

AIG is a giant insurance company whose reckless speculation and predatory lending practices led to its own collapse, sending shockwaves through the global economy and prompting \$182.5 billion in taxpayer bailouts in 2009.

Goldman Sachs was a big seller of mortgage-backed securities at the height of the real estate bubble. When the economic crash came in 2008–2009, Goldman Sachs received \$10 billion in taxpayer bailout money, then promptly paid out \$6.5 billion in bonuses.

Merck, one of Big Pharma's largest profit makers, is facing tens of billions of dollars in liabilities for marketing potentially deadly medicine while concealing the health risks from consumers.

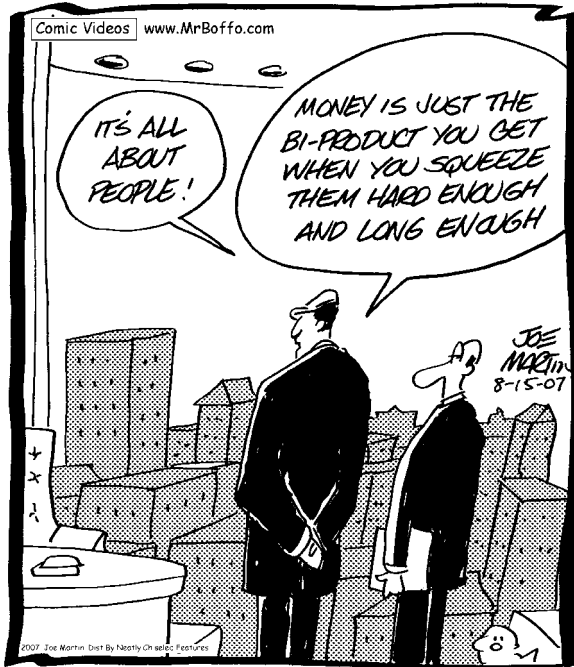
UBS is a Swiss bank that played a key role in major Ponzi schemes and international swindles. UBS also assisted more than fifty thousand of America's wealthiest individuals to commit tax evasion by sheltering more than \$14 billion in assets.⁸

The above examples show only fragments of the profiteering and malfeasance perpetrated by business corporations in a capitalist system that claims to be the progenitor of democracy and prosperity. Later chapters provide a fuller picture of what corporate America has been doing to us and the rest of the world.

LEFT, RIGHT, AND CENTER

Political ideologies traditionally have been categorized as rightist, centrist, and leftist. Let us consider these broad tendencies, without pretending to do justice to all their shadings and ambiguities. What is called the political right consists of *conservatives*, corporate elites, and many other affluent persons who advocate free-market capitalism and defend big business as the mainstay of the good society. *Free-market capitalism* is essentially the unregulated *laissez-faire* variety in which private-profit investments have priority over almost all other social considerations. Conservative ideology preaches the virtues of private initiative and self-reliance: rich and poor pretty much get what they deserve; people are poor not because of inadequate wages and lack of economic opportunity but because they are lazy, profligate, or incapable. The conservative keystone to individual rights is the enjoyment of property rights, especially the right to make a profit off other people's labor and enjoy the privileged conditions of a favored class.

Conservatives blame many of our troubles on what billionaire Steve Forbes called the "arrogance, insularity, the government-knows-best mentality" in Washington, DC. Everything works better in the private sector, they maintain. Conservatives are usually thought of as people who want to preserve the privileges and traditional practices of the upper strata. Most conservative ideologues today, however, might better be classified as *reactionaries*, having an agenda intent upon rolling back all the progressive gains made over the last century. They want to do away with most government regulation of business, along with environmental and consumer protections, disability and



retirement support, minimum-wage laws, unemployment compensation, occupational safety, and injury compensation laws. They assure us that private charity can take care of needy and hungry people, and that there is no need for government handouts.

Conservatives seem to think that everything would be okay if government were reduced to a bare minimum. Government is not the solution, it is the problem, they say. In actual practice, however, conservatives are for or against government handouts depending on whose hand is out. They want to cut human services to lower-income groups, but they vigorously support all sorts of government subsidies and bailouts for large corporate enterprises. They treat economic recession as just part of a natural cycle. They admonish American workers to work harder for less, and have not a harsh word about the devastating effects of corporate mergers and buyouts, financial swindles, the exportation of our jobs to cheap labor markets abroad, and the increase in economic hardship for working people.

Conservatives and reactionaries may want a weak government but they also want a strong authoritarian state. They are not against strong government measures to restrict dissent, suppress protests, keep us under surveillance, and regulate our private lives and personal morals, as with anti-abortion laws and bans on gay marriage. They generally support harsher police methods, more severe prison sentences, and more vigorous use of the death penalty. They want government to require prayers in our schools, subsidize religious education, and bring God into public life. They blame the country's ills on secular immorality, homosexuality, feminism, "liberal elites," and the loss of family

values. The religious right supports conservative causes. In turn, superrich conservative interests help finance the religious right.

Most conservatives are enthusiastic backers of gargantuan military budgets and a global network of U.S. military bases. They claim to be more patriotic than their more liberal opponents, supporting military attacks against other nations. They seem to equate this bellicosity with patriotism. Truth be told, when it comes to war, conservative ideologues prefer to let others do the fighting and dying. Such was the case with President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, commentator Rush Limbaugh, and scores of other prominent right-wingers who took pains to avoid military service during the Vietnam War.⁹

Not all conservatives and reactionaries are affluent. People of rather modest means who oppose big government because they do not see it doing anything for them will call themselves conservatives, for want of an alternative. As one newspaper columnist writes, they think that government has a prime responsibility to protect “their right to kill themselves with guns, booze, and tobacco” but a “minimal responsibility to protect their right to a job, a home, an education or a meal.”¹⁰

Conservative politicians talk about “upholding values,” but they make no effort to root out corruption in the business world or protect the environment or lend support to working families. For all their verbal promotion of heterosexual family values and traditional morality, numerous conservative leaders have been caught in adulterous affairs or homosexual liaisons.¹¹

More toward the center and left-center of the political spectrum are the *moderates* and *liberal centrists*, who might be lumped together. Like the conservatives, the centrists accept the capitalist system and its basic values, but they think social problems should be rectified by piecemeal reforms and regulatory policies. Along with conservatives, many liberal centrists support “free trade” and globalization, thinking it will benefit not just corporations but everyone. They support big military spending and sometimes back military interventions abroad if convinced that the White House is waging a moral crusade against some newly defined “evil” and is advancing the cause of peace and democracy—as with their support of the massive seventy-eight-day U.S. bombing of women, children, and men in Yugoslavia in 1999, and the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq (until Iraq proved more costly than anticipated).

Many liberals see a need for improving public services and environmental protections; they support minimum-wage laws, unemployment insurance, and other wage supports, along with Social Security, nutritional aid for needy children, occupational safety, and the like. They say they are for protection of individual rights and against government surveillance of law-abiding political groups, yet in Congress (where most of them are affiliated with the Democratic Party), they sometimes have supported repressive measures and have gone along with cuts in programs for the needy. Some of them also have voted for subsidies and tax breaks for business. At other times they deplore the growing inequality and poverty and have resisted the reactionary rollback of human services, the assaults on Social Security, and the undermining of both labor unions and environmental protections.

Further along the spectrum is the political left—the progressives, socialists, Marxists, and others. They want to replace or substantially modify the corporate capitalist system with a system of public ownership, in which many of the large corporations are nationalized and smaller businesses are under cooperative ownership. Some progressives will settle for a *social democracy*, the kind of political economy that exists in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and other western European nations, with strong labor unions, good work conditions, and firm controls on business to safeguard the public interest. They argue that untrammelled free-market capitalism has no goal other than the accumulation of capital by the privileged few, at everyone else's expense. A democratically responsive social democracy, say the progressives, has an important role to play in protecting the environment, advancing education, providing jobs for everyone able to work, sufficient aid to the disabled, along with occupational safety, secure retirement, and affordable medical care and housing.

Many leftists and progressives tirelessly denounce the now defunct communist societies as models for U.S. socialism. Yet some progressives note that whatever the shortcomings and crimes of communist societies, they did offer some things that would have been worth preserving: a guaranteed right to a job, no hunger or homelessness, free medical care and free education to the highest level of one's ability, subsidized utilities and transportation, free cultural events, and a guaranteed pension after retirement—entitlements that were abolished soon after the communist countries opened themselves to the plunder and harsh inequality of the corporate free market.¹²

Most U.S. leftists, social democrats, and liberals refrain from uttering a positive word about the former state socialist societies or revolutionary communism in general. Many of the more doctrinaire seem little worried about global capitalism, the system that today has the world in its baneful grip. Instead, they wage constant battle against something they call "Stalinism" (a code word for communism). To them, Stalinism is an evil that lurks in many nooks and crannies on the left and must be rooted out. Some of the doctrinaire leftists appear happiest when attacking other leftist groups for being ideologically impure, insufficiently militant, or of tainted political genealogy.

Generally speaking, revolutionary socialists are distinguished from liberal reformers in their belief that our social problems cannot be solved within the very system that is creating them. They do not believe that every human problem is caused by capitalism but they are convinced that many of the most important ones are. Capitalism propagates conditions that perpetuate poverty, racism, sexism, and exploitative social relations at home and abroad, they argue. To the socialist, U.S. military expansionism abroad is not the result of "wrong thinking" but the natural outgrowth of profit-oriented capitalism. They believe that U.S. foreign policy has been quite successful in crushing egalitarian social reforms in many countries in order to keep the world safe for transnational corporations.

An ideological tendency that defies ready classification on a lineal political spectrum are the *libertarians*, who resemble anarchists (and reactionaries) in their insistence that government is the source of all our ills. So they call for

the privatization of social programs and just about everything else. But libertarians differ from free-market reactionaries in their opposition to strong police enforcement and to U.S. military interventions abroad.

PUBLIC OPINION: WHICH DIRECTION?

The opinions most Americans have about socioeconomic issues are decidedly more progressive than what is usually enunciated by political leaders and right-wing media pundits. Surveys show substantial majorities strongly favoring public funding for Social Security, nursing home care, and lower-priced prescription drugs. Substantial majorities support unemployment insurance, disability assistance, job retraining, child care, price supports for family farms, and food stamps for the needy, while opposing tax cuts for the very rich and privatization of social services. Large majorities want improvements in managed health care and favor a universal health insurance program run by the government and funded by taxpayers. The public generally supports a stronger, not a weaker, social safety net. By nearly three to one, the public rejects cutbacks in Medicare and Social Security.¹³

Large majorities feel that the gap between rich and poor is growing, and that government has a responsibility to try to do away with poverty and hunger, that abortion should be a decision made by a woman and her doctor, and that racial minorities should be given fair treatment in employment—but not special preferences in hiring and promotion. After many years of strong support for organized labor, Americans became much less positive toward unions during the grim days of the 2009 recession.¹⁴

Sixty percent agree that large corporations wield too much power. A majority believes that corporate executives care very little about the environment, are given to falsifying company accounts, and are lining their own pockets. Large majorities say that corporations have too much influence over government. Most Americans are concerned about the environment. A majority also favors the death penalty and being “tough” on crime. Yet 60 percent agree that the president has no right to suspend the Bill of Rights in time of war or national emergency. By a five-to-three majority, Americans support the idea of a public health plan to compete with private insurance. Only 25 percent of Americans say banks are honest and trustworthy.¹⁵

In sum, on many important issues, a majority seems to hold positions at variance with those maintained by ideological conservatives and reactionaries and closer to the ones enunciated by liberals and progressives.

Opinion polls are only part of the picture. There is the whole history of democratic struggle that continues to this day and remains largely untaught in the schools and unreported in the media. It is expressed in mass demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience—targeting such things as poverty, unemployment, unsafe nuclear reactors, nuclear missile sites, and U.S. wars abroad. There have been mass mobilizations in support of legalized abortion, women’s rights, gay and lesbian rights, and environmental protections. There have been organized housing takeovers for the homeless, protests against police brutality, and noncompliance with draft registration. The