



# LOWDOWN

Edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer ◆ Vol.10 No.10 ◆ October 2008

**"Even the smallest dog can lift its leg on the tallest building."**  
— JIM HIGHTOWER

Whoever wins, we need Kevin, Heather, A.J., Monisha, Stan, Debbie, and Peter

## Political outsiders are the only change we can count on

**A** T A TIME WHEN WE THE PEOPLE have been vociferously and unequivocally demanding that our political aspirants offer Big Ideas on America's Big Issues (good jobs, health care for all, the wars, Wall Street greed, our collapsing infrastructure, big-money corruption of government, etcetera), the presidential campaign has taken a dive into the politics of lipstick and other smears.

Barack Obama's campaign has been oddly tepid, as if on cruise control. It has not been hammering its best ideas, such as his call for a massive, long-term, multibillion-dollar program to restore America's economy and world leadership through a Green Deal that would create millions of middle-class jobs and achieve true energy independence from Big Oil. Far worse, the once-proud "straight-talk express" of John McCain has dissolved into a pool of Karl Rovian sleaze.

The McCainites shrieked in September that Obama had called the sainted Sarah Palin a lipstick-

wearing pig. Which, of course, he had not. Wait, they shrieked even more shrilly in a campaign ad, Obama supported a bill to require "comprehensive sex ed" for kindergartners, forcing children to learn about sex "before learning to read." Which, of course, he had not. Then came last month's Wall Street banking collapse, and McCain immediately popped out an ad huffing that Obama was getting his advice on

financial policy from a former CEO of one of the failed banks. Which, of course, he was not. McCain's henchmen have also spread rumors that Obama is a Muslim, that he is not

### THREE FACES OF CHANGE



## ARMY TRAWLS MALLS FOR KILLERS

From football to beach volleyball, competitive games can get your juices going.

But the ultimate game, the one that'll give you the greatest rush, is...what? Why, it's war, of course. Yeah, you literally get to kill the other team! How great is that?

Such thinking (if it can be called thinking) is behind the latest leap in marketing by the U.S. Army. In its constant effort to lure young people into the killing business, military recruitment has come up with "Army Experience Centers," the first of which has opened right across from the Dave & Busters food-and-fun outlet in a mall in northeast Philadelphia.

With more than 14,000 square feet of prime mall space, the army center is bigger than three basketball courts and is filled with nearly 80 video, gaming stations, a replica command-and-control center, and—best of all—simulators that let the kids get a feel for the military action of, say, a Black Hawk helicopter.

The simulators are way cool. For example, youngsters can sit in a model chopper with a simulator that makes it seem as though they're ripping right over a mountain village, and—get this—they get the thrill of shooting at enemies in the village! Yes, the virtual thrill of the kill coming to a mall near you. And the army says it hopes to replicate the experience all across the country.

One enthusiastic army general says that the center is "a learning laboratory." Yeah, but...do we really want youngsters learning that stuff? Not to worry, say the recruiters, for the army does have rules—for example, while the "laboratory" is open to all ages, kids can't play the video games until they're 13. No toddlers allowed.

2

even an American citizen, and that he won't put his hand over his heart to pledge allegiance to our flag. Which, of course, he is not, he is, and he does. And have you heard? Obama has fathered black children!

Such stuff would be a knee-slapping hoot if it was a skit on "Saturday Night Live," but this is a campaign to choose the president of the United States. Every day that McCain and crew can set the media yackety-yackers buzzing over nonsense and force Obama to respond to lipstick is a day that there is no national discussion of what matters.

This would be crawl-into-a-dark-hole depressing except for one thing: **YOU**. In recent weeks, I've been traveling a great deal, participating in grassroots events in such disparate places as Colorado Springs, Baraboo (Wisconsin), northern New Jersey, Kansas City, and Denison, Texas (where I was born and raised). Everywhere, people are enthusiastic, on the move, determined not to let America be suckered again, and filled with a spirit of cautious political optimism.

People who have never (or at least not lately) been moved to pay attention to politics are engaged. The talk at chat-and-chew cafés, in workplace break rooms, on commuter trains, on bar stools, and in every place outside of funeral parlors is about the election. Hundreds of thousands of young people are volunteering. Even grade-school kiddos are talking about Obama and McCain. The political dynamic is electric, and there is a sense that real change is possible.

### Crowding the polls

As Woody Allen once observed, a big part of life is just showing up. This is certainly true in elections, where turnout matters. I always thought it was rather pathetic for the McCain camp to sneer at the huge crowds that show up for Obama events and for McCain to mock Obama as "a celebrity." I can tell you from experience that political crowds are hard to generate, and drawing huge ones is at least a clue that the candidate has unusual popularity—not anything to scoff at when you're in a popular election. Interestingly, now that Palin has proved to be a turn-on for the GOP faithful and is producing big crowds for McCain's rallies, we hear less from that campaign about the shallowness of celebrity

The little-reported story, however, is that folks are not merely going to

speeches, they're going to work. Both parties have all of their reliable political troops at work, but many, many more volunteers are showing up this year, especially in the Obama camp, altering the arithmetic of the election and befuddling pundits and pollsters.

The historic Obama-Clinton primary race drew millions of additional voters to the polls. The vast majority of them are still energized, with thousands now volunteering to help register and turn out millions more in November. An Associated Press survey finds that since the 2006 election, more than two million Democrats have been added to the rolls in the 28 states that register voters by party. The same survey finds that Republican registration has dropped in those states by 344,000.

This grassroots registration effort, running under the radar of the conventional media, can alter the balance in such key states as Pennsylvania, where Democrats have added 375,000 voters since 2006, while Republicans have lost 117,000. Nationwide, there are now about 42 million registered Democrats and 31 million Republicans.

The GOP has long used its deep pockets and micro-targeting systems to build a get-out-the-vote advantage. This year, however, various Democratic constituency groups are fielding an army of foot soldiers, a move that should dramatically increase the number of voters. The AFL-CIO, for example, has allocated \$53 million to reach 13 million union-friendly voters in 24 priority states; MoveOn.org is spending \$38 million to help add 500,000 young voters to the polls in swing states; more than 1,400 members of the service-employees union (SEIU) have taken leave from their jobs to work full-time for various Democratic candidates in 12 states; and America Votes, a coalition of 50 groups (ranging from the NAACP to the League of Rural Voters), has a \$25 million budget to coordinate a national ground campaign.

People are expected to show up on November 4 in such numbers that election officials in state after state are both thrilled and alarmed. The alarming part is that the anticipated turnout tsunami (including the likelihood of the highest young-voter turnout in American history) will swamp poll workers, causing long lines, delays, and explosive frustrations in many precincts. It's difficult for counties to recruit, train, and pay for election-day workers in normal

years—and this one will be way above normal.

### Progressives on the move

The buzzword for this year's presidential election is "change," driven by the fact that a whopping 81% of the public say that our leaders have put America on the wrong path. The rising clamor for a new direction is so strong that even McCain, who had been touting his long lifetime of experience, is now straining to claim that he—a 26-year member of Congress and a comfortable Washington insider—is an agent of change.

But real change can't come from one elected official. Not even a president. Rather, progress is made incrementally by hundreds of "change campaigns" run by grassroots forces. These efforts are rarely spotlighted by the media giants, yet they offer the brightest hope for advancing a true populist agenda and empowering America's progressive majority.

As we know from experience, the system won't miraculously turn democratic, nor will public policies turn progressive, merely by putting Democrats in charge of the White House and Congress. For progressive results, the progressive movement itself must get stronger, broader, smarter, more effective, more resilient—and less reliant on getting occasional favors from a few big-name politicians who're nowhere near as progressive or as gutsy as the people themselves.

The good news is that this movement has been gaining strength, developing its skills, and winning more elections over the last several years. Such groups as Progressive Majority, Wellstone Action, and Progressive Democrats of America have been recruiting, training, funding, backing, and electing thousands of candidates for local, state, and congressional offices. Teaming up with unions, churches, environmentalists, women's groups, farm advocates, poor people's organizations, clean-energy activists, and so many others, these progressive forces are in the field again this year with some exciting campaigns. Since the national media ignores these efforts, we're offering here a small sample of the different sorts of vibrant, non-presidential races under way.

■ **KEVIN KILLER.** Now here's a memorable name for you! A 28-year-old Oglala Lakota tribal member who lives and works on the Pine Ridge Reservation as a (gasp!) community organizer, Killer is a

graduate of Wellstone Action's campaign camps and has served as a trainer for other Wellstone grads. Having won a four-way Democratic primary, this smart young activist is running an unabashedly populist race for the South Dakota house, focusing on the creation of living-wage jobs, improvement of the public schools, development of wind energy, and support for other aspects of the green economy. ([kevinkiller.com](http://kevinkiller.com)).

■ **HEATHER RYAN.** A veteran of the U.S. Navy and a part-time seller of Mary Kay cosmetics, Ryan has the support of Sen. Russ Feingold's Progressive Patriots Fund. She was executive director of a small nonprofit theater in Paducah, Kentucky, until she had an encounter early this year with GOP Sen. Mitch McConnell. She tried to ask him a question about

Iraq, which he ducked. The next day, she was warned by her theater's board that McConnell staffers objected to her actions, so she should zip it. When she questioned this, she was fired. Rather than slink away, an outraged Ryan filed for Congress and is running a spirited campaign on such issues as universal health care, a living wage, Washington's culture of corruption, and domestic violence. ([ryanforkentucky.org](http://ryanforkentucky.org))

■ **COLORADO BOARD OF REGENTS.** This is the elected governing body of the University of Colorado. Although this nine-member group directs policy and spending for the statewide university system, which is Colorado's third-largest employer, board elections tend to be little noticed and little contested. However, Progressive Majority, a group dedicated to building a "farm team" of good

candidates for public office, pays attention to such races and is backing three young contenders: A.J. Clemmons, a former Golden Gloves champion in Colorado who now serves as a community-liaison official with the Denver police department and is a strong advocate for women's issues; Monisha Merchant, a 31-year-old high-tech employee who is pushing economic-justice issues; and Joe Neguse, a CU law-school student who serves on the Boulder Housing Authority. ([progressivemajority.org](http://progressivemajority.org))

■ **STAN GRUSZYNSKI.** Democrats need only three seats to win majority control of the Wisconsin Assembly, which has long been in Republican hands, and several strong progressives are running competitive campaigns this year. One is Gruszynski, who still lives on the upstate dairy farm where he grew up and heads a rural community-development program. A hard-working candidate and tremendous speaker (I've heard him pound the podium at recent Fighting BobFest hoorahs), Stan is able to unite labor, family farmers, and environmentalists with his populist values and policies. ([gruszynskiforassembly.com](http://gruszynskiforassembly.com))

■ **DEBBIE COOK.** A former college athlete, PTA president, girls' volleyball coach, and small business-woman, Cook got into politics through a successful grassroots campaign to stop developers from building a golf course and retail complex on the public beach and pier in Huntington Beach, California. This led to her winning a seat on the city council, and in 2002 she became mayor. Now she's running for Congress against the longtime right-wing incumbent, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, and

**GEORGE W. ARMS THE WORLD**

At last, George W. has his legacy. Working with military contractors who backed his presidential runs, Bush has become history's number-one gunrunner! He has now sold or given away more war weaponry to more countries than any other U.S. president.

This year has been his best. Bush's Pentagon sales force, which acts as broker between U.S. weapons makers and foreign buyers, has produced \$32 billion in sales this fiscal year, a giant leap from \$12 billion in 2005. Fighter jets, missiles, tanks, drones, helicopters, warships, you-name-it—the Pentagon has been turned into a Weapons R Us megastore for the world.

This year's rush is because it's the last of the Bush-Cheney reign, and the U.S. industry fears that the next administration might tighten up a bit on such proliferation. Bush & Company are eager to re-arm Iraq, for example, hoping to buy its long-term acquiescence to a permanent U.S. military presence in that increasingly balky nation.

Beyond Iraq, sales are—pardon the pun—booming all around the world. Hot markets include Argentina, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Georgia, India, Morocco, and Pakistan. In Bush's first term, sales to these governments totaled less than a billion dollars; in the past four years they've—pardon another pun—exploded to nearly \$14 billion.

A Bush appointee who helps coordinate some of the biggest arms sales insists that such profligate spreading of weaponry will cement George's legacy because "this is about building a more secure world." Yeah, sure—security is no longer a blanket, it's a bomb.

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## NO BAILOUT FOR WOUNDED VETS

We've seen what Bush did when Wall Street's finest were revealed to be, in his words, "a house of cards." Next month's *Lowdown* will talk more about W's trillion-dollar taxpayer gift to Wall Street. But, where was he when America's wounded veterans—including thousands severely wounded in his misguided Iraq war—needed him? Last year he was caught unawares by the scandalous mistreatment vets were getting at the Army's Walter Reed hospital and other VA medical centers.

Bush promised to do something, and in February his army surgeon general told Congress that "we are entirely staffed at the point we need to be," adding with bravado that "a key element of our warrior ethos is that we never leave a soldier behind on the battlefield—or lost in a bureaucracy."

Great line! Mission accomplished!

But why aren't veterans applauding? Because they know it's not true. In June, congressional staffers investigated a wounded-vet center in Texas that was set up for 649 patients but is now jammed with more than 1,300. Another 350 vets are on a waiting list even though many are at high risk of suicide. Instead of being "entirely staffed," the center has only half the number of nurse case-managers it needs.

The Bushites' excuse? Gosh, they simply didn't anticipate so many wounded soldiers coming out of Iraq. Excuse me! The war has been going on for more than five years, and casualties have poured into hospitals since day one.

4

campaigning for a single-payer health-care system, a new GI bill for veterans, green-collar jobs, and ending the U.S. occupation of Iraq. (*debbiecook forcongress.com*)

- **PETER GOLDMARK.** Lifelong rancher, volunteer wildfire fighter, and respected conservationist, Goldmark is taking on the timber giants in Washington State in a heated campaign for commissioner of public lands. As head of the department of natural resources, the commissioner oversees the use and protection of more than 5 million acres of state land and water and also directs the state's largest fire department. Goldmark, who is committed to long-term sustainability, has drawn the ire of Weyerhaeuser and other corporate powers, which have amassed a \$500,000 fund to defeat him. However, he has the support of a broad coalition that includes ag leaders, labor, environmental groups, teachers, and tribal organizations. (*petergoldmark.com*)

### Taking the initiative

When politicians, campaign donors, and lobbyists control the public agenda, people end up left out and run over. But all across the country, these political "outsiders" are seizing the agenda by putting their own progressive ideas on the ballot at state and local levels. In recent years, this grassroots process has led to such important democratic reforms as living-wage laws, public financing of elections, medical-marijuana protections, clean-energy programs, and expanded health-care coverage.

This year is no different. To see this populism in action, look to Colorado, which has three strong

ballot measures that directly challenge the corporate order:

- **INITIATIVE 113** would end an annual \$300-million tax subsidy for Big Oil, instead putting this money into college scholarships, wildlife-habitat preservation, and public-infrastructure projects. BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Exxon Mobil, and Occidental Petroleum—all of which are presently reaping unprecedented profits—are putting up some \$30 million to defeat the measure, hoping to continue their boondoggle subsidy from Colorado taxpayers.
- **INITIATIVE 79** is about simple fairness for working people. It says that corporations may fire an employee—as long as there is a just cause. Currently, bosses can dump workers for their haircuts, their political views, or for no reason at all. Under I-79, bad employees can still be fired, but corporations simply have to say why. Seven out of ten Coloradoans support this just-cause proposal.
- **INITIATIVE 75** scares the bejeezus out of the corporate establishment. It requires top executives who commit fraud to pay their criminal fines out of their own pockets, rather than merely passing the bill on to taxpayers (under present rules, a guilty CEO can

## The bailout bonanza

**THE BUSHITES' TRILLION-DOLLAR GIVEAWAY** started out as a bailout for banks with big holdings of investment schemes based on home mortgages. Then lobbyists got "any other financial instrument" included. Then foreign-based banks, including **Swiss-based UBS** (whose chief lobbyist, former Senator Phil Gramm, is longtime economic advisor to John McCain), muscled into the party, looking for a handout to cover **\$20-billion worth of bad paper** it bought.

Now Wall Streeters are lining up for more than a billion dollars in fees for "managing" the bailout. Yes, some of the very outfits that caused this mess plan to cash in on the cleanup!

So far the tab is well over **\$2,333 for every man, woman, and child** in our land.

In the next *Lowdown*, we'll unravel this along with other **Greatest Hits of the Bush Empire**.

have the corporation pay the fine, which in turn can be deducted from corporate taxes as a cost of doing business). In addition, this ballot proposal requires those at the top to report criminal fraud in their corporations when they learn about it.

To keep up with these and dozens of other "kitchen table" issues that citizens have put before voters this year, connect with the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center in Washington, D.C. (*ballot.org/202-223-2373*).

### Onward

The most important story of Election 2008 is not about Democrats vs. Republicans, but about the thousands and thousands of "little d" democrats who are on the move all across America. They are figuring out how to get around the barriers of power-structure politics to make grassroots issues and people matter—from local elections all the way to the presidency. While their present focus is on November 4, they are in this for the long haul, steadily building the grassroots base and electoral infrastructure necessary to create and sustain a progressive government. This is the difficult but essential work that democracy requires, and it's the only change we can count on.

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### POLITICAL OUTSIDERS ARE THE ONLY CHANGE WE CAN COUNT ON

- 2 Army trawls malls for killers
- 3 George W. arms the world
- 4 No bailout for wounded vets