



# Agitate

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## INSTITUTIONALIZED CORRUPTION

This July 4<sup>th</sup> we celebrate the 232 year history of the United States. And let there be no mistake, there is much to celebrate. There are many great qualities of the American character of which to be proud: dedication to liberty, charity, work ethic and industry. These qualities are admired world wide, but they are individual qualities possessed by the common American man and woman. Key American institutions, our government, major religions, market and media, however, do not share in these qualities. They are not dedicated to freedom, but rather the suppression of liberty. Work ethic is just another means of exploiting the citizenry. Charity is a premise for cultural imperialism. Perhaps 200 years is too much to ask for institutions to remain honest!

The excesses of the Bush Administration have one positive, latent function. They reveal the depth of government corruption. In fact, Bush flaunts this corruption in front of the nation and the world. That the Bush Administration is so barefaced in its perfidy is indicative of its arrogance. That the people of the United States are so comfortable or apathetic regarding this corruption is a national abomination and something to keep in mind as we watch the fireworks, parades and flag waving.

Throughout history governments have favored a more select class over the common people. State elitism is the historical status quo. The common man never expected to be represented by his government. With the advent of enlightened thinking, however, the concept of the rights of man and the responsibilities of government with regard to the governed raised expectations. Governments could no longer claim legitimacy at the edge of a sword or the barrel of a gun. The state had to defer, to greater or lesser extents, to the will of the people. The social contract became the model of the legitimate government.

But the state always serves the interests of the elite, be it an aristocratic class, a capitalist class, or a single party system. Governments are only ever reluctantly responsive to the commons. At first, governments established under the premise of the social contract hide their elitist functions. They acquiesce enough to the commons to establish the myth of their legitimacy. This ruse never lasts long...much less than 200 years! As with the Roman Republic, elite corruption is never far from the surface.

Ultimately, elitism oozes to the surface. Once the state feels it has the commons sufficiently cowed the corruption comes into the open as if the power elite are daring the citizenry to knock a chip from its shoulder. Jefferson was only half right when he said, "all governments eventually deceive their people." When deceptive governments become comfortable in their power they rub the people's faces in it. The state wears its corruption as a badge of honor. Elaborate explanations are offered as to why state corruption is justifiable: the divine right of kings, the ignorance of the mob, social Darwinism, realpolitik, the free market economy. It amounts to the same thing, the acquisition and centralization of power in the hands of an undeserving few.

And ultimately, all governments fall.

This is especially true when governments aspire to empire. Empire is the ultimate expression of elite interest. Only the elite benefit from imperialism. The commons prefer to stay out of the affairs of other cultures and are interested in "taking care of our own." Only when motivated by fear do the commons agree to empire: the fear of the other, of invasion, of communism, of

terrorism. The United States is among the foremost purveyors of fear in the world.

And the United States is the epitome of imperial might. Even Rome was restricted in ways that the US is not. Rome tried to convince its citizens that it remained a republic even when the last vestiges of representative government were rendered meaningless by titled Caesars. The United States, with a worldwide network of military bases, a belligerent, militaristic foreign policy and a domestic policy that ignores the needs of the bottom quintiles similarly attempts to maintain the façade of democracy. The cavalier use of power by the Bush Administration, previous administrations and almost certainly the administration that follows, is reminiscent of the gluttonous dynasties of Rome. Democracy never even enters the political lexicon beyond mere rhetoric.

### The Institutionalization of Corruption

There is no sociological, historical or philosophical reason to expect a government to serve the needs of the common man. The government is not the servant or the representative of the people. Government is an institution with a socially prescribed function. As an organic constituent of society, the function of government is to distribute and enforce power arrangements. It does this much like the economy distributes wealth resources, or the media distributes knowledge and mythology.

The ideal of democratic government is the distribution of power in the interests of the common man and woman, the commons. But once an idea like democracy is institutionalized it takes on a life of its own. This life more clearly reflects the needs of the institution itself, than the needs of the individuals to be served or the ideas to be manifest. An elite group forms at the apex of the institutional order, and becomes the benefactor of the institution. As such they symbiotically perpetuate institutional goals over ideals.

All institutions follow the same inviolable rule, what I call the law of institutions. That is, every institution functions to perpetuate the institution itself. The initial purpose of the institution, no matter how just or lofty, becomes secondary. The perpetuation of an institution with its elite hangers-on is the definition of power.

Institutions perpetuate themselves in dynamic ways. First, institutions are selective about the individuals who enter. This is known as gatekeeping. Government, being the heartbeat of power, attracts individuals interested in attaining power. Such people undergo the requisite training and credentialing. They learn an ethic of the institution as opposed to the ethics of society. They learn how to advance within the different organizations and bureaucracies of the institution. Those who do not conform to the norms of the institution are culled from the hierarchy, or stalled in their acquisition of status. Those individuals who demonstrate an investment in the status quo are more likely to work their way up the institutional ladder. Such investment precludes radical activism among the institutional elite.

The elite form groups that seek to maintain their status; norms and values institute a top tier unity. Calls for change come most often from the bottom echelons, or from outside the institution itself. Such calls are squelched with more or less force. Reforms only happen in the face of dire social forces that are a real threat to the perpetuation of the institution. Then, only reforms that



**No one personifies the collaboration between politics, economics and religion like Pres. Bush. His family may also be an example of an imperial dynasty.**

mollify the masses and best maintain the overall structural integrity of the institution are tolerated. Real, instrumental and radical change becomes heresy to the institutional priesthood. The fundamental nature of the institution must be maintained.

Institutions also develop trans-institutional alliances. All institutions benefit from greater access to power. So they negotiate access to their own social capital in exchange for social potency.

Economic institutions demonstrate this kind of alliance most flagrantly. Having access to power resources is a great temptation to those who pursue wealth. Economic institutions help political institutions by distributing greater wealth to the state elite. They fund candidates, offer economic stimulus to select communities and thereby create insidious economic bonds that cannot be severed without significant social

instability. They take on tasks through industrialization and privatization that were formerly performed by the state. They lobby and offer gifts designed to enhance the status of the powerful. In the last two hundred years this institutional collaboration has become so enmeshed that Marx's concept of the political economy, the collaboration between the state and the market, remains the best description of modern politics.

But the economic sector is not the only institution insinuating its way into state corruption. Religion and the mainstream media also have something to offer the political elite. They have demonstrated willingness to whore themselves to the state in exchange for a share of the power—and perhaps even the wealth. Major religious organizations bring out the vote, giving an edge to any candidate willing to genuflect at the right altar. The media facilitates the government line to millions of people, which they exchange for access to the scoop or headline. The latter explains why the least interesting candidates, namely the Democrats and Republicans, get most of the press, while noteworthy third party candidates are left with nary a voice.

### The Consequences

The more institutions that fall under the state wing, the more difficult it is for individuals to access power structures in the interest of resistance and social change. When the church, the media and the market are allied with the state, they constitute a powerful block against the needs of the people and the pursuit of justice. Thus the purveyors of power can unmask their cynicism, their arrogance and their disdain for the common man. And that's the point, isn't it? The one check on institutional power has always been the irrepressible power of the people to say "no." Once the people become disenfranchised with the institutions that serve them they become dangerously recalcitrant.

The alienated turn away from worship; they say no to tithes. What's more they may form new religions to challenge the old, preferring to meet in caves and basements than in opulent cathedrals bereft of spiritual meaning. In the face of economic oppression people say no to participating in the market. They "vote" with their pocket books. They also say no to being cogs in the economic machine by withholding their labor. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries desperate workers in the labor movement braved starvation, cold, blacklisting, even state violence to say no to the prevailing exploitation. The people say no to the media by changing the channel or refusing to buy newspapers that offer nothing in the way of meaningful current events. Newspapers are dying from anemia as people turn to alternative sources for their news.

It's when the people have had enough of their government that society becomes especially treacherous. To say no to the state requires disobedience, and the state does not tolerate disobedience. Power is only real in the

presence of the conformist, the follower. Authority must be respected. In the end it does not matter if the people submit to the legitimate authority of competent and ethical leadership, or merely kowtow to brutal tyranny. The social contract or the edge of a sword is of no consequence to the elite. The wages of obedience are all the same—corruption, oppression, tyranny.

The game is exacerbated by the needs of the institution to placate the people ill served, while at the same time maintaining its corrupt status quo. Propaganda ensures that the people remain ignorant of the real functions of the state. Dissent is met with marginalization or brutal, often violent retaliation. When dissent becomes too widespread, such as at the turn of the century, the 30's and the 60's, some mild concessions are negotiated until obedience is re-established. But these concessions are temporary, and within a short time the state returns to its original, corrupt station, the Palmer Raids, the House Un-American Activities Committee, COINTELPRO, the Patriot Act

Ultimately, corruption is the final state of all institutions, as all institutions are mechanisms of power. The state follows this same rule. In fact, as the pre-eminent power mechanism of society state corruption is quicker and more pernicious. Power leads to corruption—corruption informs power—a vicious cycle.

No institution voluntarily limits its power. Nor can any corrupt institution be trusted with the task of policing itself. Electing a new leadership, even an honest leadership, is no real solution when the social structure itself is fraudulent. Reform from within is fruitless, as no institution is invested in making the radical changes necessary to insure its moral integrity. In short, there is no way to fix a corrupt institution as corruption is an integral part of the institutional process.

The only solution is profound diligence and unified resistance. To guarantee that our institutions are fulfilling their social contract, the people must be dangerous, disobedient and focused on the collective needs and rights of the common man. Conformity to the institutional machine should never be a given. It should be a constant negotiation in which the institution must prove its value and moral integrity in the face of a unified and skeptical populace. Institutions, especially the state, should never be trusted and never be excused.

At the same time, those elements in society that tend to segregate the commons must be understood as intentional, strategic mechanisms of control. Religious intolerance, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia are not the natural state of humanity. They are paradigms designed by power institutions to assure common disunity and dysfunction. As such, the commons must reject all paradigms that preach difference. We must recognize our shared values, needs and rights. Only by applying constant pressure on the powerful can the average man and woman hope for a just and functional society.

There comes a time, however, when the corruption of the state and its allied institutions becomes so ubiquitous that the commons lose their investment in the very fabric of society. Social stability becomes secondary to justice, any kind of justice—even blind justice. That's when the society is in danger of collapse and calamity much like that experienced in France at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In the opening years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can hear the aggrieved rumblings of what may become a catastrophic, popular uprising that no force on earth can contain. Reasoned action must be applied now while the capacity for reason still informs our decisions, for the passion of revolution is an uncontrollable conflagration.

## Take Action!

Participate, participate, participate. Institutions are inherently corrupt. The only way to ensure that corrupt institutions serve their manifest purpose is to become dangerous. We become dangerous by participating in social movements. Many groups, both liberal and conservative, have watchdog groups dedicated to keeping an eye on government and other institutions.

