

Democracy in America Is a Useful Fiction



America has been transformed into a corporatocracy. (Original photo montage via Charles Dharapak / AP)

This column originally appeared on Jan. 24, 2010.

Corporate forces, long before the Supreme Court's decision in **Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission**, carried out a coup d'état in slow motion. The coup is over. We lost. The ruling is one more judicial effort to streamline mechanisms for corporate control. It exposes the myth of a functioning democracy and the triumph of corporate power. But it does not significantly alter the political landscape. The corporate state is firmly cemented in place. The fiction of democracy remains useful, not only for corporations, but for our bankrupt liberal class. If the fiction is seriously challenged, liberals will be forced to consider actual resistance, which will be neither pleasant nor easy. As long as a democratic facade exists, liberals can engage in an empty moral posturing that requires little sacrifice or commitment. They can be the self-appointed scolds of

the Democratic Party, acting as if they are part of the debate and feel vindicated by their cries of protest.

Much of the outrage expressed about the court's ruling is the outrage of those who prefer this choreographed charade. As long as the charade is played, they do not have to consider how to combat what the political philosopher **Sheldon Wolin** calls our system of "inverted totalitarianism."

Inverted totalitarianism represents "the political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the citizenry," Wolin writes in "Democracy Incorporated." Inverted totalitarianism differs from classical forms of totalitarianism, which revolve around a demagogue or charismatic leader, and finds its expression in the anonymity of the corporate state. The corporate forces behind inverted totalitarianism do not, as classical totalitarian movements do, boast of replacing decaying structures with a new, revolutionary structure. They purport to honor electoral politics, freedom and the Constitution. But they so corrupt and manipulate the levers of power as to make democracy impossible. Inverted totalitarianism is not conceptualized as an ideology or objectified in public policy. It is furthered by "power-holders and citizens who often seem unaware of the deeper consequences of their actions or inactions," Wolin writes. But it is as dangerous as classical forms of totalitarianism. In a system of inverted totalitarianism, as this court ruling illustrates, it is not necessary to rewrite the Constitution, as fascist and communist regimes do. It is enough to exploit legitimate power by means of judicial and legislative interpretation. This exploitation ensures that huge corporate campaign contributions are protected speech under the First Amendment. It ensures that heavily financed and organized lobbying by large corporations is interpreted as an application of the people's right to petition the government. The court again ratified the concept that corporations are persons, except in those cases where the "persons" agree to a "settlement." Those within corporations who commit crimes can avoid going to prison by paying large sums of money to the government while, according to this twisted judicial reasoning, not "admitting any wrongdoing." There is a word for this. It is called corruption.

Corporations have **35,000 lobbyists** in Washington and thousands more in state capitals that dole out corporate money to shape and write legislation. They use their political action committees to solicit employees and shareholders for donations to fund pliable candidates. The financial sector, for example, spent more than \$5 billion on political campaigns, influence peddling and lobbying during the past decade, which resulted in sweeping deregulation, the gouging of consumers, our global financial meltdown and the subsequent looting of the U.S. Treasury. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America spent \$26 million last year and drug companies such as Pfizer, Amgen and Eli Lilly

kicked in tens of millions more to buy off the two parties. These corporations have made sure our so-called health reform bill will force us to buy their predatory and defective products. The oil and gas industry, the coal industry, defense contractors and telecommunications companies have thwarted the drive for sustainable energy and orchestrated the steady erosion of civil liberties. Politicians do corporate bidding and stage hollow acts of political theater to keep the fiction of the democratic state alive.

There is no national institution left that can accurately be described as democratic. Citizens, rather than participate in power, are allowed to have virtual opinions to preordained questions, a kind of participatory fascism as meaningless as voting on "American Idol." Mass emotions are directed toward the **raging culture wars**. This allows us to take emotional stands on issues that are inconsequential to the power elite.

Our transformation into an empire, as happened in ancient Athens and Rome, has seen the tyranny we practice abroad become the tyranny we practice at home. We, like all empires, have been eviscerated by our own expansionism. We utilize weapons of horrific destructive power, subsidize their development with billions in taxpayer dollars, and are the world's largest arms dealer. And the Constitution, as Wolin notes, is "conscripted to serve as power's apprentice rather than its conscience."

"Inverted totalitarianism reverses things," Wolin writes. "It is politics all of the time but a politics largely untempered by the political. Party squabbles are occasionally on public display, and there is a frantic and continuous politics among factions of the party, interest groups, competing corporate powers, and rival media concerns. And there is, of course, the culminating moment of national elections when the attention of the nation is required to make a choice of personalities rather than a choice between alternatives. What is absent is the political, the commitment to finding where the common good lies amidst the welter of well-financed, highly organized, single-minded interests rabidly seeking governmental favors and overwhelming the practices of representative government and public administration by a sea of cash."

Hollywood, the news industry and television, all corporate controlled, have become instruments of inverted totalitarianism. They censor or ridicule those who critique or challenge corporate structures and assumptions. They saturate the airwaves with manufactured controversy, whether it is Tiger Woods or the dispute between Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien. They manipulate images to make us confuse how we are made to feel with knowledge, which is how Barack Obama became president. And the draconian internal control employed by the Department of Homeland Security, the military and the police over any form of **popular dissent**, coupled with the corporate media's censorship, does for

inverted totalitarianism what thugs and bonfires of books do in classical totalitarian regimes.

“It seems a replay of historical experience that the bias displayed by today’s media should be aimed consistently at the shredded remains of liberalism,” Wolin writes. “Recall that an element common to most 20th century totalitarianism, whether Fascist or Stalinist, was hostility towards the left. In the United States, the left is assumed to consist solely of liberals, occasionally of ‘the left wing of the Democratic Party,’ never of democrats.”

Liberals, socialists, trade unionists, independent journalists and intellectuals, many of whom were once important voices in our society, have been silenced or targeted for elimination within corporate-controlled academia, the media and government. Wolin, who taught at Berkeley and later at Princeton, is arguably the country’s foremost political philosopher. And yet his book was virtually ignored. This is also why Ralph Nader, Dennis Kucinich and Cynthia McKinney, along with intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, are not given a part in our national discourse.

The uniformity of opinion is reinforced by the skillfully orchestrated mass emotions of nationalism and patriotism, which paints all dissidents as “soft” or “unpatriotic.” The “patriotic” citizen, plagued by fear of job losses and possible terrorist attacks, unfailingly supports widespread surveillance and the militarized state. This means no questioning of the \$1 trillion in defense-related spending. It means that the military and intelligence agencies are held above government, as if somehow they are not part of government. The most powerful instruments of state power and control are effectively removed from public discussion. We, as imperial citizens, are taught to be contemptuous of government bureaucracy, yet we stand like sheep before Homeland Security agents in airports and are mute when Congress permits our private correspondence and conversations to be **monitored and archived**. We endure more state control than at any time in American history.

The civic, patriotic and political language we use to describe ourselves remains unchanged. We pay fealty to the same national symbols and iconography. We find our collective identity in the same national myths. We continue to deify the Founding Fathers. But the America we celebrate is an illusion. It does not exist. Our government and judiciary have no real sovereignty. Our press provides diversion, not information. Our organs of security and power keep us as domesticated and as fearful as most Iraqis. Capitalism, as Karl Marx understood, when it emasculates government, becomes a revolutionary force. And this revolutionary force, best described as inverted totalitarianism, is plunging us into a state of neo-feudalism, perpetual war and severe repression. The Supreme

Court decision is part of our transformation by the corporate state from citizens to prisoners.

Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent, writes a column published every Monday on Truthdig. His latest book is "Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle."