed to be “unchained.”

Thus, for most of the ensuing three decades, through lower taxes on the rich and deregulation of industry, the nation’s wealth shifted dramatically to the top 1 percent, the financial speculators prospered, the middle-class shrank and finally the economic “bubble” burst.

While Obama's First Inaugural and indeed his first term concentrated on addressing the economic crisis, his Second Inaugural warned that now the United States must begin facing other crises, from global warming to gun violence to rebuilding the middle class to protecting important social programs for those in need. He said:

"For we, the people, understand that our country cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it. We believe that America's prosperity must rest upon the broad shoulders of a rising middle class. We know that America thrives when every person can find independence and pride in their work; when the wages of honest labor liberate families from the brink of hardship.

"We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because she is an American, she is free, and she is equal, not just in the eyes of God but also in our own. We, the people, still believe that every citizen deserves a basic measure of security and dignity. We do not believe that in this country, freedom is reserved for the lucky, or happiness for the few.

"We recognize that no matter how responsibly we live our lives, any one of us, at any time, may face a job loss, or a sudden illness, or a home swept away in a terrible storm. The commitments we make to each other: through Medicare, and Medicaid, and Social Security, these things do not sap our initiative; they strengthen us. They do not make us a nation of takers; they free us to take the risks that make this country great.

"We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations. Some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, but none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires, and crippling drought, and more powerful storms. The path towards sustainable energy sources will be long and sometimes difficult. But America cannot resist this transition; we must lead it."

Some pundits on the Right and Center immediately criticized Obama for taking shots at Ayn Rand acolytes like Rep. Paul Ryan, the former Republican vice presidential nominee who complained about a nation of "takers, not makers" and the global-warming deniers who see a socialist conspiracy behind scientific warnings of climate change.

Skepticism and Rejection

But Obama also has encountered skepticism and criticism when he talked about finally bringing the last decade of war to an end. He said, "We, the people,

still believe that enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war.”

Then, in a reference to World War II and the Cold War, Obama added, “we are also heirs to those who won the peace and not just the war, who turned sworn enemies into the surest of friends, and we must carry those lessons into this time as well. We will defend our people and uphold our values through strength of arms and rule of law.

“We will show the courage to try and resolve our differences with other nations peacefully, not because we are naive about the dangers we face, but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear.” It was a message that the neocons disdained and that many on the Left doubted.

Obama then wrapped up his Second Inaugural with possibly its most memorable promise, a commitment to advance the cause of justice and equality:

“We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths, that all of us are created equal, is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone; to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth.

“Being true to our founding documents does not require us to agree on every contour of life; it does not mean we will all define liberty in exactly the same way, or follow the same precise path to happiness. Progress does not compel us to settle centuries-long debates about the role of government for all time, but it does require us to act in our time. For now decisions are upon us, and we cannot afford delay.”

Obama then called on American citizens to create the political space so these necessary reforms can be achieved: “You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country’s course. You and I, as citizens, have the obligation to shape the debates of our time, not only with the votes we cast, but with the voices we lift in defense of our most ancient values and enduring ideals.”

The final measure of Obama and his presidency may not be just how well he lives up to the commitments of his Second Inaugural but how forcefully the American people insist that those commitments become real.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#)

Roe v. Wade Turns 40

The 40th anniversary of Roe v. Wade, the landmark Supreme Court ruling granting women the right to abort unwanted or dangerous pregnancies, will be observed by opponents and proponents alike. Among its backers will be NOW president Terry O'Neill, who was interviewed by Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

On Tuesday, Terry O'Neill, president of the National Organization for Women, will lead a candlelight vigil to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Roe v. Wade, the landmark Supreme Court decision that recognized women's fundamental right to an abortion.

In a recent statement, O'Neill said: "NOW affirms that women's access to the full range of reproductive health services, including safe, legal, and affordable abortion is integral to a woman's ability to participate equally in this society."

I spoke with O'Neill about the history, importance and continuing fight to beat back the Right's continuing attempts to limit and undermine Roe v. Wade.

DB: I think we should take this moment to remember some of the history around this landmark legislation. Please set the scene: What was life like before Roe v. Wade, and where did this battle start.

T0: Back in the late 1960s in Chicago, there was a young woman who was a student at the University of Chicago. She became very concerned because of what she saw all around her. And what she was seeing was her friends terrified of becoming pregnant, and needing to terminate a pregnancy, and not being able to. So that's sort of a microcosmic description, I think, of what life was like.

That individual, her name was Heather Booth, and she in 1969, formed an organization called The Jane Network, which was an organization of women that procured illegal but safe abortions for women from about 1969 until about 1973. They performed something like 11,000 or 12,000 abortions that were safe and medically appropriate, albeit completely illegal. In 1973 the Supreme Court decided Roe versus Wade.

The reality is that, for decades, prior to the time that Roe was decided, women

who wanted to terminate a pregnancy would eventually wind up either continuing the pregnancy against their will and being forced into childbirth against their will, or if they found someone to perform an abortion, very often, it was really just a predator.

You couldn't be sure whether you were going to a, someone with medical qualifications who could terminate your pregnancy, or someone who was simply, a sadistic or a sociopathic individual preying on women who were looking to terminate their pregnancies. It was just horrific.

DB: And, it was brutal, and bloody.

TO: And what happened is, it's terrifying. I remember when I was a child sort of having the impression that pregnancy was the punishment that women experienced for having sex. That there was this, all of this, there was not only judgment but bloody, and terrible, and terrifying punishments, if you had sex and then if you wanted to terminate the pregnancy resulting from sex. It was a ridiculous means of controlling women through terror. And that fundamentally is what Roe v. Wade was intended to change. And it fundamentally did change.

DB: And in this context, the suffering was immense, women were sent off to live with relatives, they were hidden, this was really a very easy way to demonize women, while men just sort of lived in the free world, if you will. So this was really a battle, a key aspect of the battle, for women's liberation.

TO: Absolutely. And upper-middle-class circles, a girl who was sent away, was universally understood that she was being sent away from home, so that she could go to an unwed mothers home, and be forced to bear a child, and then give that child up for adoption.

That actually is what sort of happened to the woman who was Jane Roe, in the Roe v Wade case. She was not able to terminate her pregnancy, and she had the baby, and she decided to give the baby up for adoption, and she simply wanted to hold the baby, have some kind of good-bye. And it was, "Oh, no..." They whisked it away from her. Women really were treated either like children, or certainly like, as if they were less than human. When they are not able to take control of their health care needs.

DB: Before we talk about the current status, and the battle that continues apace for so many women, and to have this opportunity. So Roe v Wade was passed? Tell us just a little bit about that battle. What was that like?

TO: Well, it was really interesting, because from the late 1960s until 1973 when the decision came down, and there was just enormous legislative work and advocacy around decriminalizing Roe v Wade. State after state after state had

begun, even before decriminalizing abortion. Before Roe v. Wade was decided New York State passed a law decriminalizing abortion. A number of other states followed suit even before Roe.

And, in fact, one of the criticisms of the case, in later years, was "Hey, the political process was already taken care of, decriminalizing abortion. The Supreme Court really overstepped its bounds or shouldn't have decided the case as a matter of fundamental constitutional rights." I mean, obviously, I disagree with that. I think the court did the right thing, in Roe v. Wade.

But there was just an enormous ground swell from the public, and it was not just women, you know. Men who care about their wives' and their girlfriends' health care were very supportive of decriminalizing abortion. They saw what happened. I've heard so many stories and read memoirs of women whose husbands or boyfriends were with them every step of the way, trying to find someone who would perform the pregnancy termination, terrified that they had gotten someone who was not going to perform a safe and medically appropriate procedure, and so men were with the women, in very large numbers, back then. And, by the way, it is still true today.

So there was all of this political movement, and the challenge to the extremely harsh law in Texas came up through the courts, and eventually ended at the Supreme Court. And that was the Roe v. Wade case and Justice [Harry] Blackmun wrote, and what was really a brilliant decision, saying that women's health care includes abortion, period. And health care is a private matter, and sex is a private matter, and sexuality is a private matter. How the woman got pregnant, and what she does once she does get pregnant, the kinds of decisions that she needs to make once she's pregnant, those are only for her to decide, under our constitutional law. That was clearly the right ruling. And that's what happened.

Now almost immediately, right-wing lawmakers began trying to undo the Roe versus Wade decision. Henry Hyde, a Catholic lawmaker from Illinois, was able to push through what we now call the Hyde Amendment. It has to be passed every single year. It's an add-on to an appropriations measure. And the Hyde Amendment basically prohibits Medicaid from funding abortions for low-income women who are otherwise eligible for health care through Medicaid.

The Hyde Amendment has been expanded to include that the military cannot pay for women, for service women or women dependents of service members to have abortions that, even the Peace Corps is not allowed to make abortions available to Peace Corps volunteers. And that includes when they are in countries where safe, legal procedures are not available.

Henry Hyde, himself, was quoted as saying: Look, I would like to make abortion

unavailable to rich women, and middle-class women, and poor women, alike, but unfortunately, the only women I can go after are the poor women. I think directly what he said was "Unfortunately, all I have available to me is Medicaid," to go after them. So he really pressed to prevent federal funding for abortion care.

And that has had two, I think, extremely harmful effects. First of all, you can't take one piece of health care, you can't pull out one piece of health care, and think that women will then have all of the other aspects of health care, that they need. We've seen in practice that that just doesn't work.

What's going on today is in the name of the Hyde Amendment right-wing lawmakers are trying to shut down family planning clinics. Because those clinics refer women to abortion clinics or they perform abortions themselves. So you're shutting down family planning clinics that give birth control, and STD screenings, and mammograms and cervical cancer screenings. So it's really simply not possible to isolate abortion, as the one piece of health care that you are going to deprive women of. The reality is, you go down that road, women start being blocked from reproductive health care, generally.

DB: And just to add on, as Henry Hyde was playing that role in the Congress, he was also collaborating with, really, call them border-line terrorists, like I believe his name was Joseph Scheidler [accused of] sort of inspiring the killings of abortion doctors. And Henry Hyde is making sort of campaign stops in the courtroom. They didn't only play it in Congress. When you mess with Scheidler, and I did, because I wrote a book about Henry Hyde, you, for instance, would end up maybe in the cross hairs of his Web site as a baby killer, as a mass murderer. So there was this extralegal operation going on that ultimately cost abortion doctors their lives. Right? This was a part of this struggle.

T0: Absolutely. It hasn't completely stopped but it has been enormously tamped down, and frankly, that's partly because my own organization, other women's organizations too. When, as you said, these over-zealous advocates against abortion rights,... their inflammatory language, their announcement that anyone who supports abortion rights is a baby killer, deserves to be killed themselves.

That kind of inflammatory language, as somebody once said, it falls on the ears of the hinged and the unhinged, alike. And it sets the stage for murdering abortion providers which absolutely happened in the 1980s and the 1990s. It was a terrible time. And the National Organization for Women brought a RICO, that's a racketeer influenced and corrupt organizations act, lawsuit against Joe

Scheidler and Randall Terry and others in the violent anti-abortion movement. We set out to prove that they had a whole network, and in fact a corrupt organization that was designed to shut down legitimate health-care providing clinics and that that was against the law. And because they were conspiring together, to shut down legitimate health-care providers that that was a conspiracy under the RICO statutes.

Now, that lawsuit was fascinating and amazing, and the National Organization for Women went to the Supreme Court twice, and won, and the third time we didn't win. But that took 14 or 15 years, and in that 14 or 15 year time period, we were able to get a nationwide injunction against those men, and the level of violence against abortion clinics dropped like a stone. I mean it was dramatic. The violence has not completely gone away, but it is at a much, much lower level than it was at the height of the extremist activities of Joe Scheidler and Randall Terry.

DB: But, clearly, this still boils under the surface, we saw this in the recent presidential election with the extraordinary statements being made by politicians who are supposedly to be taken seriously. That represented a viciousness and, at best, a profound unbelievable ignorance that is ultimately, incredibly dangerous.

The National Organization for Women is going to be celebrating, commemorating, whatever you want to call it a fortieth anniversary of Roe versus Wade. A candlelight vigil is going to take place next Tuesday in Washington, D.C.

T0: Right in front of the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. at five o'clock.

DB: Now let's talk about where Roe v. Wade is, the rights of women in terms of getting an abortion and having a safe, legal, affordable abortion, and the other rights that go along with it. This is still the law but it's also getting, and is incredibly difficult particularly for poor and working-class women to exercise this right, right?

T0: You know, it is. It is much more difficult for poor women, for younger women, for obviously military women, for employees of the federal government, for women who live in rural areas outside of a city to obtain, safe, legal, medically appropriate abortion. But it's also much harder today, for low-income women, these are women who are working two jobs, sometimes three jobs and barely making it in supporting their families.

It's really very difficult to say with a straight face that even if there was an abortion clinic in their neighborhood that was not being attacked by radicals,

it's very difficult to suggest that there's real choice going on. I mean, what kind of a choice is it if you have to decide between terminating a pregnancy because you can't afford it, because you and your partner are struggling to get by, because wages have been pressed down so far in the past 30 years. So your decision is to terminate the pregnancy, which you might want if you could only afford it. And going forward and having the child, which you can't afford and will drag the entire family down.

So the concept that Roe v. Wade opened up choices is wonderful, it's excellent and it's good. But we need to be mindful of the economic situation today, with the wealthiest people in this country sucking off the vast majority of the increase in the gross domestic product that we've produced in the past 30 years, meaning that [for] more and more and more families, to say that they have choice is a little bit of an exaggeration.

I'm trying to bend my own brain around how to make that point to the legislators, especially our friends on the Hill. And try to see, the economic implications of what's really going on for ordinary families, and increasingly middle-class families, don't seriously feel like it's giving them that kind of choice. Just from an economic point of view.

But beyond that, on the one hand you have families struggling and the economics are making their choices unpalatable. On the other hand, you've got Catholic bishops and truly, truly radical, irrational legislators like Todd Aiken and Richard Murdock, all claiming that women routinely lie about being raped just so that they can go out and have an abortion. Just absolutely rabid to control women's sexuality and stop women from accessing, not only abortions, but birth control. And, as I said earlier, STD screenings and mammograms and cervical cancer [screenings]. In 2011, alone, 94 anti-abortion measures were passed into law at the state level. The previous record was only 34 in 2005.

And that's an astonishing. It's an astonishing spike in anti-abortion legislation. Now in 2012, we pushed through, the women's movement and the pro-choice movement pushed those numbers down at the state level to only 43, again, the second highest in the history of this country. Vicious, anti-abortion legislation. And that's not letting up. In 2013, we've got legislation coming out of Michigan and Ohio and even New Jersey, where Governor Chris Christie has zeroed funded the family planning clinics. This war on women's access to reproductive health care is continuing and is just jaw-dropping with its ferocity, really.

DB: Well, you know, it's the end of Obama's first term, he's getting ready for term two. He's going to be taking the oath. Why don't you give us the good news and the bad news about the first administration and maybe then, where you think,

if they really want to jump in and do something, where they should? What the administration should be doing next in this context.

T0: The bad news about the first four years of President Obama's administration with respect to abortion rights is that, in the health care debate, in order to get the Affordable Care Act passed the administration gave up on abortion rights for women and the way the Affordable Care Act works, insurance companies will not be required to cover abortion care as part of the health care that women ordinarily get. And in addition, it opens the door to legislatively prohibit insurance companies from making it easy for women to access insurance coverage for abortion care. So it was a real betrayal, frankly, of women's rights.

The Obama administration then redeemed itself somewhat, by standing very strong against the Catholic bishops, when the bishops wanted him to make birth control unavailable in insurance policies, and the Obama administration was quite good. My organization takes the position that the Obama administration's carving out of an exception for churches, for actual religious institutions, like churches, and synagogues, and mosques, and so forth. We don't agree with that. We think that that's illegitimate.

But the bishops were insisting on no insurance coverage whatsoever for birth control. And the Obama administration absolutely stood up to them, and said "No." That's wonderful news, frankly, for women because we are now beginning to see studies that show that if cost is not an issue for women, and they have access to birth control, that's the one that's best for them, then the general health of women improves over time. And not to mention that the cost for insurance companies goes down because women's health is better and obviously pregnancy and childbirth is actually quite expensive for insurance companies.

So covering birth control was a real win and the White House took a leadership role and they did a very good job with that. My hope for Obama's second term is that they'll correct the mistakes that they made, that he made, with abortion rights in the Affordable Care Act. I'm not holding my breath, but I think that's what he should do.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net. You can get in touch with the author at dbernstein@igc.org.

America's War for Reality

Exclusive: The United States has been on a three-decade binge of unreality, imbibing delusions that began with Ronald Reagan and have continued through the Tea Party. The challenge now is for rational Americans to show they have the toughness and tenacity to fight for the real world – and to save it, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The real struggle confronting the United States is not between the Right and the Left in any traditional sense, but between those who believe in reality and those who are entranced by unreality. It is a battle that is testing whether fact-based people have the same determination to fight for their real-world view as those who operate in a fact-free space do in defending their illusions.

These battle lines do relate somewhat to the Right/Left divide because today's right-wing has embraced ideological propaganda as truth more aggressively and completely than those on the Left, though the Left (and the Center, too) are surely not immune from the practice of ignoring facts in pursuit of some useful agit-prop.

But key elements of the American Right have set up permanent residence in the world of make-believe, making any commonsense approach to the real-world challenges nearly politically impossible. The Right's fantasists also have the passions of true-believers, like a cult that gets angrier the more its views are questioned.

So, it doesn't matter that scientific evidence proves global warming is real; the deniers will insist the facts are simply a government ploy to impose "tyranny." It doesn't matter how many schoolchildren are slaughtered by semi-automatic assault rifles or what the real history of the Second Amendment was. To the gun fanatics, the Framers wanted armed rebellion against the non-violent political process they worked so hard to create.

On more narrow questions, it doesn't matter whether President Barack Obama presents his short or long birth certificates, he must have somehow fabricated the Hawaiian state records to hide his Kenyan birth. Oh, yes, and Obama is "lazy" even though he may appear to an objective observer to be a multi-tasking workaholic.

The American Right's collective departure from reality can be traced back decades, but clearly accelerated with the emergence of former actor Ronald

Reagan on the national stage. Even his admirers acknowledge that Reagan had a strained relationship with facts, preferring to illustrate his points with distorted or apocryphal anecdotes.

Reagan's detachment from reality extended from foreign policy to economics. As his rival for the 1980 Republican presidential nomination, George H.W. Bush famously labeled Reagan's supply-side policies of massive tax cuts for the rich which would supposedly raise more revenues as "voodoo economics."

But Bush, who knew better, then succumbed to Reagan's political clout as he accepted Reagan's vice presidential offer. In that way, the senior Bush would become a model for how other figures in the Establishment would pragmatically bend to Reagan's casual disregard for reality.

Perception Management

The Reagan administration also built around the President a propaganda infrastructure that systematically punished politicians, citizens, journalists or anyone who dared challenge the fantasies. This private-public collaboration coordinating right-wing media with government disinformationists brought home to America the CIA's strategy of "perception management" normally aimed at hostile populations.

Thus, the Nicaraguan Contras, who in reality were drug-connected terrorists roaming the countryside murdering, torturing and raping, became "the moral equivalent" of America's Founding Fathers. To say otherwise marked you as a troublemaker who had to be "controversialized" and marginalized.

The remarkable success of Reagan's propaganda was a lesson not lost on a young generation of Republican operatives and the emerging neoconservatives who held key jobs in Reagan's Central American and public-diplomacy operations, the likes of Elliott Abrams and Robert Kagan. The neocons' devotion to imperialism abroad seemed to motivate their growing disdain for empiricism at home. Facts didn't matter; results did. [See Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

But this strategy wouldn't have worked if not for gullible rank-and-file right-wingers who were manipulated by an endless series of false narratives. The Republican political pros manipulated the racial resentments of neo-Confederates, the religious zeal of fundamentalist Christians, and the free-market hero worship of Ayn Rand acolytes.

That these techniques succeeded in a political system that guaranteed freedom of speech and the press was not only a testament to the skills of Republican operatives like Lee Atwater and Karl Rove. It was an indictment of America's timid Center and the nation's ineffectual Left. Simply put, the Right fought

harder for its fantasyland than the rest of America did for the real world.

There were a number of key turning points in this “info-war.” For instance, Reagan’s secret relationship with the Iranian mullahs was partly revealed in the Iran-Contra scandal, but its apparent origins in treacherous Republican activities during Campaign 1980 contacting Iran behind President Jimmy Carter’s back were swept under the rug by mainstream Democrats and the Washington press corps.

Similarly, evidence of Contra drug-trafficking and even CIA admissions about covering up and protecting those crimes were downplayed by the major newspapers, including the Washington Post and the New York Times. Ditto the work of Central American truth commissions exposing massive human rights violations that Reagan aided and abetted.

The fear of taking on the Reagan propaganda machine in any serious or consistent way was so great that nearly everyone looked to their careers or their personal pleasures. One side dug in for political warfare and the other, too often, favored trips to wine country.

Distrusting the MSM

As this anti-empiricism deepened over several decades, the remaining thinking people in America came to distrust the mainstream. The initials “MSM” standing for “mainstream media” became an expression of derision and contempt, not undeserved given the MSM’s repeated failure to fight for the truth.

National Democrats, too, showed little fight. When evidence of Republican misconduct was available as in the investigations of the early 1990s into Iran-Contra, Iraq-gate and the October Surprise case accommodating Democrats, such as Rep. Lee Hamilton and Sen. David Boren chose to look the other way. [See Robert Parry’s *America’s Stolen Narrative*.]

The Democrats even submitted when the Right and the Republicans overturned the electoral will of the American people, as happened in Election 2000 when George W. Bush stole the Florida election and thus the White House from Al Gore. [For details, see the book, *Neck Deep*.]

In the decades after the Vietnam War, the American Left also drifted into irrelevance. Indeed, it’s common in some circles on the Left to observe that “America has no Left.” But what was left of the Left often behaved like disgruntled fans in the bleachers booing everyone on the field, the bad guys who were doing terrible things as well as the not-so-bad guys who were doing the best they could under impossible conditions.

This post-modern United States may have reached its nadir with George W. Bush's presidency. In 2002-03, patently false claims were made about Iraq's WMD and virtually no one in a position of power had the courage to challenge the lies. Deceived by Bush and the neocons with the help of centrists like Colin Powell and the editors of the Washington Post the nation lurched off into an aggressive war of choice.

Sometimes, the Right's contempt for reality was expressed openly. When author Ron Suskind interviewed members of the Bush administration in 2004, he encountered a withering contempt for people who refused to adjust to the new faith-based world.

Citing an unnamed senior aide to George W. Bush, Suskind wrote: "The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' ...

"That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality, judiciously, as you will, we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.'"

Reality Bites Back

Despite this imperial arrogance, real reality gradually reasserted itself, both in the bloody stalemate in Iraq and in the economic crises that Bush's anti-regulatory and low-tax policies created at home. By Election 2008, the American people were awaking with a terrible hangover from a three-decade binge on anti-reality moonshine.

In that sense, the election of Barack Obama represented a potential turning point. However, the angry Right that Ronald Reagan had built and the corresponding crippling effects on the Center and the Left didn't just disappear.

The Right counterattacked ferociously against the nation's first African-American president, even intimating violent revolution if Obama acted on his electoral mandate; Obama often behaved like one of those accommodating Democrats (in retaining much of Bush's national security team, for instance); the mainstream press remained careerist; and the Left demanded perfection regardless of the political difficulties.

This combination of dysfunction contributed to the rise of the Tea Party and the

Republican congressional victories in 2010. But Election 2012, with Obama's reelection and a general rejection of Tea Party fanaticism, has created the chance of a do-over for American rationalists.

After all, the United States continues to see the consequences of three decades of right-wing delusions, including high unemployment; massive deficits; self-inflicted financial crises; a degraded middle class; poor health care for millions; a crumbling infrastructure; an overheating planet; costly foreign wars; a bloated Pentagon budget; and children massacred by troubled young men with ridiculously easy access to semi-automatic assault rifles.

Yet, if rational and pragmatic solutions are ever going to be applied to these problems, it is not just going to require that President Obama display more spine. The country is going to need its conscious inhabitants of the real world to stand up with at least the same determination as the deluded denizens of the made-up world.

Of course, this fight will be nasty and unpleasant. It will require resources, patience and toughness. But there is no other answer. Reality must be recovered and protected if the planet and the children are to be saved.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Is the Constitution Still Relevant?

Exclusive: The U.S. Constitution has become part of today's political battlefield, with the Right claiming to be its true defender and the Left questioning why the old parchment should undercut democratic choices in the modern age. But neither side seems very interested in what the document actually did, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There are two major schools of thought about the U.S. Constitution. One from the Left argues that it's an outdated structure that should not be allowed to inhibit actions necessary to meet the needs of a modern society. And one from the Right, that only a "strict constructionist" reading of the Constitution and respect for the Framers' "original intent" should be allowed.

But the problem with these two views is that neither is logically consistent or honest. The Left, for instance, embraces important constitutional liberties, such as habeas corpus, freedom of speech, and prohibitions against “cruel and unusual punishments” and unreasonable searches and seizures regardless of the exigencies of the moment.



Yet, the Left disdains much of the Constitution for its anti-democratic and even immoral compromises, which enabled the new governing document to emerge from the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and narrowly win ratification in 1788. Not only did the Constitution countenance slavery, it undercut democracy by giving two senators to each state regardless of population (and originally having them appointed by state legislatures, not elected by the people).

Why, ask many on the Left, should modern American society be restricted by the judgments of a small group of propertied white men many of them slaveholders who died two centuries ago? Why should old compromises, which now seem ridiculously quaint and wrongheaded, be allowed to distort and constrain democratic judgments in 2013?

As Georgetown University constitutional law professor Louis Michael Seidman wrote in a recent New York Times op-ed, much of the fault behind today's gridlock in Washington can be traced to the “archaic, idiosyncratic and downright evil provisions” of the U.S. Constitution. He added:

“Our obsession with the Constitution has saddled us with a dysfunctional political system, kept us from debating the merits of divisive issues and inflamed our public discourse. Instead of arguing about what is to be done, we argue about what James Madison might have wanted done 225 years ago.”

The Right's Distortions

While the Left tends to view the Constitution as an irretrievably flawed document (albeit with individual liberties that the Left loves), the Right has made political hay by presenting itself as the Constitution's true defenders. The Right argues for what it calls "strict construction" and "original intent."

Yet, even right-wing Supreme Court justices who wax eloquently about "originalism" will twist the Framers' words and intentions when ideologically convenient, such as when Antonin Scalia inserted restrictions in the Commerce Clause during his opposition to the Affordable Care Act although James Madison and the Framers left the congressional power to regulate interstate and national commerce unlimited.

Indeed, from a strict reading of the Constitution, Madison had a much more robust respect for the democratic decisions of the elected branches of government than does today's Right.

In oral arguments on "Obamacare" in 2012, Scalia fretted about the possibility that Congress might use the Commerce Clause to mandate compulsory broccoli purchases, but Madison seemed to understand that if Congress and the President were nutty enough to do something like that, the voters would have the commonsense to un-elect those representatives at the next opportunity.

However, rather than trusting in Madison's language giving Congress the unlimited power to regulate commerce, Scalia insisted on second-guessing the Framers by applying his own judgments about what limitations should be in the Commerce Clause.

Scalia's Constitutional re-write was accepted by his fellow right-wingers, including Chief Justice John Roberts, although at the last minute Roberts joined with four Democratic justices to deem the Affordable Care Act constitutional under the taxing power of Congress. Still, Roberts rejected the Commerce Clause as justification after he arbitrarily eliminated some 18th Century definitions of the word "regulate."

In other words, Scalia and Roberts played games with the Constitution to make it fit with their political biases. They really didn't give a hoot about "strict construction." [For details, see Robert Parry's [*America's Stolen Narrative*](#).]

Similarly, when Scalia and four other Republican justices wanted George W. Bush in the White House, they suddenly discerned in the Fourteenth Amendment's demand for "equal protection under the law" an "original intent" to ensure Bush's Florida victory in Election 2000 though the amendment was adopted after the Civil War to protect the rights of former black slaves, not white plutocrats.

Thus, the U.S. Constitution has become something like a secular Bible, with

people using different parts to justify whatever their desired positions already are. Instead of letting the words of the Constitution guide their governance, they let their governing interests dictate how they interpret the Constitution.

But the Right much more than the Left has built a cottage industry around this practice, sending well-funded “scholars” back in time to cherry-pick (or fabricate) quotes from the Framers to support whatever the Right wants done. The Right’s commitment to “strict construction” is only a facade.

Changing Reality

That the modern American Right twists historical reality, I suppose, should not come as a shock. After all, today’s Right has organized itself around propaganda regarding current events, from talk radio to Fox News to ideological think tanks. So, why should anyone expect anything different about how the Right would deal with history?

The Right also understands that national mythology is a powerful force, very effective in manipulating Americans into believing they are standing with the Founders even if the history has to be falsified to achieve that emotional response. Many Tea Partiers, it seems, will eagerly eat up a stew of bad history served by the likes of Glenn Beck.

Thus, we have key chapters of that early history effectively expunged, such as the disastrous reign of the Articles of Confederation from 1777 to 1787. The Articles declared the 13 states “sovereign” and “independent” with the central government just a “league of friendship” with little power.

Because of that original structure, the United States was lurching toward catastrophe by 1787, with a major revolt erupting in western Massachusetts (the Shays’ Rebellion) and European powers plotting how to exploit divisions between the states and regions. General George Washington, in particular, worried that the hard-won independence of the new country was in jeopardy.

So, to understand what Washington, Madison and other key Framers were trying to do with the Constitution, you must first read the Articles of Confederation, i.e., what prompted the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. Washington and Madison were so determined to correct the flaws of the Articles that they defied their instructions, which were to propose some changes to the Articles. Instead, they threw out the old system.

The Framers replaced the Articles and the emphasis on states’ rights and a weak central government with nearly the opposite, a structure that made the federal government much more powerful and its law supreme across the land. Sovereignty was transferred to “We the People” and the states were left mostly with

responsibility for local matters.

At the time, opponents of the Constitution, known as the Anti-Federalists, were keenly aware of what Washington and Madison had engineered, and these skeptics fought fiercely against the federal power grab, just barely losing in several key states, such as Virginia, New York and Massachusetts.

A Revised Narrative

Yet, by recreating the Founding Narrative so it jumps from the Declaration of Independence in 1776 directly to the U.S. Constitution in 1787, the modern Right has learned that it can convince ill-informed Americans that the Constitution was devised as a states' rights document with a weak central government, when nearly the opposite was the case.

The key to the Right's false narrative is to delete (or ignore) the Articles of Confederation and thus eliminate what Washington and Madison were reacting against.

So, what the American people are now stuck with is a debate in which one side (the Left) largely dismisses the relevance of the Constitution (beyond some cherished individual rights) and the other (the Right) lies about what the document was designed to do. Thus, the nation finds itself in something between a muddle and a quandary.

The best path to firmer ground would seem to be, twofold: a serious effort to reclaim the real history of the Constitution from the charlatans on the Right and a recognition that the Constitution, as amended, creates an imperfect but still workable framework for democratic change, a rebuff to some on the Left.

The reality is that the Framers did include broad and flexible powers in the Constitution, so future elected representatives could work their will on matters important to the "general Welfare." As already noted, the Commerce Clause was not limited by the Framers; it was restricted by the current majority of right-wing ideologues who sit on the U.S. Supreme Court.

And as for the Left, it should recognize that with some political changes, such as the expanded use of primaries and caucuses to select Democratic and Republican candidates, filibuster reform and some more public financing of campaigns the Constitution allows for a reasonably vibrant, though clearly imperfect, democratic process.

Today's political crisis can more accurately be blamed on the Right's well-funded propagandist machine which has succeeded in supplanting history and science with propaganda and disinformation and the failure of the Left and the

Center to fight as hard for the truth as the Right fights for its fallacies.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Tea Party Extremism and the 'Cliff'

With a late-night vote, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a partial plan negotiated by the Senate and the White House to avert the "fiscal cliff," but most House Republicans voted no, with Tea Partiers continuing to flaunt their nihilistic extremism, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

It is irresponsible to help create a mess and then to walk away and expect someone else to clean it up. That's true whether the mess is a spill in the kitchen or something comparably sticky, smelly or hazardous in deliberations in Congress.

Multiple [press reports](#) observe that this is what the political tantrum known as the Tea Party has been doing. We haven't heard much from the Tea Partiers recently because they opted out of participation in the fiscal cliff drama as the rest of the country counted down the time remaining until the New Year's, and budgetary, ball drops.

In this latest phase in the tantrum, Tea Partiers unhappy that the political game has not gone entirely their way (with the outcome of the presidential election being, of course, their principal setback) have decided to take their own ball and bat and go home.

As a South Carolina Tea Party activist put it, "Why in the world would I want to get involved in the games they [i.e., members of Congress] are playing? I have other things to spend my energy on besides lost causes."

Some of the causes which Tea Partiers evidently do not think are lost and to which they now are devoting energy include "nullification" by states of the Affordable Care Act, exposing corruption in Florida election boards that they believe illicitly handed the state to Obama, and opposition to a United Nations resolution on sustainable development that they contend is a threat to property

rights.

Tea Partiers are providing some of their own drama with disarray and dissension within their own movement. The Washington-based Tea Party group FreedomWorks experienced an attempt by its chairman Richard Arme y, accompanied by a gun-sl inging aide, to purge his opponents within the organization, a few days before Arme y himself was ousted in a counter-coup. Meanwhile, polls show public support for the Tea Party has dropped significantly from its heyday around the 2010 election.

This certainly does not mean, unfortunately, that we have heard the last of the Tea Party. But the more that this tantrum subsides or fades out of view, the better off the Republic will be. Republicans, and more broadly those who believe in a healthy two-party system, ought to be especially hopeful that it will fade out of view.

Tea Party activism during the primary season probably cost Republicans a couple of Senate seats. It also has cost the Republican Party the services in public office of some of its most distinguished thinkers, including Richard Lugar, a victim of one of those primary fights, and Jon Huntsman, who was the most sensible person on the stage in those primary debates but never seemed to have a chance to win his party's nomination.

The biggest damage the Tea Party has inflicted has been the less measurable but still major boost it has given to intolerance and inflexibility, with everything that implies regarding dysfunction in the American political system. It has been poison to any spirit of compromise and to the normal give-and-take of politics in a democracy. In this regard it is remarkable how, among all the attention to the details of the fiscal cliff negotiations such as where to set tax brackets and how to define inflation adjustments, so little has been said about how we got confronted with the cliff in the first place.

To refresh our memories: sequestration and the other fiscal changes that define the cliff were devised as a threat to concentrate minds on the congressional super-committee that was charged with reaching, but failed to achieve, a fiscal and budgetary grand bargain. The super-committee was in turn a device for getting out of the impasse created when one side of the aisle resorted to extortion by threatening to force a default on the national debt if that side did not get its way.

The extortion was a marked departure from the normal way of conducting the people's political business, which is to try to enact one's preferred policies by winning support and winning votes for one's point of view, rather than by threatening to inflict harm on the country. Since then, the inflexibility and

resistance to compromise have been, as [Ezra Klein reminds us](#) in reviewing the bidding of the last couple of years, far more on the side that did the initial extortion than on the other side.

The Tea Party cannot be blamed for all of this, of course. Roots of inflexibility such as no-tax-increase obsessions and related starve-the-beast notions have been around before there even was a Tea Party movement. Nor is it only Tea Partiers who today kvetch endlessly about the deficit but not long ago did not say a peep about it when the unprecedented combination of a very expensive war of choice and simultaneous tax cuts turned, surprise, surprise, what had been a budgetary surplus into a ballooning deficit.

But the influence of the Tea Party has unquestionably made this whole sorry story substantially worse than it otherwise would have been. The very irresponsibility that the movement is exhibiting today, in walking away from the mess it did so much to help create, testifies to its character.

However much reasonable men and women may disagree about tax codes or the size of government, what is even more important to the health of a society such as America's are the give-and-take habits and attitudes that are necessary for a liberal representative democracy to function. Those habits and attitudes are ultimately what keep the United States from being an Iraq or a Syria. The Tea Partiers never seem to have understood that.

We should all hope that they will consign themselves permanently to a safe-to-ignore lunatic fringe that burns its energy pursuing wacky conspiracy theories about Florida election boards and the like.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as [a blog post](#) at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

Congressmen Eye Revolving Door

Outgoing members of Congress even as they consider legislation in the lame-duck session are preparing their exits through the revolving door to lucrative lobbying jobs, often with industries they assisted while doing the "people's business," as Bill Moyers and Michael Winship explain.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

Last week, we talked about the infernal revolving door between government and big business and how one person in particular, Liz Fowler, has spun through it so many times she may need to take something for motion sickness. Which makes it a good thing that she's going back to work as a lobbyist for the health care industry, where presumably she can get a prescription filled.

Fowler used to be a lobbyist with the health insurer WellPoint. Then she went to Capitol Hill as Sen. Max Baucus's health care reform architect followed by some time at the Department of Health and Human Services and Barack Obama's White House. Now she's headed back to the private sector, going to bat for the medical giant Johnson & Johnson where no doubt her deep insider knowledge of Washington will be worth every dollar.

We were reminded of the revolving door again when Bill spoke with Tony Kushner, the screenwriter of "Lincoln," on this week's edition of *Moyers & Company*. Early in the film, Lincoln tells his Secretary of State William Seward that he wants to ram through a lame-duck House of Representatives the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery. He needs support from his opposition, the Democratic Party. Seward says there's none to be had but the politically savvy Lincoln reminds him that 64 Democratic members have just lost reelection and will be looking for jobs.

"If procuring votes with offers of jobs is what you intend," Seward replies, "I'll fetch a friend from Albany who can supply the skulking men gifted at this kind of shady work." And so he does.

The more things change, the more they remain the same. The actual revolving door may not have been invented until 1888, more than 20 years after Lincoln's death, but the principle already was firmly in place back then and still turning 'round today, especially among departing members of the House. They're looking for jobs and the siren call of K Street is irresistible.

Some didn't wait, and lined up their cushy lobbying positions even before their terms have officially ended. Outgoing House Rep. Jason Altmire, a Pennsylvania Democrat, was a health care lobbyist before being elected in 2006. He opposed Obamacare. Now he's hooking up with Florida Blue they run that state's Blue Cross and Blue Shield as senior vice president for public policy; a fancy title for lobbyist.

Rep. Mike Ross, Democrat of Arkansas, fought hard against a rule cutting back on dangerous emissions from coal-burning power plants. Now he's leaving the House and becoming senior vice president for government affairs at Southwestern Power Pool that's a group representing electric utilities that burn coal for energy and profit. Some coincidence.

Heath Shuler, Democratic representative of North Carolina and former NFL quarterback, is helping lead the congressional effort to prevent a plunge over the so-called fiscal cliff. Come January, he moves on to be senior vice president of federal affairs for the biggest electrical power company in the country, Duke Energy. Duke has enjoyed extensive tax subsidies and in the years 2008-2010 receiving tax refunds of \$216 million while reporting a \$5.5 billion profit.

Tim Carney, of the conservative *Washington Examiner* newspaper, writes that Duke Energy would have profited nicely if Congress had passed cap-and-trade legislation that Duke Power helped draft and Shuler supported. So he'll still be working for Duke, just making more money.

Another case of coincidence, apparently, which is funny because only a few months ago, Shuler was in total denial when investigative reporters Lee Fang and Ziad Jilani asked him about his future:

Fang: Are you going to become a lobbyist?

Shuler: No

Jilani: What do you plan to do after you retire?

Shuler: Have a better job than you guys have, that's for sure.

In pursuit of a so-called better job a lobbying job even a House member who was easily reelected is abandoning the ship of state. Republican Congresswoman Jo Ann Emerson of Missouri just won her ninth term with a whopping 72 percent of the vote.

Hardly had the voters re-elected Emerson then she jilted them. She's leaving to become head of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, a lobbying group which over the years coincidentally, of course has been her largest campaign contributor.

An editorial in the *Kansas City Star* noted that "As a congresswoman, Emerson was paid in campaign donations to help rural electric cooperatives avoid tough environmental regulations and reap tax credits. As a soon-to-be overseer of a large staff of lobbyists, she'll be paid even more handsomely." We don't know what her new salary will be but the former congressman who had the job two years ago was paid \$1.5 million, a number which would boost Emerson's current paycheck by 862 percent.

Lobbying's the biggest business in Washington, after government and tourism. According to James Thurber of American University, the industry spends as much

as \$8 billion a year and employs some 100,000 people, including former government staffers who make far more than they did on the public payroll.

Professional headhunters told the Washington newspaper *The Hill* that “former Obama cabinet members could start at \$1 million, depending on their prominence at law and lobby firms.” Former assistants to the president could start at half a million a year and special assistants could pull in an annual paycheck of more than \$300,000.

It’s a lucrative world through that revolving door no wonder that of the 119 members of Congress who left after the 2010 elections, roughly a third wound up in the lobby business, hitting up those they left behind for valuable information and favors.

Oh, I know, there are rules now in place that say outgoing members and their staffs can’t hit up their colleagues in government for a period of time. But you know how it works: ex-Congressman A follows the letter of the law but says to his new lobbying colleagues, call my good friend Congressman B. or Cabinet Secretary C. Tell him or her I said hello. And the deed is done. The bidding of big business is obeyed and the voter left flat-footed once again.

Abraham Lincoln Honest Abe was a realist; in another life he’d been a lawyer serving the interests of the railroads. Much of this probably wouldn’t surprise him and as we see in the movie he wasn’t above back-dealing to achieve a loftier goal. The 13th Amendment is “the greatest measure of the 19th century,” a character says in the film. “Passed by corruption, aided and abetted by the purest man in America.”

But the extent of the back-dealing now is staggering, and what’s especially enraging is how it has become accepted, normal behavior in Washington the richest and most powerful corporate lobbyists are held in higher esteem than those elected to serve.

If you’re a public official or working for one you can’t keep your mind on the people’s business when your eyes are on the exit through the revolving door and the biggest paycheck available.

Bill Moyers is managing editor and Michael Winship is senior writer of the weekly public affairs program, Moyers & Company, airing on public television. Check local airtimes or comment at www.BillMoyers.com.

The Revolving Door on Healthcare

Washington is a place where behavior friendly to the rich and powerful is rewarded lavishly and other behavior hostile to those interests can make you a pariah. That reality is reinforced when public officials make trips through the revolving door, as Bill Moyers and Michael Winship note.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

We've seen how Washington insiders write the rules of politics and the economy to protect powerful special interests, but now as we enter the holiday season, and a month or so after the election, we're getting a refresher course in just how that inside game is played, gifts and all.

In this round, Santa doesn't come down the chimney – he simply squeezes his jolly old self through the revolving door.

It's an old story, the latest chapter of which came to light a few days ago with a small item in *Politico*: "Elizabeth Fowler is leaving the White House for a senior-level position leading 'global health policy' at Johnson & Johnson's government affairs and policy group."

A familiar name. We had talked about Liz Fowler on *Bill Moyers Journal* in 2009, during the early stages of Obama's health care reform. She was at the center of the action, sitting behind Montana Sen. Max Baucus, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee at committee hearings.

Bill noted, "She used to work for WellPoint, the largest health insurer in the country. She was Vice President of Public Policy. And now she's working for the very committee with the most power to give her old company and the entire industry exactly what they want: higher profits, and no competition from alternative non-profit coverage that could lower costs and premiums."

After Obamacare passed, Sen. Baucus himself, one of the biggest recipients in Congress of campaign cash from the health care industry, boasted that the architect of the legislation was none other than Liz Fowler.

"I want to single out one person," he said. "Liz Fowler is my chief health counsel. Liz Fowler has put my health care team together. ... She put together the White Paper last November 2008, [the] 87-page document which became the basis, the foundation, the blueprint from which almost all health care measures in all bills on both sides of the aisle came. She is an amazing person. She is a lawyer; she is a Ph.D. She is just so decent. She is always smiling, she is always working, always available to help any Senator, any staff. I just thank

Liz from the bottom of my heart.”

The health-care industry was very pleased, too. Early on in the evolution of Obamacare, the Senate and the White House cut deals that protected the interests of the health-care industry, especially insurers and the pharmaceutical companies. Lobbyists beat back such popular proposals as a public option, an expansion of Medicare, and a requirement that drug companies negotiate the prices they charge.

As the eagle-eyed journalist Glenn Greenwald noted in *The Guardian* last week, “The bill’s mandate that everyone purchase the products of the private health insurance industry, unaccompanied by any public alternative, was a huge gift to that industry.” That sound you hear isn’t jingle bells; it’s cash registers ringing.

And Liz Fowler? The White House brought her over from Congress to oversee the new law’s implementation, first at the Department of Health and Human Services and then as Special Assistant to the President for Healthcare and Economic Policy. And now, it’s through the revolving door once more.

Yes, Christmas has come a little early for the peripatetic Ms. Fowler, as she leaves the White House for the pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson.

As Glenn Greenwald writes, Ms. Fowler “will receive ample rewards from that same industry as she peddles her influence in government and exploits her experience with its inner workings to work on that industry’s behalf, all of which has been made perfectly legal by the same insular, Versailles-like Washington culture that so lavishly benefits from all of this.”

Friends of Liz Fowler will say this is harsh, that she was the talented, intelligent protégée of two liberal Democrats – outgoing California Congressman Pete Stark and the late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York – who believed in public service as a calling. That she was seriously devoted to crafting a health-care reform proposal that would pass.

No doubt, but it’s not the point. She’s emblematic of the revolving door culture that inevitably means, when push comes to shove, corporate interests will have the upper hand in the close calls that determine public policy. It’s how insiders fix the rules of the market, no matter which party is in power.

The last time we looked, 34 former staff members of Sen. Baucus, whose finance committee has life-and-death power over the industry’s wish list, were registered lobbyists, more than a third of them working on health care issues in the private sector. And the revolving door spins ever faster after a big election like the one we had last month, as score of officials, elected

representatives and their staffs vacate their offices after the ballots are counted. Many of them head for K Street and the highest bidder.

When his administration began, President Obama swore he would get tough. "If you are a lobbyist entering my administration," he said, "you will not be able to work on matters you lobbied on, or in the agencies you lobbied during the previous two years. ... When you leave government, you will not be able to lobby my administration for as long as I am president. And there will be a ban on gifts by lobbyists to anyone serving in the administration as well."

Reforms were passed that are supposed to slow down the revolving door, increase transparency and limit the contact ex-officials and officeholders can have with their former colleagues. But those rules and regulations have loopholes big enough for Santa and his sleigh to drive through, reindeer included.

The market keeps growing for insiders poised to make a killing when they leave government to help their new bosses get what they want *from* government. That's the great thing about the revolving door: one good turn deserves another.

Bill Moyers is managing editor and Michael Winship is senior writer of the weekly public affairs program, Moyers & Company, airing on public television. Check local airtimes or comment at www.BillMoyers.com.
