

In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in October set the record straight in defense of Gary Webb's Contra-cocaine reporting, explained the continued crises in Syria and Ukraine, and noted the decline of American democratic institutions.

["Standing Up for Lessons of Dissent"](#) by Peter Dreier, Oct. 1, 2014

["Official Washington's Syrian 'Fantasy'"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 1, 2014

["The Why of Obama's Failed Hope"](#) by Greg Maybury, Oct. 3, 2014

["Eyes Finally Open to Syrian Reality"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 3, 2014

["NYT's Belated Admission on Contra-Cocaine"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 4, 2014

["Eroding Principles of Human Rights"](#) by Lawrence Davidson, Oct. 6, 2014

["Guantanamo's Force-Feeding Challenged"](#) by Ray McGovern, Oct. 8, 2014

["The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 9, 2014

["The Lost Hope of Democracy"](#) by John Chuckman, Oct. 10, 2014

["A Murder Mystery at Guantanamo Bay"](#) by Ray McGovern, Oct. 10, 2014

["Can MSM Handle the Contra-Cocaine Truth?"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 11, 2014

["An Imperial Death Grip on Democracy"](#) by Greg Maybury, Oct. 12, 2014

["A Shift Toward Recognizing Palestine"](#) by John V. Whitbeck, Oct. 14, 2014

["Ukraine's Neo-Nazis Demand Respect"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 15, 2014

["'Kill the Messenger': Rare Truth-telling"](#) by James DiEugenio, Oct. 16, 2014

["The Neocons – Masters of Chaos"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 17, 2014

["WPost's Slimy Assault on Gary Webb"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 18, 2014

["Germans Clear Russia in MH-17 Case"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 20, 2014

["Citizenfour's Escape to Freedom in Russia"](#) by Ray McGovern, Oct. 23, 2014

["The Battle for Palestine"](#) Parts [One](#), [Two](#) and [Three](#) by William R. Polk, Oct. 23-24, 2014

["Using the Holocaust to Justify War"](#) by Maidhc "Cathail", Oct. 25, 2014

["Treating Putin Like a Lunatic"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 25, 2014

["Is Latin America's 'Pink Tide' Ebbing?"](#) by Andres Cala, Oct. 27, 2014

["How the Washington Press Turned Bad"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 28, 2014

["Big Media Has Betrayed the People"](#) by Greg Maybury, Oct. 31, 2014

["Petraeus Spared Ray McGovern's Question"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 31, 2014

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Standing Up for Lessons of Dissent

There is a general belief that Americans don't care much about history, preferring to bask in self-reverential "exceptionalism" with U.S. behavior beyond criticism. But students outside Denver are taking to the streets to protest right-wing efforts to strip dissent from the history curriculum, writes Peter Dreier.

By Peter Dreier

In Colorado, just west of Denver, Jefferson County high school students are protesting their school board's attempt to rewrite the American history curriculum. In their resistance, they are doing all Americans a favor by reminding us of the importance of dissent and protest in our nation's history.

The students are reacting to a proposal by the Jefferson County school board – Colorado's second largest school district with about 85,000 students – to change the way history is taught in the schools.

Last November, three new board members were elected to the school board, forming a conservative majority. One of them, Julie Williams, has led the charge to revise the Advanced Placement U.S. history curriculum to promote patriotism, respect for authority, and free enterprise and to guard against educational materials that "encourage or condone civil disorder."

Williams said she believes that the current Advanced Placement curriculum in

American history places an excessive emphasis on “race, gender, class, ethnicity, grievance and American-bashing.”

With the support of many teachers and parents, the Colorado students have engaged in a protest of their own to teach the school board a lesson. It began on Monday, Sept. 22, when about 100 students walked out at Evergreen High School, one of 17 high schools in the suburban district outside Denver.

Since then the protests have gained momentum, fueled by social media and student-to-student contact. As the *New York Times* reported, they “streamed out of school and along busy thoroughfares, waving signs and championing the value of learning about the fractious and tumultuous chapters of American history.”

By last week, the number of students involved in the protest had mushroomed. On Thursday, according to the *Denver Post*, more than 1,000 students walked out of class behind a new unified slogan – “It’s our history; don’t make it mystery.”

History of Protest

Back in 1900, people were considered impractical idealists, utopian dreamers or dangerous socialists for advocating women’s suffrage, laws protecting the environment and consumers, an end to lynching, the right of workers to form unions, a progressive income tax, a federal minimum wage, old-age insurance, dismantling of Jim Crow laws, the eight-hour workday, and government-subsidized health care. Now we take these ideas for granted. The radical ideas of one generation have become the common sense of the next.

As Americans, we stand on the shoulders of earlier generations of reformers, radicals and idealists who challenged the status quo of their day. They helped change America by organizing movements, pushing for radical reforms, popularizing progressive ideas, and spurring others to action.

To understand American society, we need to know about the accomplishments of people like Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, Eugene Debs, Robert La Follette, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, W.E.B. DuBois, Frances Perkins, Lewis Hine, A.J. Muste, Alice Paul, A. Philip Randolph, Dorothy Day, Eleanor Roosevelt, Langston Hughes, Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), Fiorello LaGuardia, Myles Horton, Rachel Carson, Walter Reuther, Thurgood Marshall, Bayard Rustin, Woody Guthrie, Cesar Chavez, Barry Commoner, Ella Baker, Jackie Robinson, Bella Abzug, Pete Seeger, Martin Luther King, Harvey Milk, Ralph Nader, Gloria Steinem, John Lewis and Billie Jean King.

If some of these names aren’t quite household names, that reflects our failure as a society to recognize and teach our students about some of the major dissenters, rebels and reformers who have shaped our nation’s history.

Even today, grassroots movements have continued to push and pull America in a positive direction, often against difficult odds. Today's battles over the minimum wage, Wall Street reform, immigrant rights, climate change, voting rights, gun control, and same-sex marriage build on the foundation of previous generations of dissenters.

Each generation of Americans faces a different set of economic, political, and social conditions. There are no easy formulas for challenging injustice and promoting democracy. But unless we know this history, we will have little understanding of how far we have come, how we got here, and what still needs to change to make America (and the rest of the world) more livable, humane and democratic.

The Jefferson County School Board's attempt to ignore or downplay the long tradition of dissent, protest and conflict that has always shaped American society is hardly unique. In the early 1990s, Lynne Cheney, who headed the National Endowment for the Humanities during the first Bush Administration (and is the wife of former Vice President Dick Cheney), attacked the teaching of American history for presenting a "grim and gloomy" account of America's past.

After that, conservatives on local school boards around the country escalated their efforts and continue them today. It is part of the backlash against the increasing examination by historians of the roles of women, African-Americans, Latinos, native Americans, dissenters, and movements in American history.

But such battles go back even further than Cheney's campaign. In the 1979 book, *America Revised*, Frances Fitzgerald examined how the teaching of American history has been the subject of an ongoing debate going back to the 1800s, fueled by political differences over the nature of American identity. Conservatives have traditionally sought to emphasize consensus over conflict in the development of U.S. history textbooks and curriculum.

As the College Board observed in a statement issued on Friday, the Jefferson County students "recognize that the social order can – and sometimes must – be disrupted in the pursuit of liberty and justice. Civil disorder and social strife are at the patriotic heart of American history – from the Boston Tea Party to the American Revolution to the Civil Rights Movement. And these events and ideas are essential within the study of a college-level, AP U.S. History course."

It would be fitting and appropriate for the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association to give these students an award at their next meetings for their commitment to the teaching of American history. Perhaps one or both of these organizations could invite some of the students to give a

presentation about their protest campaign as part of a plenary session on the teaching of AP American history. It would surely be the most well-attended session at either conference.

Such a gesture by one or both of the leading organizations of historians would inspire high school students elsewhere to challenge arbitrary authority and put the two organizations on record in opposition to the efforts by school boards to distort the teaching of history for overtly political purposes.

Peter Dreier is the Dr. E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics, and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department, at Occidental College. His most recent book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012)

In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in December focused on political battles facing Barack Obama's second term, the firebombing at the house of an ex-Israeli spy, the slaughter of 20 children in Connecticut, and the Right's insistent misinterpretation of the U.S. Constitution.

["A Shot for a Possible New World"](#) by Morgan Strong, assessing the openings from President Obama's reelection. Dec. 1, 2012.

["Why to Say No to Susan Rice"](#) by Ray McGovern, explaining some real reasons to object to Rice as a possible Secretary of State. Dec. 3, 2012.

["Arson Seen in Attack on Ex-Israeli Spy"](#) by Robert Parry, reporting on the firebombing of Ari Ben-Menashe's Montreal home. Dec. 3, 2012.

["Ben-Menashe Case Eyes Bomb Residue"](#) by Robert Parry, describing the probe of a mysterious fire. Dec. 5, 2012.

["Still Pretending on Israel's Nuke Arsenal"](#) by Paul R. Pillar, writing how the U.S. undercut a conference seeking a Middle East nuclear-free zone. Dec. 8, 2012.

["Who Bombed Ben-Menashe's House?"](#) by Robert Parry, updating the arson mystery around the attack on the ex-Israeli spy's home. Dec. 8, 2012.

["Growing Doubts about Susan Rice"](#) by Ray McGovern, noting the rising opposition to a possible State Department nomination. Dec. 13, 2012.

"The 2nd Amendment and Killing Kids" by Robert Parry, rejecting the right-wing nonsense about the Framers wanting armed resistance. Dec. 15, 2012.

"Placing Blame for Gun Massacres" by Peter Dreier, recognizing the madness of some pro-gun advocates. Dec. 16, 2012.

"How the GOP Promoted Gun Madness" by Robert Parry, recalling the political pandering of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Dec. 16, 2012.

"Hijacking the Second Amendment" by Joe Lauria, tracing how the NRA tricked Americans regarding their "gun rights." Dec. 17, 2012.

"Dim Tidings of Political Disconnect" by Phil Rockstroh, reflecting on how false narratives confuse the masses. Dec. 17, 2012.

"The Right's Limited Government Scam" by Robert Parry, revealing how right-wingers deceive Americans regarding the Founding. Dec. 18, 2012.

"Neocons Guided Petraeus on Afghan War" by Robert Parry, exposing the secret alliance that expanded an unwinnable war. Dec. 19, 2012.

"Hagel: The Neocons' Last Stand" by Robert Parry, reviewing the stakes involved in the fight over Chuck Hagel's nomination. Dec. 20, 2012.

"The Right's Second Amendment Lies" by Robert Parry, debunking the right-wing myths about the "right to bear arms." Dec. 21, 2012.

"An Incurious 'Zero Dark Thirty'" by Jim DiEugenio, questioning the lack of historical context in the get-bin-Laden movies. Dec. 21, 2012.

"NRA Suggests a Police State" by Robert Parry, ripping apart the absurd idea of arming-up everywhere children may go. Dec. 23, 2012.

"Israel Lobby Takes Aim Again" by former Ambassador Chas Freeman, recalling how he was targeted as a "realist." Dec. 24, 2012.

"The Price of Revolutionary Illusions" by Robert Parry, linking romantic notions about armed revolution and the death of children. Dec. 26, 2012.

"The Larger Question of Chuck Hagel" by Ray McGovern, evaluating the stakes in the Hagel nomination fight. Dec. 28, 2012.

"War Spending and the Fiscal Cliff" by Coleen Rowley, tracking the budget crisis to the door of the Military-Industrial Complex. Dec. 31, 2012.

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Placing Blame for Gun Massacres

After each gun-related massacre, the U.S. news media waves its collective finger at politicians for permitting today's insane tolerance of gun violence, but the media lacks the courage to call out specific individuals who bear most responsibility. One of those people is the NRA's Wayne LaPierre, says Peter Dreier.

By Peter Dreier

The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence has a 62-page list of mass shootings in America since 2005. It is Wayne LaPierre's resume. For the past 21 years, LaPierre has been the National Rifle Association's executive Vice President and chief political strategist.

It is tempting to say that these shootings – including the most recent one at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, on Friday – reflect something basically wrong with American culture or the nation's very soul. But the majority of Americans favor strict gun control laws. No, let's not burden Americans with collective guilt. The problem is more narrow – and more fixable – than that.

The long list of killings is due in large measure to the political influence of the NRA, and the campaign finance system that allows the gun lobby to exercise so much power. But an outraged and mobilized public can beat the NRA's influence and pressure Congress to put strong limits on gun sales.

The blood of the 26 victims of the Connecticut shooting, including 20 young children, is on LaPierre's hands. Of course, LaPierre didn't pull the trigger, but he's the NRA's hit man when it comes to intimidating elected officials to oppose any kind of gun control and the nation's most vocal advocate of gun owner rights.

There should be special place in hell reserved for LaPierre. He likes to fulminate about gun owners' rights. But so far he's has been silent on the nation's most recent gun massacre.

Although LaPierre likes to portray the NRA as representing grassroots gun owners, the bulk of its money comes from gun manufacturers. LaPierre is a corporate lobbyist and his clients are corporations whose profits grow when there are few restrictions on the sale and ownership of guns and ammunition. He does not speak for America's gun owners. In fact, a majority of gun owners support stricter gun laws.

The NRA not only lobbies on behalf of "stand your ground" laws, but also offers insurance to members to pay for the legal costs of shooting people in "self-defense." The NRA also defends the right of Americans to carry concealed weapons, including handguns.

Adam Lanza, the 20-year old man who walked into the Connecticut school with two firearms (a Glock and a Sig Sauer) and had another gun (a 223 Bushmaster) in his car is no doubt deranged. He's not alone. There are lots of crazy people around. But if we make it easy for them to obtain guns, they are more likely to translate their psychological problems into dangerous and deadly anti-social behavior.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2011, there were 15,953 murders in the United States and 11,101 (30 a day) were caused by firearms. Suicides and unintentional shootings account for another 20,000 deaths by guns each year. Of course, many more people are injured, some seriously, and permanently, by gun violence.

Most gun-related deaths are committed by people who purchase their weapons legally. Others purchase or steal them illegally, but their ability to get access to guns is due to our lax laws on gun ownership. LaPierre's job is to make it easier for people to buy and use guns. And so far he's been very successful. Since the 1994 assault-weapon ban expired in 2004, Congress hasn't enacted any major gun regulations.

It is no accident that the United States ranks first in the world, by a wide margin, in gun-related civilian deaths and injuries. Compared with every other democracy, we have the most guns and the weakest gun laws.

The shooting in the Connecticut school was not an isolated incident. We've almost become used to a regular diet of gun-toting rampages. The most visible of them, like Columbine, the Virginia Tech killings, the murders in the Aurora, Colorado, movie theater, and the Arizona shooting that nearly claimed the life of former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and left six others dead, stick in our minds, but there are many others. Even more Americans are killed each year in one-on-one shootings.

The NRA has two knee-jerk responses to this. The first is that the Second Amendment gives all Americans the right to possess guns of all kinds, not just hunting rifles but machine guns and semi-automatics. Efforts to restrict gun sales and ownership is, according to the NRA, an assault on our constitutional freedoms. The second is the cliché that “guns don’t kill people, people kill people.”

Both of these arguments are bogus, but the NRA has the money and membership (4 million) to translate these idiot ideas into political clout to thwart even reasonable gun-control laws. To the NRA, gun laws have nothing to do with the epidemic of gun-related killings.

Even in countries with strong gun-control laws, some people will get their hands on a weapon and destroy others’ lives. The tragic killing in Norway last year is testament to this reality. (Although let’s recall that Anders Breivik bought \$550 worth of 30-round ammunition clips from an American gun supplier for the rifle he used to kill 69 Norwegian kids at a summer camp. Thanks to American laws, it was a legal online purchase.)

But the shooting in Norway was an infrequent occurrence; it is, in fact, one of the safest countries in the world. In contrast, the U.S. is off the charts in terms of murder rates. In other well-off democratic countries, gun violence is rare and shocking.

According to the recent comparative figures, the U.S. had five murders for every 100,000 inhabitants. Finland was next with only 2.3 murders per 100,000 residents, followed by Canada (1.8), Belgium (1.7), France (1.3), England and Australia (both 1.2), Netherlands (1.1), Sweden (1.0), Germany (0.8), Norway (0.6) and Japan and Austria (both 0.5). In other words, America’s murder rate is more than eight times greater than Norway’s.

The news media will spend an inordinate amount of effort trying to figure out what was in Lanza’s head before he put on his protective gear, carried two guns into the school, and began his shooting rampage. Although the psychology and motives of the murderer may be fascinating, it should not be the major focus. There are plenty of deranged people in the world, but in most well-off countries they can’t easily get their hands on a firearm.

The U.S. has more guns per capita than any other well-off democratic country. But the danger isn’t simply the number of guns; it is the type of guns we allow people to legally purchase. Other countries permit hunting rifles. But many Americans believe it is their right to own an assault weapon.

Here’s where the NRA comes in. According to the Center for Responsive Politics,

since 1990, the gun rights lobby, led by the NRA, has contributed \$29.2 million to candidates for Congress and the White House, 87 percent of it to Republicans. In the most recent election cycle, gun rights groups donated \$3.1 million to political candidates and spent another \$5.5 million in lobbying.

In contrast, since 1990 the gun control lobby has donated only \$1.9 million to politicians, 94 percent to Democrats. In the most recent election cycle, these groups contributed only \$4,000 to candidates and spent only \$420,000 on lobbying.

Of course, Democrats are not immune from the NRA's influence. This summer, 17 House Democrats recently voted in favor of criminal contempt for Attorney General Eric Holder for his oversight of Operation Fast and Furious. Not surprisingly, each of them received campaign contributions from the NRA in the previous two election cycles.

[Editor: There was a right-wing conspiracy theory that the Obama administration intentionally bungled the Fast and Furious undercover operation, which allowed some guns to reach Mexican drug cartels, to create the pretext for new gun-control laws.]

At the top of the gun-rights food-chain is the NRA's Wayne LaPierre. It is hard to know if he's mentally unstable but he's certainly crazy like a fox (and Fox News). Under LaPierre's leadership, the NRA has aligned itself with the most reactionary forces in American politics, including the Tea Party, the Koch brothers, and the American Legislative Exchange Council. For example, For example, LaPierre gave a speech earlier this year to the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington in which he said that President Obama was part of a "conspiracy to ensure re-election by lulling gun owners to sleep."

LaPierre added: "All that first term, lip service to gun owners is just part of a massive Obama conspiracy to deceive voters and hide his true intentions to destroy the Second Amendment during his second term." He also warned that everything that "gun owners across America have fought to achieve over the past three decades could be lost" if Obama won a second term.

Well, Obama *did* win a second term. In a statement soon after the Connecticut massacre, Obama called for "meaningful action" to curb gun violence.

"Meaningful action" does not mean educating young people about bullying and violence. It does not mean instructing gun owners to be more responsible. It does not mean, as Mike Huckabee suggested on Friday, restoring God in our schools. It means pushing for strong gun control laws.

If Obama does take this kind of leadership, he will have the support of an overwhelming proportion of Americans who support stricter guns laws. For

example, 82 percent of Americans support limiting the sales of military-style assault weapons. Also, 87 percent of Americans support background checks on private sales of guns, including sales at gun shows. And 79 percent support requiring a police permit before the purchase of a gun. Almost all (94 percent) police chiefs favor requiring criminal background checks for all handgun sales.

Every American grieves for the families and friends of the people killed and injured in the Connecticut shooting. But until we tame the power of the NRA, we can expect more killings like this, as well as the deadly daily diet of murders throughout America committed by angry and in some cases crazy gun-toting people whose “freedom” to own weapons of mass destruction LaPierre defends.

Peter Dreier is professor of politics at Occidental College. His new book, *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*, was published by Nation Books in July.

In Case You Missed...

Some special stories in March demonstrated our unique brand of investigative journalism, bringing historical context to current events. Stories included White House secrets on the sabotage of Vietnam peace talks, realization that Campaign 2012 may turn on old myths about Iran, the legal battle over health-care reform and more.

“Confusion Over the First Amendment” by Robert Parry, examining Republican claims that an employer should have a religious right to deny an employee health coverage, March 1, 2012.

“LBJ’s ‘X-File’ on Nixon’s ‘Treason’ by Robert Parry, a look-back on what Lyndon Johnson knew about Richard Nixon’s sabotage of the Vietnam peace talks, March 3, 2012.

“Profiting Off Nixon’s Treason” by Robert Parry, describing how Nixon’s Wall Street backers used inside knowledge of the doomed peace talks, March 4, 2012.

“Can Rush Keep It Up” by Peter Dreier, questioning the continued potency of Rush Limbaugh’s radio bullying, March 5, 2012.

“Romney’s Made-Up History on Iran” by Robert Parry, piercing the mythology around Ronald Reagan and Iran, March 6, 2012.

“An Israeli October Surprise on Obama” by Paul R. Pillar, assessing the

political impact of an Israeli attack on Iran, March 7, 2012.

"How the Right's Smear Machine Started" by Robert Parry, tracing the pattern back to Nixon, March 8, 2012.

"Will Netanyahu Defy Obama on Iran?" by Robert Parry, noting that the Israeli prime minister might see twin benefits in an attack on Iran, March 9, 2012.

"Israel's Tragedy of 'Victories,'" by Morgan Strong, observing how Israeli attacks on its neighbors have left it more insecure, March 10, 2012.

"Slovakia Defies Kochs and Cato" by Mark Ames, reporting on a small country rejecting "free-market" extremism, March 12, 2012.

"America's Core Values in Afghan War?" by Nat Parry, reflecting on a string of atrocities carried out by U.S. troops, March 14, 2012.

"The Surge Myths Deadly Results" by Robert Parry, examining how Iraq's "successful" surge led to a similar approach toward Afghanistan. March 17, 2012.

"The 1%'s Doctrine for the 99%" by Mark Ames, exploring the history of the rich treating average Americans as chattel, March 21, 2012.

"Did the Founders Hate Government?" by Robert Parry, reviewing America's real founding narrative, March 22, 2012.

"The Sarah Palin/Neocon Alliance" by Morgan Strong, filling in some missing pieces from HBO's "Game Change," March 22, 2012.

"Are the GOP Justices Political Hacks?" by Robert Parry, assessing the partisanship behind the Supreme Court's assault on health-care reform, March 25, 2012.

"'Hunger Games' Left Appetite for More" by Lisa Pease, reviewing the smash-hit movie, March 26, 2012.

"Hunt for the Historical Jesus" by Rev. Howard Bess, dissecting a 2,000-year-old mystery, March 26, 2012.

"GOP Justices Clown Over Health Care" by Robert Parry, pointing out the constitutional absurdity of questions from Republican justices, March 27, 2012.

"Calling Dr. Strangelove" by David Krieger and Daniel Ellsberg, explaining the hazard of keeping obsolete land-based missiles, March 27, 2012.

"GOP Justices Ignore the Founders" by Robert Parry, noting how the Republican

“strict constructionists” suddenly blow off the actual Constitution, March 28, 2012.

“[Health Law Dispute Hinges on Timing](#)” by Sam Parry, zeroing in on the narrow issue of when to buy insurance, March 28, 2012.

“[A Judicial War on Democracy](#)” by Robert Parry, viewing the Supreme Court challenge to health care reform as another blow to U.S. democracy, March 29, 2012.

“[Nature of Self-Defeating Convictions](#)” by Phil Rockstroh, reflecting on how his fellow white male Southerners buy into harmful false narratives, March 29, 2012.

“[When Is a Hack a Hack?](#)” by Robert Parry, looking at how “Obamacare” has blinded conservatives regarding their principles, March 30, 2012.

“[Minnesota Battle Over Israeli Bonds](#)” by Sylvia Schwarz, discussing a legal fight over a U.S. state investing in a foreign country, March 31, 2012.

“[If the Supreme Court Goes Rogue](#)” by Sam Parry, exploring the threat to democracy if the High Court’s majority starts ignoring the Constitution, March 31, 2012.

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Can Rush Keep It Up?

Rush Limbaugh’s gross comments about a female college student who voiced support for President Obama’s birth-control insurance compromise have forced some old Republican allies to distance themselves from the talk-radio star, raising questions about Limbaugh losing his potency, says Peter Dreier.

By Peter Dreier

The response to Rush Limbaugh’s latest tirade about college women having too much sex suggests that he may be growing impotent, politically at least.

With a large audience of conservative listeners, the radio reactionary was once able to intimidate Republican politicians into defending his outrageous comments or publicly apologizing to him if they dared voice even the mildest criticism. He was invited to speak to gatherings of GOP pols and activists, who took Limbaugh's advice in order to gain his favor and avoid his vitriol.

A Who's Who of the conservative political world – including Karl Rove, Sean Hannity, Mary Matalin, Rudy Giuliani, Fred Thompson, and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas – attended Limbaugh's fourth wedding in 2010.

But the reaction to his comments on his radio show last week – when he called a Georgetown University student a “slut” and a “prostitute” for advocating expanded access to birth control – shows that his influence may be on the wane. Has Limbaugh finally become politically impotent?

Last year, Fox News pulled Glenn Beck's show off the air as a result of declining ratings, a boycott by consumers of companies that advertised on his show, and growing controversy over Beck's increasingly lunatic diatribes. Is the end now in sight for Limbaugh's radio empire?

The latest firestorm over Limbaugh began after he attacked Sandra Fluke, a law student who testified on Capitol Hill last month in favor of the Obama administration's decision to require employers to offer health insurance plans that cover birth control.

Limbaugh said that Fluke “wants to be paid to have sex. She's having so much sex she can't afford the contraception. She wants you and me and the taxpayers to pay her to have sex.”

The talk-show host then went further, adding: “So Miss Fluke, and the rest of you Feminazis, here's the deal. If we are going to pay for your contraceptives, and thus pay for you to have sex. We want something for it. We want you post the videos online so we can all watch.”

Limbaugh's remarks sparked sharp criticism not only from President Barack Obama (who phoned Fluke on Friday to express his support) and other liberals like House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-California, but also from some Republicans and conservatives, who acknowledged that Limbaugh had crossed the line.

GOP presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum were forced to rebuke Limbaugh's comments, even though their own remarks were quite tepid. Republican Sen. Scott Brown of Massachusetts, who is running for reelection, called Limbaugh's comments “reprehensible” and said that he “should apologize.”

A spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said that Limbaugh's words

were “inappropriate.” Carly Fiorina, the former corporate CEO and one-time GOP candidate for U.S. Senate from California who now serves as vice chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee called Limbaugh’s comments “insulting.”

Could it be possible that the GOP establishment is finally realizing that its sharp rightward turn – fueled in large part by the right-wing echo chamber of which Limbaugh is the most influential player – is alienating all but the most conservative voters and leading the party off a cliff?

(Over the past two decades, the modern Republican Party has often walked hand in hand with Limbaugh toward that cliff. After the GOP congressional victory in 1994, the House Republicans were so thankful to Limbaugh that they made him an honorary member of their new majority.)

Since his comments about Fluke, however, several of Limbaugh’s top advertisers pulled out of his syndicated radio show. Quicken Loans’s Twitter statement said: “Due to continued inflammatory comments – along with valuable feedback from clients and team members – QL has suspended ads on Rush Limbaugh program.”

Two mattress companies, Sleep Train and Sleep Number, made similar statements on Friday. A Sleep Number spokesperson wrote on Twitter, “Recent comments by Rush Limbaugh do not align w/ our values, so we made decision to immediately suspend all advertising on that program.”

At first Limbaugh not only stood by his statements, but escalated the controversy. On Friday, he offered to “buy all of the women at Georgetown University as much aspirin to put between their knees as they want,” as a form of birth control.

But by Saturday, the anger toward Limbaugh had reached such a crescendo that he was forced – perhaps for the first time in his career – to apologize. The apology, posted on his website, said he did not mean to make a “personal attack” against Fluke.

“My choice of words was not the best, and in the attempt to be humorous, I created a national stir,” he wrote. “I sincerely apologize to Ms. Fluke for the insulting word choices.”

However, his sincerity remains in question. Limbaugh has made a habit – indeed an entire career – of cowardly hate-mongering toward women and other groups. For years he has called women’s rights activists “Femi-Nazis.”

The Anti-Defamation League has challenged Limbaugh for anti-Semitic remarks. He has a long history of making anti-gay statements. He lost his position as an

ESPN sports commentator for his racist comments about an African-American quarterback.

But what fueled Limbaugh's tirade against Ms. Fluke? The brouhaha over Limbaugh's recent comments have drawn attention to Limbaugh's hypocrisy between his past public rhetoric and his own personal life, including his previous habit of unleashing harsh attacks on drug users at the same time he himself was addicted to drugs.

Now, in light of Limbaugh's attack on the Georgetown law student, it hasn't escaped attention that the radio shock jock has been married four times (beginning in 1977) and has no children. Did all of Limbaugh's wives use birth control? Or could it be that Limbaugh is impotent in that way, too?

In 2009, returning from a vacation in the Dominican Republic, Limbaugh was briefly detained by U.S. Customs when they checked his bags and found a vial of Viagra with another person's name listed as the user. Viagra is prescribed for erectile dysfunction, but it is sometimes taken by men visiting other countries for "sex tourism."

Limbaugh's attorney Roy Black said Limbaugh's doctor prescribed the Viagra for Limbaugh but the prescription was put in the doctor's name for privacy reasons. Limbaugh chuckled about the Viagra incident on his radio show, "I had a great time in the Dominican Republic. Wish I could tell you about it."

Now, people are wondering: Could the link between Limbaugh's sex life, his anxiety about his declining political power and his intemperate outburst about female birth control just be a fluke?

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