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The Domsday Lobby Getting a Grip

by Michael I. Niman



Much of the world focused this week on Copenhagen, where global leaders met to discuss plans to contend with catastrophic global warming. Americans, however, were more focused on golf star Tiger Woods's marital infidelity. We have our priorities.

Outside of the United States, global warming is universally acknowledged as the gravest threat humanity has ever faced. There's no longer any debate about the certainty of climate change or humanity's role in the earth's warming—just arguments over the speed at which global destruction will rain down upon us and who's gonna field the pain of confronting it. Back in La La Land, we Americans have distinguished ourselves as the last population on earth not to really give a damn about our unfolding environmental cataclysm. By the numbers, about 40 percent of us don't believe humanity had any role in polluting the atmosphere and bringing on this mess. Children born today will see major populated chunks of South Florida succumb to the sea during their lifetimes, but hell, that's not stopping their parents from moving there.

How did we come to be so insanely stupid and so incredibly out of touch with the rest of the planet's grip on reality? The answer is easy. We have an industry whose job it is to spin reality into an incoherent cerebral omelet of misinformation. We're not just dim—we're educated to be idiots. Cloven-hoofed pundits and other professional liars seize every opportunity to mislead the public into acting against our own best interests. A generation ago this meant voting for Ronald Reagan and his ilk, even as they cut taxes for the rich, nickel-and-dimed the middle class, and gutted healthcare, education, recreation, housing, and social welfare programs. Reagan made Americans feel good even as he erased a century of social progress.

A few years into this insanity, working Americans actually began, like a dog dumbly following simple commands, to hate the very union movement that brought them weekends, the 40-hour work week, minimum wages, workplace safety rules, and so on. Average Americans began, on command, to identify with their oppressors rather than with their oppressed neighbors and co-workers. The ever-widening chasm between the rich and the rest of America, the fact that we are the only industrialized nation without government-guaranteed healthcare, the ease with which terms like "homelessness" roll off our tongues, the reality that one third of the residents of Buffalo are functionally illiterate—all this is the result of our generation-long stupor. But social inequality can always be reversed. That's what revolutions are often about.

Climategate

The Reagan-era plunder didn't stop with the upward redistribution of wealth and a general indifference to working Americans. The greedy didn't just steal our labor and our health—they raped the very environment that all of us, ourselves included, rely on for our day-to-day survival. We have lobbies that fight environmental laws in order to allow corporations to foul our air and water with carcinogens, endocrine disruptors, and other previously unimagined poisons. Why? So that someone somewhere can accumulate more material wealth, a bigger mansion, a private jet, or the sexual services of people who hate them, all with the coin they get by destroying the basis of their own existence. How rich is rich enough?

Bought and paid for politicians, rather than join the debate on how to best address global warming, prefer to throw tires on the fire and feed the global

warming smokescreen with monotonously scripted debates on the very existence of the problem. A media noise machine invents an endless array of vapid terminology crafted and tested to maximize confusion, employing memes such as “climategate” and proliferating them with endless repetition.

Follow the money

So let’s follow the money and get to the bottom of the Doomsday Industry. Global warming deniers cloak themselves in quasi-scientific veneers spun by pseudo-academic groups such as the Heartland Institute, the Acton Institute, the Annapolis Center for Science-Based Public Policy, the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, the American Enterprise Institute, the George C. Marshall Institute, the Fraser Institute, the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Committee for Economic Development, the Cato Institute, and the Reason Foundation—all of which are partially funded by Exxon-Mobil. Toss in some funding from the coal industry and the auto industry, and you wind up with no shortage of grant-funded, B-roll academics willing to parrot the company line. Mate them with the Fox “News” and talk radio blabber drones, and you have a manufactured debate capable of derailing climate action. It’s all about Exxon’s short-term revenues, which last year broke all world records for corporate profits, and a dying auto industry’s vested interest in peddling its mechanical dinosaurs, long-term planetary survival be damned.

The same model holds true wherever we see politicians and pundits joining forces to fight against the public good. Americans die every day because they lack healthcare, yet all attempts to develop a universal healthcare system and healthcare price controls have been thwarted for a generation by propaganda efforts funded by the private, for-profit healthcare industry. As is the case with addressing global warming, opponents of real healthcare reform aren’t coming up with a better proposal—instead they’ve been successfully lobbying for no proposal for a generation.

The healthcare mob

When I was a kid, it was well known that a few organized crime families got a skim off of all private garbage carting dollars spent in New York City. The same rule holds true today in the healthcare industry, where a handful of insurance companies have artificially inserted themselves between healthcare recipients and their providers. They take their skim. The only difference is that the garbage mafia actually hauled trash. The health insurance industry, in contrast, makes its best profits by denying services, sometimes at the cost of its customers’ lives. It appears that the only way this industry will instruct its bordello of politicians to allow the nation to institute universal healthcare is if “reform” expands that skim with public funding, mandating that everyone do business with this unnecessary private industry.

The healthcare debate parallels the global warming debate. The healthcare industry has attempted to bolster its image and position with somewhere in the neighborhood of a billion dollars spent on public relations and advertising over the last decade. Politicians opposed to healthcare reform often cite academic studies by “think tanks” like the Lewin Group, which is actually a subsidiary of healthcare giant UnitedHealth. If the “public option” is killed, and the government adopts a universal coverage mandate, UnitedHealth, according to a report by Bloomberg News, stands to gain 10 million new paying customers for their for-profit business. The new revenue will assure that UnitedHealth and similar companies will have the money to tweak the healthcare debate for another generation. In anticipation of a coming celebration, a UnitedHealth lobbyist threw a fundraiser for Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi back in September, right after she announced her willingness to sell out the public option.

Not only has the healthcare lobby successfully fended off all efforts at healthcare reform, they’ve also managed to restructure healthcare in the United States following a Wall Street profit maximization structure. This has decimated the surge capacity in American hospitals. Airlines have long operated under the correct premise that all seats should be sold before a plane takes off, since empty seats lose all value once the plane backs away from the gate. Likewise, empty hospital beds represent excess capacity with a cost to the provider and no revenue stream for reimbursement. Hence, despite growing public health threats, we’ve seen a slew of hospital closings and mergers over the last decade.

The problem is, unlike in air travel, people can’t put off their health emergencies until the “low season.” Hence, people now die waiting for emergency care, and cities have no surge capacity to deal with catastrophes or pandemics. Granted, it’s a bad business model to keep all those empty beds in inventory for the rare occasion when they’ll all be filled, but healthcare should be more than a business that weighs sporadic losses of life against overall profitability.

Politicians who lobby to deny healthcare to those who need it, rather than figure out how to deliver it, essentially comprise a death lobby. They’d be cousins to the doomsday lobbyists and politicians—except that they’re usually the same people.

Investment vehicles and other poker chips

There’s also the precarious state of the global economy, brought about by a generation of greed-based deregulation of what we are now seeing as criminal enterprises that dominate the financial industry. A lot of people got very rich looting the real value out of our economy while creating bizarre conceptual “investment vehicles” that belonged on a poker table more than in a nation’s financial system. The end result was a near collapse of the system, thwarted by unpopular and unjust public bailouts of the very institutions that were holding our economy for ransom. Real reform of the financial system, and real accountability for those who got rich looting it, is still not on the table, and the doomsday lobby remains hell-bent on derailing any injection of responsibility or restraint into the system.

There’s a pattern emerging here. The Reagan-Bush-Clinton-Bush era left us with a decimated social safety net, healthcare apartheid, a crippling wealth gap, a downward redistribution of the tax burden, class-based disparities in public education funding, unaffordable colleges and universities, a plethora of critical unfolding environmental catastrophes, global political instability, and so on.

Addressing any of these issues will involve pain and sacrifice. Not addressing them invites calamities and undermines our very survival, both physically and as a democracy.

These calamities, however, aren’t immediate. The sacrifices we must make, such as conserving energy and paying for equitable universal healthcare, will be. Hence, opposing all collective stabs at responsibility, weak as they may be, can be effectively spun into political capital at election time. Healthcare reform and climate action will produce problems and growing pains as we adjust to a culture of less personal consumption and more collective responsibility. Functionally illiterate voters with limited access to balanced information, weaned on a media culture that values Tiger Woods’s sex life more than a global climate summit, are ripe to be manipulated.

No action supports an unjust status quo that enriches a small powerful elite while maintaining a socially and environmentally toxic agenda. If politicians and lobbyists care about their own family’s survival, they’ve got to be hoping that they lose these fights, yet they don’t want to go out on a limb, offend their sponsors, or risk taking any responsibility for the sacrifices we’re eventually going to have to make.

Jimmy Carter the party pooper

Jimmy Carter's presidency died with his 1979 Malaise Speech, imploring Americans to conserve energy, consume less, and raise windfall profit taxes in order to fund solar energy development. We weren't ready at the time to grow up. Reagan promised us an endless orgy of consumption with no cover charge—and he took the presidency from Carter at the next election. Under Reagan, the oil, chemical, coal and timber industries took over dictating our environmental policies while the banking industry took over financial regulation. Newly merged media conglomerates worked to re-boot our culture to accommodate the corporate agenda. The bill for the ensuing generation of laissez-faire government policies allowing corporations to run roughshod over the economy, the environment and the workforce, is now due.

We, still, however, have a strong extremely well funded political movement in this country whose unstated and probably unacknowledged function is to hasten the end of the world. Don't take my word for it—take theirs, and watch them as they work to thwart any effective attempts to confront the problems that most threaten our collective survival.

Dr. Michael I. Niman is a professor of journalism and media studies at Buffalo State College. His previous Artvoice columns are available at artvoice.com, archived at mediastudy.com, and available globally through syndication.

Reader Comments

Erasmus Jackson

17 Dec 2009, 00:52

You want a quick end to the world?

Turn off the power grid.

Dave McK

17 Dec 2009, 01:02

OK, let's follow the really big money:

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/jamesdelingpole/100019821/climategate-wit-h-business-interests-like-these-are-we-really-sure-dr-rajendra-pachauri-is-fit-to-head-the-ipcc/>

Nice trick, eh? Close down a factory, kill 1700 jobs, get paid for it. Set up the factory where labor is cheap, get paid again. Repeat.

On the topic of derivative bubbles- do you know how much the carbon indulgence derivatives market is expected to be in 10 years if they pass a Cap & Trade bill? How about a bubble as big as the world economy?

<http://www.ccf.com/>

Europol already claims there's 7.5 billion dollars worth of just tax fraud on them so far.

a dood

17 Dec 2009, 10:28

Wow. This was the biggest pile of garbage I've ever read in my life.

Note to self: don't send the kids to Buffalo State College.

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