

The *HighTower* **LOWDOWN**

Edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer ♦ Vol.11 No.12 ♦ December 2009

“If they say you can’t make a difference, remember this: Even the smallest dog can lift its leg on the tallest building.”

—JIM HIGHTOWER

Forget for a moment our culture of wealthcare—and celebrate some grassroots victories

These folks aren’t waiting for change, they’re making it happen

HAVING JUST GRADUATED from the University of North Texas in June 1965, I headed east to Washington, D.C., for a few years. I wanted to experience a place and culture that were different from where I’d been raised—and to absorb all the lessons I could about the new American politics emerging as my generation came of age in the sixties and seventies, including the progressive populist lessons to be found in such transformative movements as civil rights, antiwar activism, farmworker justice, feminism, and environmentalism, and the Ralph Nader model of corporate muckraking and public-interest advocacy.

It was a heady time for a 22-year-old Texas bumpkin to arrive in the nation’s capital, for D.C. was an exciting, creative place politically. However, the city suffered from a serious, almost terminal cultural flaw: there was no Mexican food or barbecue worth eating. You could take the boy out of Texas, but you could not take Texas out of the boy, and I yearned for a real taste of home. Then it came. The best Christmas present I ever received was from my parents—a cardboard box filled with a fantastic assortment of BBQ sauces, Cajun spices, chili mixings, tostados, salsa...and, of course, the essential liquid binder for all of the above: a 6-pack of Lone Star beer.

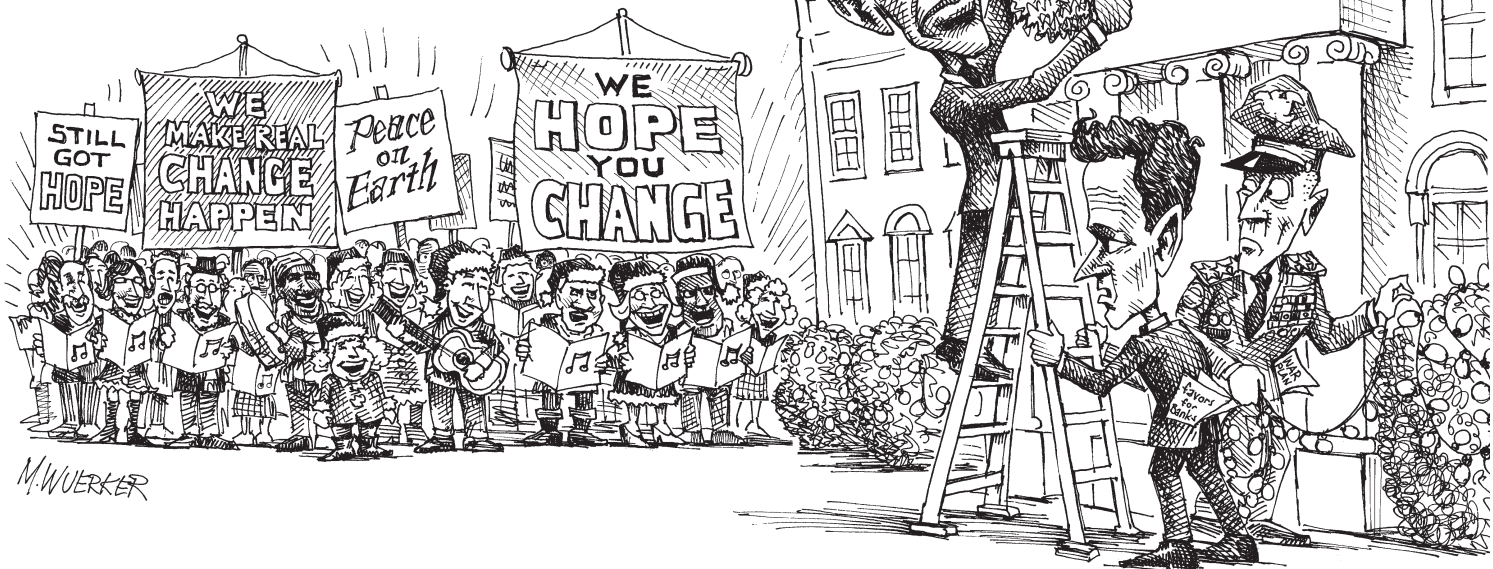
Today my favorite meals are those made up of an array of small plates with many different tastes, such as an Italian seafood misto, a 20-dish Turkish “salad” (like I once had in an Arab village in Israel), a Greek mezze, or just a selection of appetizers from any interesting American restaurant. I like variety.

So in this season of many flavors (Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Eid al-Adha, Winter Solstice, etc.), we’re serving up a *Lowdown* misto for

you this month—a holiday basket of tidbits, oddities, advice, and what-nots to ease you into 2010 and our next decade of grassroots activism.

Three steps forward

Too often we progressive types get all hang-dog about what’s going wrong, failing to acknowledge that many things are actually going right, and that we’re making gains on the greedheads and goofballs who for so long have been running roughshod over common sense and the common good.



EARTH DINNER

Are you up for an Earth dinner for the holidays?

No, not eating earth, but folks gathering around a table for a social occasion to celebrate the bounty of our good, green Earth.

Our dinner tells many stories, embodying our personal histories, family memories, music, art, and other connections... besides our tummies. To help reawaken those cultural links, the folks at Organic Valley Family of Farms have come up with Earth Dinners.

Here's the idea: throw a dinner party at which the food is not merely consumed, but also is the focus of table talk—reminiscing, singing, laughing, game playing, and whatever else you can dream up. It can be a potluck dinner, a buffet, a five-course gourmet meal, a backyard barbecue... whatever suits you. The key is to know something about the food being served—where it comes from, the history of some of the ingredients, songs written about it, and so on.

Get everyone connecting in some personal or cultural way to the dinner as it progresses. Ask guests to tell their very first food memory, or to recall a family member who was a farmer or a jolly cook. Invite people of diverse backgrounds and all ages. Ask a farm family to join you, or a cheese-maker, gardener, or butcher—anyone involved in producing food. Then—eat, talk, enjoy!

Organic Valley's web site offers Earth Dinner tips on everything from menus to party favors, as well as providing reports on successful dinners that others have put together. Check it out at www.earthdinner.org—and have a good time!

It's another piece of that "upchuck rebellion"—ordinary folks rejecting the industrialized, chemicalized, corporatized, and globalized food system.

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PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTEES. Yes, Obama has hung such albatrosses as Timmy Geithner, Larry Summers, and Ben Bernanke around our economic necks. But he's also made some sterling appointments, including Sonia Sotomayor to the Supremes, Hilda Solis to head Labor, Lisa Jackson to run EPA, Steven Chu as Energy chief, Jared Bernstein as chief economic advisor to Joe Biden, and Kathleen Merrigan to be the number two at the Ag Department.

Many other solid progressives have taken over as assistant secretaries, program heads, regional directors, and other key positions—these are the hands-on officials at the operational level of government. If you've ever seen the cable show "Dirty Jobs," you'll have a sense of the challenges these mid-level appointees face. After Bush & Buckshot's eight-year frat-house party, the soiling of government programs was so bad that cleaning them would take a giant can of Comet and a wire brush, but the Obamacans have this scrub job well underway (though their efforts get little media attention).

One example of the clean-up process is EPA's recent moves to reverse the Bushites' horrific policy of encouraging mountaintop removal. This obscene mining practice by Big Coal amounts to the environmental rape of Appalachia (see *Lowdown*, November 2005), and the new crew at EPA is taking regulatory and scientific steps to stop it. First, they've placed 79 mountaintop-removal permits that the previous EPA honchos tried to shove through on hold, pending environmental review. Second, they've launched a major scientific study of whether the explosion of mountaintops and subsequent shoving of the rubble (called "spoil") down into the valleys below destroys streams, thus violating the Clean Water Act.

THE VERMONSTER. The little brewery that could, did! Last month, we told you about Rock Art Brewery, a tiny Vermont beermaker that was under a frontal attack by Hansen Beverage, a billion-dollar California

corporation that peddles a line of energy drinks under the "Monster" label. The big dog claimed that one of the little dog's beers, labeled "Vermonster," infringed upon their trademark, so—ipso facto, *mondo cane*, and hocus pocus—the tiny brewery should cease and desist from using the Vermonster name.

Usually that's that for any small business under legal assault by the giants. It's not that the little guys are wrong, but that they have shallow pockets and cannot afford the legal fees to fight the deep-pocketed corporate lawyers who can drag out these cases for years. However, Rock Art owner Matt Nadeau chose to fight the Hansen bullies—not in a trial court, but in the court of public opinion. On his website titled "Rock Art Brewery vs. Corporate America," Nadeau talked about the injustice and declared war.

He sent out an email to fans of the brewery on October 8, and they quickly enlisted in the cause, using their blogs, email lists, Twitter, and other social-media tools. A local company, greenriverpictures.com, produced a video about the fight for free and put it online. A student created a Facebook page—"Vermonters and Craft Beer Drinkers Against Monster"—that pulled in 16,000 new supporters in less than two weeks. Twitterers began to rally support through such tweets as "#boycottmonster," and in just one week fired off 1.6 million tweets about the controversy.

Then other businesses joined the rebellion by pulling all of Hansen's products out of their stores. AP and other traditional-media sources picked up the story, and before Hansen even knew what hit it, the company was being rocked hard by Rock Art.

On October 15 at 8 a.m., Nadeau got a call from one of Hansen's major investors, who essentially wanted to know how to make this all go away. Matt asked to speak to the CEO. The chief called that very day, offering to settle. Six days later, Nadeau had a signed contract, specifically assuring him of his right to keep selling the Vermonster.

Now Nadeau is continuing the fight on behalf of "the next small business" that'll be a victim of corporate-lawsuit abuse. "I have heard countless stories," he says, "[of] the small guy running out of money to fight and then losing by default. That is not right, just, or fair."

His own victory is sweet, Nadeau says, but the system itself must be reformed, so he's calling for further development of the grassroots movement that rallied around Rock Art. He hopes to turn those social-media tools into an ongoing force for what he calls an "organic democracy" that can empower independent businesses against the brutish power of the giants. "Let's communicate," he asks. Do so at <http://rockartbrewery.com>.

STUDENTS AGAINST SWEATSHOPS.

Being against sweatshops is the easy part. Stopping them—that's hard.

For the past decade, a feisty and determined movement of students on campuses all across the country has had the savvy and tenacity to do the hard part, and their efforts paid off last month with a landmark victory.

United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) is an organization of young people who're outraged that the sweatshirts, gimme caps, and other paraphernalia bearing the names and logos of their universities are made in miserable sweatshops. Nike, Reebok, Russell Athletic, and a handful of other sportswear conglomerates sign exclusive licensing agreements with universities to sell millions of dollars worth of university-branded stuff to students, and then these corporations contract with sweatshop factory-owners in China, Haiti, Central America, and elsewhere to produce the items.

Using raucous rallies, sit-ins, and other means, USAS (pronounced YOU-sass) has pressured more than 170 school administrations to adopt strict codes of conduct for all the factories used by the licensees. To put teeth in this code, the students compelled their schools to create and fund the Worker Rights Consortium to conduct independent inspections that measure the factories' compliance with the code.

Several months ago, the consortium found Russell Athletic in violation for shutting down a factory in Honduras because workers there had voted to unionize. USAS sprang into action in January, launching a nationwide campaign on scores of campuses and persuading nearly 100 universities to suspend their

Hightower is a top creative citizen

THE LOWDOWN HAPPILY ANNOUNCES that Hightower is the recipient of the 2009 Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship.

The Puffin Foundation Ltd. and The Nation Institute are the mutual sponsors of this annual award given to "an individual who has challenged the status quo through distinctive, courageous, imaginative and socially responsible work of significance." The prize gives Jim a great back slap—plus a chunky check for his good works.

licensing agreements with Russell. The students also went off-campus—distributing fliers and sending Twitter messages to customers in major chain stores selling Russell products, picketing at the games of pro basketball teams that had licensing deals with Russell, getting a letter from 65 members of Congress expressing “grave concern” about Russell’s labor violations, and even showing up at the door of uber investor Warren Buffet, whose firm owns Fruit of the Loom, the clothing conglomerate that owns Russell.

This public pressure and perseverance paid off. On November 17, USAS announced that Russell had agreed to open a new, unionized factory in Honduras, rehire the 1,200 dismissed workers, not fight unionization in its seven other Honduran factories, and “foster workers’ rights in Honduras.”

Hailing the turnaround, the president of the Honduran workers’ union said, “For us, it was very important to receive the support of the universities. We are impressed by the social conscience of the students in the United States.” For information and new actions, go to <http://usas.org>.

Socialist Republicans

The entire bloc of 39 Republican U.S. senators locked arms just before Thanksgiving in a failed attempt to block the federal health-insurance reform bill from even being debated. “Socialism!” they barked in unison. They declared that their principled intention in trying to prevent debate was to save the American people from the nightmare of government-run health care.

Thank you, senators. For nothing. First the bill does not—repeat, does NOT—create any government-run health-care program. Instead, it is an *insurance* reform bill, dealing not with the delivery of care but with the raw gouging we consumers and tax

Teabag Tidbit

LETTER TO THE EDITOR of *The Texas Observer*, November 13, 2009:

“*The Panola Watchman* newspaper in Carthage recently published a full-page ad of ‘Tea Partiers’—about 315 people—who signed a petition against national health care. Curiously, the chairman of the group had heart surgery in July, paid for by Medicare.”

payers routinely get from the private-insurance giants.

Second, and more fascinating, what all 39 of the naysayers hope you don’t figure out is that they actually are (shhhhhh) secret socialists when it comes to health care! *Their* health care, I mean. Not yours.

Have you ever heard any of these free-market purists mention that (shhhhh, again) they and their families get a Rolls Royce level of socialized-insurance coverage? Of course not. They don’t want us to know that about 75% of their insurance cost is paid for by taxpayers—aka you and me—who are lucky if we can afford a Yugo-level of coverage for our families.

But (double-shhhhhh), the thing they most want to keep secret from us commoners is a special spot of unadulterated socialism located right under the Capitol dome: the Office of the Attending Physician (OAP). This obscure nook is where these antigovernment-run health-care stalwarts go to get government-run health care delivered directly to them. When they get a little boo-boo, they can get it kissed in this tucked-away office, courtesy of us taxpayers.

The OAP is a boutique medical practice providing full-service, state-of-the-art treatment exclusively to members of Congress. It offers full-bore, British-style, socialized medicine—the physicians, specialists, nurses, med-techs, pharmacists, and others working there are government employees.

Their service is primo. Let’s say that one of the 39 Republican grumps gets gaseous or suffers a tongue cramp while giving a Senate speech denouncing socialism. He or she can scoot just a few yards away for socialized care at the OAP—no appointment required, no bothersome insurance forms to fill out, no co-pay, no waiting. Just care.

So, let’s all ask our own Congress critters why we can’t have what they’re getting. Do they think they’re better or more deserving than us? Also, if they pass a less-generous plan for us consumers, let’s ask why we shouldn’t take away their elite coverage and OAP, so they can enjoy the same system that they create for us. Here’s how to reach your rep and senators: <http://house.gov>, <http://senate.gov>, 202-224-3121, or U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510; U.S. House, Washington, D.C. 20515.

Also, don’t hesitate to share their responses (especially if they don’t respond) with others through your email and mailing lists, blogs, letters to the editor, etc.

Six things to do in 2010

Here at the *Lowdown*, we’ve been getting many cries of despair from you good folks about the timorous Obama presidency. On issue after issue (including the Wall Street bailout, health care, jobs, the green economy, climate change, and Afghanistan), it’s been go-slow and don’t-rock-the-corporate-boat.

THE MORALITY OF BANKERS

“Banker” and “morality” are not concepts you easily put together, but some of the biggest bankers in Europe are rushing out to insist that at heart, they are all about morality.

These declarations of personal ethics are prompted by the outrage that Europeans feel about the economic collapse bankers caused, and the obscene bonuses that they’re now paying themselves. Americans are furious about the same thing, but in Europe, the greed is seen as a fundamental moral failure. The Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the Church of England, has called on bankers to “repent” for their ethical sins.

Incredibly, several bankers are defending themselves by asserting that their outsized bonuses allow them to donate to charity, thus proving their moral soundness.

Their charity defense reminds me of a story from Earl Long, former governor of Louisiana, about a rich man who died and showed up at the Pearly Gates demanding entry into heaven.

The gatekeeping angel found that this rich man had been a selfish, no-good so-and-so his whole life. But the man said, “Wait a minute, I have a pattern of charitable giving.” He said he’d once tossed a nickel in a beggar’s cup. Plus, a poor woman he encountered needed help, and he gave her a nickel. Then there was the time that he put a nickel in the Salvation Army kettle.

Hearing all this, the angel turned to St. Peter and asked, “What do we do with this man? And St. Peter said: “Give him back his 15 cents and tell him to go to hell!”

That’s a story that every big-shot banker needs to hear... and ponder.

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MONOPOLIZING OUR VOTING SYSTEM

Voting is sacrosanct, right? Except that over the past decade, state and local election authorities have allowed something to come between the casting and the counting of our votes—privatization.

So, balloting, which has historically and properly been a purely public function, now relies on electronic machines that are made and controlled by a handful of corporations. These corporate computers are easily hacked, they break down on election day, they divert votes from one candidate to another, they drop votes, they mysteriously add votes—and they're expensive.

But the greatest problem is with the privatization concept itself. Voting is not a commodity or industry, it's a democratic right. To allow private interests to control the balloting mechanism—including allowing them to refuse to reveal their software codes—is a sacrilege that's destroying public trust in electoral integrity. Yet this privatization is about to be made geometrically worse by monopolization.

The largest purveyor of voting machines, ES&S, intends to buy out the second largest, now owned by the Diebold Corporation, a company that's notorious for unreliable equipment and publicly cheering on Republican candidates. This sale would give ES&S monopoly control of the voting systems in the vast majority of our cities and states.

Antitrust officials must stop this monopolization of America's most basic democratic process—and restore full public ownership and management of our voting systems. For more info, contact the reform group, Fair Vote at (301) 270-4616 or info@fairvote.org.

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Where's the "audacity of hope," people are asking. Where's the "change you can believe in"?

The answer is that audacity and change are where they've always resided: out there with you and me, at the grassroots level. For some reason, the guy who was elected by running from the outside is now trying to govern from the inside (which is where change is taken to be suffocated).

That's disappointing and infuriating, but we cannot let it be an excuse for giving up. At least with Obama, our issues are on the table for the first time in decades, allowing progressives to go on the offensive. The good news is that the American majority is with us on nearly every issue, so the chance for change remains strong—if we push it.

Now is the time for us to be more aggressive, more demanding, more active than ever. Many of you have said to us, "Fine, but how? I'm just one person. What can I do?" Here are six suggestions:

1 Start by considering what's reasonable for you. Few of us can be full-time activists, and the list of issues and problems is intimidatingly long and complex.

So just take one bite, choosing an issue that interests you the most, then start contributing what you can (time, skills, contacts, money, enthusiasm, etc.) to making progress. Don't beat yourself up or feel your contribution is too small if you can only devote a half-day a week, or an hour a day, or even five minutes a day—it all adds up. As a young Oregon woman said of her half-day-a-week volunteer door-knocking in a legislative race, "I was only a drop in the bucket, but I was a drop. And without all of us, the bucket would not have filled up."

2 Inform yourself. A little effort can quickly connect you to accessible, usable information and insights on any given topic, allowing you to gain a "citizen's level" of expertise so you can talk to others about it. Read progressive periodicals, tune in to progressive broadcasts, get information from public-interest groups, and plug into good websites and blogs.

Don't know how to go online? Nearly all public libraries not only have computers, but also librarians and volunteers who'll assist you in finding the info you want and teach you how to use the machines. Or find a youngster (maybe your granddaughter or someone at church) who'll help you. Yes, you can do this!

3 Democracy belongs to those who show up. Join with others. Everyone feels better when they're part of a group, a movement, a *community* (whether real or virtual). In your own town or neighborhood, many others share your progressive outlook and are either already working together or willing to help form a group—seek them out, maybe at bookstores, book clubs, coffee shops, events, churches, blogs, websites, and other meeting places.

4 A community is more than a collection of issues and endless meetings. Get to know each other by combining the serious with the social. Remember the Yugoslavian proverb: You can fight the gods and still have fun! So discuss your issues and strategies at potluck suppers (bring the kids, have some music, pour a little wine), throw an annual festival of politics, create weekly sessions of beer-mug democracy at local taverns, set aside one day a week for Big Talk (rather than small talk) at

the coffee shop, etc.

5 Become the media. Create a local newsletter, blog, bulletin board (on the wall or online), internet radio broadcast, etc. Just as importantly, enlist high-school or community-college speech and journalism teachers to help you learn how to do radio and tv interviews and how to get local media to cover your issues. Also, get them to train you and others in public speaking, so you can have your own speakers' bureau to address clubs, churches, schools, etc.

6 Hold your own "what to do" sessions in your community. Don't wait for national progressive groups, which haven't figured out a cohesive strategy for focusing people's anger about the meekness of Washington's Democratic leaders. Instead, have your own discussions about what should be done nationally—if anything—and start zapping those ideas to other communities, heads of national groups, progressive media outlets, and so forth. Let the ideas percolate up from a thousand localities! Bear in mind that the best strategy for now might be to focus locally, where tremendous progress is already being made on energy policy, grassroots politics, health care for all, jobs now, new economic models, education, cross-cultural unity, and so much more. If you're looking for genius, don't look up—instead, look around where you already are and trust the wisdom of your own community. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "Common sense is genius with its work clothes on."

Remember what Obama himself said during the 2008 campaign: "I'm not the change. You are." Take that to heart.

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