

What Ails Us

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As the protest grows, in New York and elsewhere, against Wall Street, commentators complain that the issues haven't yet been made clear. Is it all the economy, predator banks and corporations and joblessness?

Look at the American political system as it operates now. Its principal objective is the upward transfer of wealth. We all know the numbers: a greater disparity between the upper 1% and all the rest than ever seen before in this country, and political power goes with it. It has not happened by accident. Elections have been made so expensive that hardly a candidate can run for any office without selling out first to the corporations which are the custodians of the national wealth.

It was not always so. We can see the carefully planned campaign to make it so in the 1970s, and it is older than that. It was the meaning of the Reagan presidency, with the drastic tax cuts and the undercutting of labor unions. The Republican Party bought into this wholly, but there is no political opposition, as the Democratic Party has made its own deal: so long as it gets its cut, it will make no trouble.

It all went into a new gear with the George W. Bush campaign, when the corporate forces were able to choose their own nominee, someone they were sure they could control – they knew the right buttons to push – and he was given a minder in Mr. Cheney to make sure he conformed. Any regulatory or ethical constraints remaining on the corporations since the 1930s had to be removed. They are artificially defined as persons with full rights, their money a form of speech.

One of the troubles with this arrangement is that the corporations, increasingly running the country, have no long-range policy interests. They are in the game only for short-term profit. So they have left definition of policy to the other limb of what Dwight D. Eisenhower had warned us of, the military-industrial complex, source of much of their profits through military build-up and international arms trade, and we have our neo-conservatives. Increasingly these policy-makers concluded that the answer to any problems the country faced was military, and the hype that was spread to the country, by the bought politicians and media wholly owned by these same corporate interests, worked to make that our national myth.

Left with no restraints, they overplayed their theme, of course. Wars for which we did not bother to pay and an orgy of reckless lending and borrowing brought us to the present state of

economic crisis, for which everyone pays except those who brought it about. By now we are only vestigially the democracy we imagine ourselves to be.

One factor might encourage us. This is not the first time all this happened in our country. After the 19th-century Civil War, the same thing happened: the gilded age, robber barons, trusts, desperate conditions of working Americans, suppression of their attempts at organization, the bravado of the Spanish-American War. That was brought to a close by two things: Teddy Roosevelt's Anti-Trust law put on the brakes, and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal reversed the process. Wealth was widely redistributed, we lived at peace and the country enjoyed several decades of unparalleled prosperity and growth of influence. It was shadowed by the Cold War, of course, and that gave an excuse for the formation of the military-industrial complex which has since eaten us up.

But if those forces could be beaten once, they can be beaten again. Many of us thought that the Obama Administration would do a Roosevelt for us, but so far we have seen too much timidity for that. Popular indignation took the form of a Tea Party, made up of people so ill-informed that they hardly noticed how they were manipulated by the same multi-billionaires who had brought us the trouble. But now with the Occupy Wall Street movement we have some people striving for a better understanding of what is happening. So far the politicians, frightened that their funders might catch them being disobedient, are not listening, but there is hope in the air.