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The Robber Barons Are Back!

By Aerek Vondenburg
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Editor's Note: The most impressive part of the Right's propaganda machine is how it convinces so many average Americans to support tax cuts for the rich, unbridled corporate power, and elimination of programs that improve the nation's general welfare -- and incidentally help average Americans.

Through this propaganda machine and other political machinations, an American plutocracy has managed to reverse middle-class gains of the last century and concentrate more and more wealth and power in its own hands, as Aerek Vondenburg describes in this guest essay:

Since the Gilded Age of the 19th century, the wealthy financiers and "robber baron" industrialists have been effectively purchasing power – and creating further revenue for themselves – by directing money into the coffers of business friendly politicians, who in turn vote for lower taxes, special exemptions, tax loopholes, deregulation, etc.

Although the Democrats have learned to accept big business money as well, it has been the Republicans who on average, not only receive a majority of the spoils, but are more likely to give their wealthy benefactors exactly what they want.

It was just over a century ago that the progressive Republican, Teddy Roosevelt, came into confrontation with the big business Republicans who supported William Taft, which resulted in the split of the 1912 elections.

Running on a platform of opposition to the [League of Nations](#) (a force for labor regulations and international law) and the promotion of supply-side economic interests, the Republicans solidified their connection with the corporations during the presidencies of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, in the 1920s.

The pro-business policies of the decade seemed to produce

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unprecedented prosperity — that is, until the reality of an unregulated
economy reared its ugly head. Of course, what followed was the [Wall Street
crash](#) and the [Great Depression](#).

Realizing the powerful forces that he was up against, progressive Democrat,
Franklin D. Roosevelt, initiated a campaign to protect himself and the nation
from the wealthy industrialists.

His Secretary of the Interior, Harold L. Ickes, went after the superrich "Sixty
Families," who, according to Ickes, comprised "the living center of the
modern industrial [oligarchy](#) which dominates the United States." Ickes
warned that left unchecked, they would create a "big-business Fascist
America — an enslaved America."

An oligarchy is a type of government that is run by an elite minority who are
not democratically elected. Their position is attained by royalty, family ties
and/or military position; although, in America, it is usually attained solely by
wealth. Therefore, a more accurate designation would be plutocracy (from
the Greek word *ploutos*, meaning wealth).

Roosevelt had essentially declared war on the plutocrats. As it turns out,
both Ickes and Roosevelt had reason to be concerned.

The wealthy corporate elite were indeed plotting against him. In fact, a plot
to oust Roosevelt from power via a military coup was discovered and foiled
thanks to a high-ranking military whistle-blower (Marine Corps Maj. Gen.
Smedley Butler), who was approached by the plutocrats (under the name
the American Liberty League).

Although the plutocratic plan to forcefully overtake the U.S. government
failed, the plotters did not give up. That is because they came to realize that
they could commit their coup legally. By exploiting lax laws in the political
system they could continue to effectively purchase power.

Using paid-off politicians as middlemen, the plutocrats could still get their tax
breaks and deregulation. All they needed to do was to get the right
politicians in office and the right judges on the courts.

However, they knew that they had to do more than this. What they also
needed was to have the American people themselves vote the middlemen
into power.

In 1971, a corporate lawyer and future Supreme Court justice, Lewis F.
Powell, wrote a memorandum to the director of the U.S. Chamber of
Commerce.

The memo called for the increased role of the Chamber to affect public
opinion through the means of "constant surveillance" and the monitoring of
textbooks and media to guard against "criticism of the enterprise system."
Powell also called for increased influence in the "radio and press" and a
"more aggressive attitude" in order to "influence consumer decisions."

The Chamber heeded his advice and helped initiate a new movement that
spawned the creation of more Republican think tanks, as well as other
powerful organizations that would serve to put more business-friendly
politicians in power.

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Billions of dollars were directed into organizations like the Heritage foundation, the Americans for Tax Reform, and the libertarian Cato Institute.

The Chamber of Commerce also created front groups like The Coalition: Americans Working for Real Change, and its spin-off: Americans for Job Security. These "astro-turf" (i.e. pseudo-grassroots) [organizations](#) masquerade as patriotic citizen non-profits in order to help conceal their intentions and their plutocratic funders.

It is said that to get to truth, one must "follow the money," however, groups like Americans for Job Security are determined to cover up the money trail. Moreover, these were not the only questionable activities that were being concocted by the Chamber of Commerce.

In February 2011, ThinkProgress.org [exposed an operation](#) by the organization to hire a set of private security firms to spy on the personal lives of progressive opponents in an effort to find ways to undermine them.

The plan not only involved the releasing of sensitive information related to the private family lives of these political adversaries, but also involved the fabrication of false documents as part of a draconian disinformation campaign.

Also, to win the votes of average Americans the plutocratic Republicans needed to win over minds. To do that, they came to realize that they needed to reframe the debate.

One of the secret weapons in this war of minds is a man named Frank Luntz, an American political consultant, [pollster](#), focus group analyst, and commentator and analyst for the Fox News Channel. Luntz's specialty is "testing language and finding words that will help his clients sell their product, or turn public opinion on an issue or a candidate."

His stated intention is to cause audiences to react based on emotion rather than thought. It was Luntz who changed estate tax to "death tax," oil drilling to "energy exploration," and tax cuts to "tax relief." He was also awarded the 2010 [Politifact.com](#) Lie of the Year award for his promotion of the phrase "government takeover" to refer to healthcare reform.

However, Luntz was not the only one who was interested in using words to influence hearts and minds. In 1994, Rep. Newt Gingrich, R-Georgia, wrote and distributed a memorandum (the "GOPAC Memo") titled "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control."

In it, Republican candidates were instructed what words to use when defining their opponents. For instance: the word liberal is to be associated with bureaucracy, red tape, and traitors. While the word conservative is to be related to freedom, crusade, and pride.

These connotations not only resonate in both the conscious and the subconscious mind, but more importantly, evoke emotion; which, according to Luntz, is the most important influencing factor of all — especially when pertaining to voters who are not well-informed on the issues.

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Republicans have successfully turned the word "liberal" into a bad word, even though the original definition corresponds with the principles of freedom of speech, equality, fairness, and separation of church and state that the United States of America was founded upon.

A Gallup poll revealed that most people identify themselves as conservatives; however, when people are asked about individual liberal policies, such as spending on education, environmental protections, regulation of business and Social Security, a majority of people say they approve.

The key is that they are not told ahead of time that these policies are liberal.

Even though most Americans identify themselves as conservative, the Democratic Party is the largest of all political organizations, with even more registered voters than the Republicans. Of course, these numbers presented a significant problem for the wealthy elite who represent only a very small minority of the American population.

However, the rich realized that they were not the only segment of American society offended by the progressives. There were the social conservatives.

Many plutocrats are libertarians; however, in order to get one of their own in the White House they needed to have the support of the vast conservative base in the Republican Party. What they needed to do was to find a common link between the two belief systems. So they learned how to merge their interests with those of the mostly evangelical conservatives by rallying around their disdain for their common enemy.

What most people do not know is that this link between these two worlds is mostly fabricated. For instance, in the teachings of Jesus, we do not find anything that would suggest that he would have condoned, much less have advocated anything resembling right-wing social-Darwinist economic and political philosophy.

In fact, if anything, we find just the opposite. Indeed, Jesus spoke out against hard-hearted avarice and denounced rich people who did not use their wealth to help the less fortunate. Jesus was clearly someone who would most certainly be accused of being a "socialist" or "bleeding heart" liberal by today's libertarian Republicans.

The plutocrats realized that in order to win elections they needed to influence what right-wing radio personality Rush Limbaugh refers to as "the country class." The plutocrats found all the votes that they needed in the "heartland" of America.

And it is these more rural "red state" people — the good-intentioned but often low-information folk — who are being used for plutocratic purposes. Here is what the Republicans told these conservatives:

- 1 - Democrats want to take away your guns.
- 2 - Democrats want to take away your Bibles
- 3 - Democrats want to let illegal immigrants into the country.

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- 4 - Democrats are against Israel and stand on the side of the Muslims.
- 5 - Democrats care more about the rights of criminals than victims.
- 6 - Democrats want to replace capitalism with communism.
- 7 - Democrats want to give your hard-earned money away to lazy people who do not deserve it.

What they are doing is telling the conservatives that liberals would take away "their way of life." To achieve that, the Republicans appeal to conservative fears and prejudices, and it is working.

In some cases, the plutocratic Republican leaders are even knowingly misrepresenting information and undermining facts. This is done out of a sense that the ends justify the means.

In the Powell memo from 1971, we read: "The threat to the enterprise system is not merely a matter of economics. It also is a threat to individual freedom."

Individual freedom to a conservative means the ability to abide by things like traditional Biblical values and lax gun laws. Individual freedom to the plutocrats simply means the ability to be free from government taxation and regulation. These are two completely different objectives.

Just as the Powell memo suggested, propaganda – through all forms of media – was used to indoctrinate the public. The plan worked.

Since 1980, a majority of the South has become Republican. In 2004, CNN's exit polls showed that George W. Bush led John Kerry by 70 percent to 30 percent among Southern whites. One-third of these Southern voters said they were evangelicals and voted for Bush by 80-20.

The Republican Party also has a strong influence is in the [Great Plains](#) and Mountain states.

The country class has been conditioned to:

- 1 - Protest against higher taxes on the plutocrats.
- 2 - Vote against the regulation of big business, rules designed to protect the economy, consumers and public safety.
- 3 - Fight wars for natural resources (so that companies like Halliburton can profit).
- 4 - Disbelieve overwhelming evidence from a majority of the world's leading scientists that pollution is having a dangerous effect upon our environment (so that the plutocrats can keep the factories running at full profit-making capacity).
- 5 - Protest medical insurance reform that is intended to make healthcare more accessible and less fraudulent by reducing the power of unscrupulous private profit-driven healthcare providers.
- 6 - Have contempt for labor unions.

One of the most effective propaganda themes devised by the plutocratic think tanks was the anti "Big Government" campaign that urged Americans to support "limited government." But what does "limited government" actually mean?

To the plutocrats it means that the government is limited in preventing private industry from engaging in illegal and reckless behavior. The ultimate goal of this anti Big Government campaign is to essentially privatize government; to replace democratic federal rule with a theocratic plutocracy.

One strategy that the think tanks came up with was to redirect blame for adverse situations, off of the private sector, and onto the government. Another strategy was to first sabotage and defund government programs – and then complaining that "government does not work."

Yet, why was FDR successful and why is Obama having such a difficult time?

It's not just because Obama is more of a moderate centrist than a true progressive.

It is because the plutocrats have become more successful in not only using money to influence politics and the law, but in using modern telecommunications to influence people to vote against their own best interests. This is something that their 19th century Robber Baron predecessors did not have the ability to do.

In 1944, FDR's Vice President, Henry Wallace, wrote an article in the New York Times about the dangers of American Fascism. The following passages are excerpts from this article, in which he describes the plutocrats as "fascists."

"The American fascists are most easily recognized by their deliberate perversion of truth and fact. Their newspapers and propaganda carefully cultivate every fissure of disunity, every crack in the common front against fascism....

"But always and everywhere they can be identified by their appeal to prejudice and by the desire to play upon the fears and vanities of different groups in order to gain power. ...

"They claim to be super-patriots, but they would destroy every liberty guaranteed by the Constitution. They demand free enterprise, but are the spokesmen for monopoly and vested interest. Their final objective toward which all their deceit is directed is to capture political power so that, using the power of the state and the power of the market simultaneously, they may keep the common man in eternal subjection."

Today, the plutocrats strive to continue the dream of those enemies of FDR by ending what remains of his New Deal program.

A large segment of this campaign involves the elimination of the social safety net, what they refer to as "entitlement programs." Some of their long-term goals are not only the elimination of the minimum wage, unions, and child labor laws, but the corporate privatization of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

In order for this campaign to work, they need to convince voters that the people who benefit from these programs are nothing but lazy socialist free-loaders — even though a majority of people on public assistance are the

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Even though, a majority of people on public assistance are the elderly and the disabled.

The U.S. Constitution declares that it is "We the People," not we the wealthy elite, who control the fate of the Republic.

So, what was the plutocratic solution to this constitutional dilemma? To have Republican-appointed judges on the U.S. Supreme Court rule that corporations are people and that money is the equivalent of speech. Under these new rules, whoever has the most money has the greatest influence over the country.

It is a situation that contradicts the spirit of the Founders who were influenced by the humanist values of the 18th century Enlightenment.

Some believe that what is happening is a "culture war." Others believe that it is a "class war." Although it is not being fought with guns and armies, make no mistake, it is a war.

It is a conflict that was unofficially declared by Ronald Reagan when he fired the striking air traffic controller union members, neglected the importance of the hard-working middle-class, and instituted his supply-side "trickle down" tax cuts for the rich — an economic theory that has since been discredited by even Reagan's own former budget director, David Stockman, a central architect of "Reaganomics."

If the plutocrats win this war, the American Dream will be replaced by a modern form of Feudalism, in which wage serfs serve under the rule of a elitist class of hegemonic lords.

In such an un-American system, politicians will no longer be civil servants, but businessmen who enter public service solely as a money-making venture. These self-servers will no longer answer to the people, but to the plutocrats.

Such a person does not even have to worry if his or her policies cost re-election because the plutocrats will be there with the ample rewards of a well-paying job in the private sector. Another adverse effect of a plutocracy is that white-collar crimes will largely go unpunished, as part of a two-tier system of justice.

In a theocratic plutocracy, democracy and the American Dream become only illusionary slogans to be held up as meaningless emblems to the well-meaning but uneducated base. The plutocratic Republicans wave Bibles with one hand and wrap themselves in the American flag with the other; when in fact, there is nothing religious nor patriotic about what they are doing.

Kevin Phillips, author and political strategist to President Richard Nixon, admits that the United States is becoming a plutocracy. He said in a 2004 interview with Bill Moyers that the plutocracy has existed in a way that we haven't seen "since the Gilded Age."

Although, instead of Carnegie and Vanderbilt, we now have people like the Waltons and the Koch brothers.

A University of California-Berkeley study [released in 2009](#) found that income inequality in 2007 was the highest it had ever been in recorded history, with the top 1 percent incomes capturing half of the overall economic growth over the period 1993-2007.

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Aerik Vondenburg, who lives in Portland, Oregon, is an affiliate member and contributing writer at The Center for Progressive Christianity (progressivechristianity.org) and is a featured blogger at Crossleft.com.

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