



The law—prepackaged for your convenience

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I was reading about Trayvon Martin and Florida's nutty Stand Your Ground law and I found the National Rifle Association was behind it (no surprise there) along with something called ALEC. ALEC? It rang a bell.

Then on Monday, Paul Krugman wrote about how the country's largest private prison operator and ALEC were behind Arizona's notorious illegal immigrant law, and the bell rang louder.

It dawned on me: A February story in the *Dispatch* about 20 Ohio Statehouse Republicans getting free trips for themselves and their wives to swanky "conferences" in places like San Diego and New Orleans, courtesy of something called ALEC, a "right-leaning, pro-business policy group."

Well, yes, it certainly is that. But that doesn't do the American Legislative Exchange Council justice. ALEC has moved beyond lobbying or just flat-out buying politicians. ALEC permits corporate America to literally write its own laws.

Our late, lamented SB5? Right out of the ALEC playbook. What they do—they call it "model" legislation—is save Republican state reps the trouble of coming up with their own anti-union, anti-environment, anti-voting, anti-immigrant, pro-gun laws. The giant corporations that fund ALEC are glad to write them.

Those voter ID laws all the rage in statehouses across the country, those Republican governors on union-busting sprees, the calls to round up illegal immigrants—you think that's all a coincidence? You don't know ALEC.

ALEC has "been waiting in the wings for Republicans to take over the state legislatures and governorships, and [has] pre-packaged off-the-rack public policies with a

conservative bent, ready for introduction,” a Florida political science professor told the Tampa Tribune.

ALEC has been around for a while (ask John Kasich—he was a member as far back as the '70s). It's allegedly funded by its legislative members, as well as corporations, but it's the corporations that pick up about 98 percent of the tab. And what corporations: Exxon, Wal-Mart, PhRMA, AEP, Coca-Cola, Boeing, along with the usual shadowy financiers like the Koch brothers and Richard Scaife, plus “think tanks” like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute.

So let's say you're the Corrections Corporation of America and you need to fill all those jails you're building. Locking up illegal immigrants in Arizona would be a gold mine, as would getting a state like Ohio to privatize its overwhelmed prison system.

Under the aegis of ALEC, you invite Ohio and Arizona GOP lawmakers (and their wives) to a five-star hotel in sunny San Diego for a “conference” where the booze and food flow freely and there are handy-dandy, ready-made laws for you to take back home.

The Center for Media and Democracy reports that 33 bills were introduced in Ohio last year that were similar or identical to 64 ALEC “model” proposals. So what, says state Sen. Bill Seitz, an ALEC board member. ALEC pays for his trips to San Diego and New Orleans out of a “scholarship fund” so the good people of Ohio won't have to.

As Seitz told the Dispatch: “I like being able to say I don't travel at taxpayers' expense.”