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POLITICS

40 Years After Watergate, "Enemies Lists" Are Alive and Well

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Forty years ago, a botched break-in of the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate office complex brought down a president and accelerated the public's distrust of politicians and government. But, ironically, many government programs that most Americans now cherish were initiated under Nixon's watch. Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency, and signed a number of groundbreaking laws such as the Clean Air Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Consumer Product Safety Act and the Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act that required warning labels on cigarettes and banned cigarette ads on TV and radio.

Nixon was a conservative Republican, but he didn't oppose government action as a matter of principle. Since then, however, his party and its allies in the business community have engaged in a wholesale assault on the basic premise that government can play a positive role in society, seeking to dismantle many of these accomplishments of the Nixon era and subsequent regulations that protect consumers, workers, public health and the environment from corporate abuse.

Nixon was a paranoid, megalomaniac obsessed with his own power, his re-election and, above all, his own reputation. He had an "enemies list" of individuals whom he believed could weaken his presidency, get in the way of his agenda and thwart his re-election.

Senator Sam Ervin (D-NC), chairman of the Senate Watergate Committee, concluded that it was Nixon's "lust for political power" that led to the White House Plumbers' dirty tricks, the Watergate break-in and the cover-up that eventually ended the Nixon presidency.

The heavy-handed "lust for power" is alive and well in 21st century. The only difference is that now it's a group project. And it's out of the shadows in full public view. Now, corporate-funded think tanks, industry lobby associations and GOP political strategists maintain the lists of enemies and devise the schemes to weaken, sideline or even destroy them.

Corporate America reorganized itself in the wake of a burst of progressive consumer, environmental and workplace safety laws passed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Big business recognized that it wasn't enough just to attack individual crusaders (like Ralph Nader) or specific laws (like mandated seat belts). Nor was it sufficient for each company or industry to do battle on its own. They had to challenge the ideological and political underpinnings of public support for government regulations.

So, beginning in the 1970s, the CEOs of America's major corporations came together and began building a set of now well-known think tanks like the Heritage Foundation to promote the idea that government was inherently inefficient, wasteful and a drag on economic prosperity (i.e. a "job killer"). In 1972 John Harper, the head of ALCOA Aluminum, and Fred Borch, CEO of General Electric, formed the Business Roundtable, comprised of the CEO's of the nation's largest corporations, to address the public's growing hostility toward business that led to the new environmental, worker and consumer laws. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce added public relations experts and lobbyists to its staff, and began channeling large campaign contributions to political candidates, in an effort to become a more powerful voice for business interests.

By the time George W. Bush entered the White House in 2001, business's coordinated political infrastructure was in place -- spending more than ever on elections and lobbying, backed up by a robust web of think tanks, industry associations, media outlets and PACs. Bush's first act was to reward the wealthy owners of industry with a budget-busting tax cut rolling back the Clinton era tax high earner increases that balanced the budget and even created a surplus.

They were increasingly aggressive. Grover Norquist, the head of the corporate-funded Americans for Tax Reform, reprised Nixon's legacy with a new list of enemies who stood in the way of corporate influence and GOP hegemony, but this time it was comprised of major interest groups, not just individuals.

He urged an all-sided assault on constituencies that helped elect Democrats -- unions, trial lawyers, federally-funded social service agencies, urban political "machines" and low-income minority voters. The goal was -- and still is -- clear: take out the enemy and eliminate the need to fight the next war.

Unlike Nixon's dirty tricks, today's wars on political opponents aren't about a particular president. They are now more clearly about protecting the interests of the truly powerful in American society -- not just the richest 1%, but the richest one-hundredth of 1%. The funds that pay for this infrastructure -- the think tanks, conservative media, industry associations and political campaigns -- come from corporations and their billionaire and millionaire owners and executives. They want the American

government to serve them -- to strip government of its power to require corporations to clean up after themselves when they emit cancer-causing and climate changing air pollution; to create work places and processes that don't put workers at risk of illness or death, or to promote a kind of economic productivity and prosperity that is shared with working and middle class families.

Karl Rove brought the enemies lists back into the White House. Bush's Justice Department urged U.S. attorneys across the country to prosecute groups involved in voter registration and turn-out for "voter fraud" in order to suppress the votes of Democratic leaning constituencies. Attorney General Roberto Gonzales clumsily fired seven U.S. Attorneys that refused to participate in the charade. Gonzales was forced to resign to quell the growing controversy.

The corporate/billionaire assault on government morphed easily into an attack on government employees and their unions, led by a new wave of Republican governors, including Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker.

Reducing the number of workers in unions means workers have less power to negotiate with American employers for a fair share of profits and productivity increases and their unions have less money to spend on politics so corporate political spending has even less competition.

The right-wing attack on teachers and teachers' unions aims at weakening popular support for public education. With Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* as their cheerleaders, Big Business and conservatives have sought to shrink the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers -- both powerful advocates for public education -- that stand in the way of private vouchers programs. Fox's Bill O'Reilly said "most teachers -- high school and college in the United States -- are left-wingers."

Planned Parenthood, a powerful organization that reaches millions of women, has been another consistent target. The latest attack came when the Susan G. Komen Foundation decided to cut funding to Planned Parenthood, allegedly because it was under investigation by Congressman Cliff Stearns, a Florida Republican who pursued a witch hunt against the group. Komen CEO Nancy Brinker is a longtime GOP donor and was George W. Bush's Ambassador to Hungary, while its Senior Vice President for Public Policy, Karen Handel, was a Republican activist and a candidate for governor of Georgia in 2010, who had promised to defund Planned Parenthood if elected.

The Republicans, and their allies at Fox News and conservative think tanks, have orchestrated a campaign to suppress the votes of minorities, the poor and college students -- all groups that tend to vote for Democrats and who would benefit from government actions such as raising the minimum wage, stopping toxic air pollution, and raising taxes on the wealthy. Fifteen states controlled by Republican governors and legislatures have already passed voter identification laws that create barriers to voting that could eliminate several million voters this year.

Big business and conservative billionaires have funded an unrelenting war on science and scientists that warn about environmental dangers that might call for government action, including regulation of business. Corporations including ExxonMobil, General Electric, Caterpillar and Boeing have funded think tanks such as the Heartland Institute that calls climate change a hoax. They have also launched campaigns to discredit climate scientists. For example, a coal-industry astroturf group, The Common Sense Movement/Secure Energy for America Political Action Committee (CSM/SEAPAC), is running a public campaign to harass Pennsylvania State University climate scientist Michael Mann for his "radical agenda" of climate science. These business and pseudo-academic groups have worked with front groups and conservative media outlets that repeatedly deny that climate change is a problem. This propaganda campaign has made a serious dent in public support for action that could impact oil companies and other industries that need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The number of Americans who believe that the threat of serious global warming is exaggerated increased from 31% in 1997 to 48% in 2010.

The effort by business and Republicans to destroy the effectiveness of unions, voter registration groups, trial lawyers, women's rights organizations, scientists and others is hardly random. It is aimed at reducing the number of powerful voices for health, safety and middle class security. The results, of course, are lower taxes, fewer life-saving rules and fewer obligations to do their part in creating an America that works for everyone.

To avoid appearing to be a top-down ruling class, the corporations and billionaires needed ground troops so that its assault on government would look like a bottom-up revolt of the masses. So it cultivated and helped fund right-wing anti-government constituencies, like the Christian Right, the Tea Party, the National Rifle Association and the Koch-funded Americans for Prosperity.

Those groups have certainly played a role in changing American politics, particularly in making the GOP even more fanatically anti-government. But the good news is that the American public has mixed feelings about the attacks on government. In general, polls show that a majority of Americans expect the government to protect Americans from dangerous consumer products, unsafe workplaces, environmental threats, and economic insecurity. True, the relentless corporate-sponsored propaganda campaign has weakened Americans' support for groups like unions and trial lawyers that are the political bulwark of support for these policies. At the same time, however, Americans understand that this attack on government can sometimes cross the line into nastiness and a crude assault on common sense, such as the Republicans' and the Komen Foundation's attack on Planned Parenthood, whose reputation and fundraising have increased as a result of the right-wing overreach.

The bad news is that the conservative campaign against proponents of government regulation of business -- that is, responsible capitalism instead of no-rules capitalism -- is likely to expand in the near future. The Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* ruling unleashed a flood of right-wing billionaire funding of campaign contributions, media propaganda campaigns, and conservative think tanks and publications as part of its take-no-prisoners war on liberal groups, politicians and ideas. It is likely to get only uglier and more vicious -- to a level that might even surprise Richard Nixon.

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