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Reaganomics and climate change

David Offutt

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At long last the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has finally decided what it wants to do about the carbon issue! The EPA has successfully regulated emissions of mercury and sulfur dioxide, but never before has it regulated carbon dioxide, and we've known about its greenhouse effects for over 30 years. Coal-fired power plants are the greatest polluters, and Arkansas has several of them.

The EPA and Obama administration hope to reduce carbon emissions nationwide to 30 percent below 2005 levels by 2030. What's taken them, or previous administrations, so long? Maybe it was necessary to wait for the U.S. Supreme Court to rule that the Clean Air Act gave the EPA the authority to regulate carbon emissions, but they did that in 2007. So maybe it was necessary to wait for the recent climate change reports to conclude that we have only a 15-year window before it's too late to prevent the global average temperature from rising beyond 2 degrees centigrade.

My explanation for our procrastination and unwillingness to act has been the success of the Lewis Powell Memorandum of 1971 and the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s. Powell laid out the mapwork that was needed to re-educate the voters so that they would vote against their own best interests. In the affable Ronald Reagan, the plutocracy (the upper 1 percent or upper .1 percent) found a spokesman who could change the public's opinion about them: Instead of their being "robber barons," they would become "job creators." The result has not only been devastating for our middle class and our national infrastructure but also for our environment.

Reagan persuaded a large number of voters that the restoration of the plutocracy and a New Gilded Age would solve all our problems. All we had to do was "return to normalcy" — return to the Gilded Age that existed between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the Progressive Era in 1901. Get rid of those pesky union workers who expect fair wages and benefits and safe working conditions; get rid of those costly safety regulations on products like food, toys and automobiles; get rid of those progressive income tax rates in which the wealthy pay a higher percentage than those with lower incomes; and get rid of those absurd environmental regulations that cut into profits for ridiculous reasons like clean air, clean water and better health.

Reagan reminded voters that it was the inventors and industrialists who had made America great. Every American could become a millionaire like railroad builder Cornelius Vanderbilt, financier J.P. Morgan, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, and oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller. (In the mid-1800s, English essayist Thomas Carlyle called people like them the "captains of industry.") All we had to do was get our constitutional government out of the way. Let developers once again have unlimited access to natural resources and labor with no regulations. Let's return to laissez-faire economics where the government gives support to Big Business, keeps its hands off the economy's ups and downs, and lets the buyers beware.

It's important to remember that the corporate welfare system of the Gilded Age led to such a wide income gap between the plutocracy and everyone else and created such unpleasant working conditions that many victims were considering alternatives to capitalism: socialism or communism. As the 20th century began, President Theodore Roosevelt became the leader of the Progressive Era. His goal was to reform the abuses of capitalism to save the system from itself. A lifetime hunter, he became a champion of the environment; and a Republican, he offered the working class and consumers a "Square Deal."

The disillusionment of World War I's failure to "make the world safe for democracy" brought a halt to our progressivism. During the "Roaring Twenties," Americans elected to return to the plutocracy of the Gilded Age. Laissez-faire was restored as "trickle-down" economics and the income inequality gap between the haves and have-nots widened again. The Great Depression that resulted brought a return to progressivism and a renaming of the "captains of industry" to the "robber barons." Capitalism had virtually collapsed, and another Roosevelt had to save it again.

Progressivism lasted for nearly 40 years.

The breaking point for the "robber barons" was probably Earth Day 1970 that led to the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and creation of the EPA. The fact that these occurred while a Republican — Richard Nixon — was president was more than they could take. It was corporate lawyer and lobbyist Lewis Powell, a lifelong corporate Democrat, who provided the guide rules as to how the plutocracy could regain control .

Months before Nixon appointed him to the U.S. Supreme Court, Powell's 1971 memo outlined several steps the plutocrats needed to influence government policy — and they succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Right-wing "think tanks," lobbying organizations, and radio and TV propaganda networks emerged to change voters' perceptions of government and corporations: the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, Fox "News," Americans for Prosperity, Club for Growth, et al. Corporations even created the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to write laws for their extremist lawmakers to present as their own to promote the interests of the plutocracy.

So, for more than 30 years, we've been stuck with Reaganomics (A.K.A. laissez-faire and trickle down). The income inequality gap has returned to Gilded Age and Roaring Twenties levels. The middle class is in rapid decline, and the burning of fossil fuels is heating up the planet. The plutocracy, through its "think tanks" and politicians and pundits, has succeeded in convincing

many voters than none of this is actually happening and, even if it were, nothing can be done about it.

Plutocratic Reaganomics and climate change denial go hand in hand — and that's the problem. Voters who bought into the first in 1980, and continue to do so, are stuck with accepting the other no matter what the scientific evidence indicates. The EPA and Mr. Obama want to do the right thing at great political risk. Big money, their politicians and their voters will continue to do everything possible to stop them — regardless of the consequences for planet Earth.