

Maybe They Are After Us

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I've always been particularly contemptuous of conspiracy theories, whether it's U.N. sponsored black helicopters, the dangers of the Trilateral Commission, or alien abduction. It's never been the way I see things, although as a kid I had a period of concern over sitting on toilets and baby alligators that kids bought at the circus and flushed into New York City sewers.

But now I am joining mainstream America in its paranoia. This week we've witnessed the dissolution of ACORN, the leading national advocacy group for the poor, shut down with the active help of the Congress from both parties, and the stunning decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission* which allows unlimited spending by corporations and labor unions in political campaigns. ACORN was forced out of business despite the fact that the expose' that led to repeated attacks on it was perpetrated by a conservative activist now charged with a wiretapping attempt against U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, and the congressional blocking of funds to the group was found to violate the Constitution as a Bill of Attainder, a law aimed at only one group or person.

The Supreme Court decision suddenly makes the whole notion of campaign finance laws a joke. How in the world is a person or a group without money and/or power going to cope with corporations which can literally throw millions into a political campaign and consider it pocket change? In New York City, we're all still staggered by the \$112 million spent by Mayor Bloomberg last year to get reelected. Against major multinational corporations, that amount could well be considered trivial in the future.

Why do these things come together in my paranoid delusion? Because I don't see how a democracy can function under these conditions, with efforts to engage in grassroots organizing being cut down whenever they get too strong, a media which are controlled only by persons and corporations of great wealth, and - the final blow - elections which depend solely on getting messages out through organizing or a media completely under the control of corporate America.

Now, after a drink or two, I calm down and realize that as usual nothing will go quite as I envision it in my nightmare. But I do think progressives, those concerned with a democratic America, or just plain people who believe in fairness will fight back. Some of the things that could be done quickly are to place strict controls on corporate campaign spending and level the playing field by encouraging all nonprofits, including those receiving government money, to engage in nonpartisan voter registration and advocacy for their constituents. And, finally, our hallowed foundation community has to start putting money into grassroots organizing and advocacy instead of adding new wings to teaching hospitals that only serve those with lots of insurance. They all keep giving lip service to democratic values and civic engagement, but they ran like crazy when ACORN came under attack.

Now may be the time to look more carefully when institutions that serve the poor, people of color, and working Americans start coming under fire. It may not be as random as we thought.