

## My take on Groundswell

By: Matt Lewis- July 26, 2013

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In reading David Corn's report on "Groundswell," a conservative conclave (which includes some former and current Daily Caller folks) that meets to "concoct talking points, coordinate messaging, and...fundamentally transform the nation," I was struck with some thoughts and questions:

1. It is to be expected that people who support an agenda will coordinate and strategize. Are we conflating "collusion" with coordination?
2. Is there hypocrisy? In other words, is it only *collusion* when the other guy does it?
3. Does the coordination only become a problem if media are involved? And, if so, are opinion columnists different from people who present themselves as neutral reporters?
4. Should we assume that all journalists are, at some level, activists? And is this admission better — more honest and transparent — than pretending otherwise?

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A few thoughts...

Politics, as they say, is like making sausage, so even when the people who are "colluding" are all on the same team, it will almost always appear unseemly to anyone outside the group. When David Corn lands a tape of Mitt Romney talking about the 47 percent — or one of McConnell's aides talking about how to defeat Ashley Judd — it will almost always *sound* worse to outsiders than it really is. This is true even though nothing unethical has occurred. I suppose that modern technology means we can never expect to have secret planning meetings before rolling a finished product out to the masses.

This is probably self evident, but it should be factored in whenever we judge the importance of such revelations.

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Is there hypocrisy here? Of course! Some people who defended the "Journalist" will be outraged by Groundswell and some people outraged by the Journalist will have no problem with Groundsell. And this will not only be true not of outside observers, but also of active participants.

You don't have to go all the way back to the Journalist controversy for an example of this. A few months ago, Matt Boyle breathlessly reported an "EXCLUSIVE" story: "Secret emails obtained exclusively by Breitbart News show the libertarian Cato Institute, Americans for Tax Reform, and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) are colluding on immigration reform messaging in the wake of the Boston Marathon terror attack in order to push the "Gang of Eight" bill that was released this past week."

Boyle clearly had no aversion to reporting on private emails, so it would be fruitless to criticize Corn in that regard. But the more interesting thing (to me, at least) was the implied astonishment that a). supporters of immigration reform might want to have a coordinated response to the Boston bombing, and b). politicians and organizations (who are transparently in favor of immigration reform) would want to, you know, have private discussions about strategy.

As far as I know (I wasn't on this secret email list), the coordination between Rubio's office, CATO, and ATR didn't include any journalists. Who knows, maybe it did? But this is arguably a very important distinction when compared to Groundswell.

For example, consider this excerpt from Corn's piece:

*At the March 27 meeting, Groundswell participants discussed one multipurpose theme they had been deploying for weeks to bash the president on a variety of fronts, including immigration reform and the sequester: Obama places "politics over public safety." In a display of Groundswell's message-syncing, members of the group repeatedly flogged this phrase in public. Frank Gaffney penned a Washington Times op-ed titled "Putting Politics Over Public Safety." Tom Fitton headlined a Judicial Watch weekly update "Politics over Public Safety: More Illegal Alien Criminals Released by Obama Administration." Peter List, editor of LaborUnionReport.com, authored a RedState.com post called "Obama's Machiavellian Sequestration Pain Game: Putting Politics Over Public Safety." Matthew Boyle used the phrase in an immigration-related article for Breitbart. And Dan Bongino promoted Boyle's story on Twitter by tweeting, "Politics over public safety?" In a message to Groundswellers, Ginni Thomas awarded "brownie points" to Fitton, Gaffney, and other members for promoting the "politics over public safety" riff.*

Clearly, Boyle was involved in the very kind of "collusion" that he seemed to be accusing the Rubio folks of facilitating — not that there's anything wrong with that.

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Let's give Groundswell credit. Most meetings are pointless. But this is an efficient way to get things done. It rewards action and holds people accountable. And it reminds me of something my friend and former boss Morton Blackwell wrote about how conservative icon Paul Weyrich would conduct meetings.

According to Blackwell, the key to Weyrich's model was this:

1. Invite people who share common interests and who will commit to take actions to further those causes
2. Invite people who have the personal ability to make things happen, through their financial resources, their communication vehicles, their grassroots following, their network of contacts, or their expertise.
3. Avoid inviting people who are merely note-takers for others.
4. Prepare an interesting, action-oriented agenda of topics for coalition meetings.
5. Brainstorm ideas for appropriate actions regarding the topics discussed.
6. Call for volunteers to take specific actions.
7. Note those who volunteer to take actions and hold them accountable for doing what they agree to do.
8. Have the meetings chaired by someone who has resources to commit, who has considerable prestige, and whom participants would fear to disappoint.

Groundswell seems to be a perfect manifestation of this model.

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Of course, this doesn't answer the ethical questions about journalism. It's one thing for activists to want to co-opt journalists, it's another thing for writers to let that happen. But let's not pretend this isn't a two-way street. Consider, for example, what Boyle wrote to the group: "I'm saying we can get pieces out fast on Breitbart. Whenever you have an idea, email or call me with a pitch and I'll do my best to get the story out there. Keep us on offense, them on defense. Even if the idea isn't perfect, I can help massage it to get there."

Is this horrible? I don't think so. First, I'm sure I have used the "fast" argument as an excuse for sources to give me information. This is a competitive business and the ability to turn things around fast is a potential selling point. It's hard to blame someone for being aggressive.

The notion that he would help "massage" stories is more problematic. But again, as Dave Weigel pointed out, it's not like Boyle is going around misrepresenting himself as a paragon of journalistic virtue. He has been utterly transparent about "enlisting in Andrew Breitbart's war."

This, I would argue, is key.

Weigel downplays the mainstream media angle, but there is a huge distinction between overt partisans and ideologues cavorting with activists and supposed mainstream journalists doing so. That's why Journalist was worse — and more newsworthy.

As James Joyner observes about Groundswell: "These people write for unabashedly partisan outlets; they're not masquerading as straight news reporters."

I think that's why this story probably won't last past today.