Michael Colby is sprawled across his armchair, ruminating on the recent elections. "Newt Gingrich is a gift," says Colby with a broad smile. "He's just what we need." With his crew cut, faded plaid shirt and old Levi's, Colby seems like a lanky young farmer attuned to the details of weather, seeds, and soil. Colby does help his wife, who runs an organic farm, but his main occupation is strategist for anti-toxics campaigns around food safety, with an eye firmly fixed on the big picture. Colby heads Food & Water, Inc., in Marshfield, Vermont [phone: 1-800-EAT- SAFE]. Food & Water has joined three battles simultaneously: to stop food irradiation, to get BGH (synthetic growth hormone) out of cow's milk, and, most recently, to end the use of dangerous pesticides. Yes, END THE USE.

Colby sees the problem this way: chemical corporations have invaded the food industry because they profit handsomely when their poisons are pumped onto or into our food. Someone else reaps the consequences. "They've got to be stopped, that's all there is to it," he says. They CAN be stopped because Americans care about their health; good, safe food is essential to health; and people "get it" about the chemical corporations. Furthermore, taking on the chemical corporations provides a great vehicle for talking about other problems brought on by corporate dominance of our culture, Colby says.

How can we talk on the chemical companies by campaigning for safe food? Colby sees the problem the way any good organizer might: we devise strategies that capture the imagination of the public, get people engaged, and focus their anger on winnable goals. Colby says its definitely doable.

If people "get it" about corporations, how do we explain the Republican success on November 8?

In a recent interview, Colby told THE NATION, "I've got to hand it to the Republicans for tapping into the latent anger in the American electorate. For me, this election was about people trying to take back their government. What they will soon find out, however, is that we don't live in an individual democracy, but a corporate republic. Grass-roots environmental campaigns will be able to capitalize on that realization."[1]

For their part, the Republicans claim they were swept into office with the children of unwed mothers, base all of the nation's government regulations on the junk science of cost-benefit analysis and risk assessment, fatten up the military to crush imagined attackers,[2] make it harder for consumers to bring lawsuits against corporations that sell dangerous products, and protect Wall Street manipulators from certain kinds of investor lawsuits.[3]

But these promises are NOT what swept the Republicans into office. To begin with, only 39% of eligible voters voted; 61% stayed home.[4] Secondly, a TIME MAGAZINE/CNN poll reveals that only 12% of the voters voted Republican because they favored the Republican platform. Seventy- four percent voted "Against Bill Clinton" or "Against the Democrats," according to TIME.[5] Now 12% of 39% = 4.7%, so Newt Gingrich's "Contract With America" received a positive mandate from a scant 4.7% of the voters on November 8.

Who put the Republicans into office this year? Not people with annual incomes of $30,000 or less; they voted overwhelmingly Democrat. People making $30,000 to $49,000 per year split their votes between Democrats and Republicans. Yet the Republicans won. The Republicans won this year not because they achieved record support among any class of voters, but because rich people voted. About 7% more voters were wealthy this year than in 1992, and 7% fewer were working class. The shift in turnout was enough to cost the Democrats control of Congress," says Peter Levine, a researcher at the University of Maryland.[6]

Money bought the election, in every sense. You have to have big money just to become a candidate. According to Ellen Miller, of the Center for Responsive Politics, 95% of the average House race cost $542,000. In other words, you had to have half-a-million dollars in the bank just to run for a seat in Congress. In 1994, it was even more expensive.

When Bill Clinton ran for President in 1992 he promised to get money out of politics. He said then that American politics was being held "hostage" by monied interests. He said "political action committees, industry lobbies, and cliques of $100,000 donors buy access to Congress and the White House."[7] However, after winning the Presidency, Mr. Clinton gave campaign finance reform a low priority, and he failed to push a reform bill through his own Democratically-controlled Congress. THE NEW YORK TIMES editorialized (May 31, 1994), "Mr. Clinton has spent more time and energy courting well-to-do donors at fancy private receptions than prodding Congress to enact serious political reform." During his first 20 months in office, Mr. Clinton personally raised $40 million in Democratic political donations. "Mr. Clinton is the best money draw his party has enjoyed in decades," the NEW YORK TIMES says.[7]

Nevertheless, Republicans have more money to spend than Democrats do. The NEW YORK TIMES observes, "Indeed, even though Mr. Clinton has sharply closed the gap, the Democrats still get creamed by Republican money men. Through the first 18 months of Mr. Clinton's term in office, the Democratic National Committee and its fundraising organs in the House and Senate raised $83 million, as against $162 million raised by the Republicans."[7]

Does money get you elected? Candidates that outspent their opponents won 30 of the 35 Senate races in 1994 (83%), and 370 of the 435 Congressional races (85%).[8] Clearly, money translates directly into votes.

The Republicans argue that unleashing "free market" forces --and reducing taxes on corporations and on the rich--will allow the economy to grow so everyone can benefit. This is what the country tried throughout the 1980s; this is Reaganomics. Unfortunately, the facts reveal that this "trickle down" or "supply side" theory plunges the nation into massive debt, makes the rich richer, swells the poverty rolls, and reduces the income and security of the middle class.

The economy has been growing in recent years, but so has economic inequality. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in October that average per-person income rose in 1993, but 72% of the growth went to the wealthy.[9] A full 40% of the growth went to the top 5%, the group that Labor Secretary Robert Reich calls "the overclass."[10] The top fifth of American households took 48.2% of the nation's income in 1993; the bottom fifth received just 3.6% --an historic record for inequitable distribution of income in America.[9]

From 1989 to 1993, the typical American household lost $2,344 in annual income, a loss of 7%. Between 1970 and 1993, working people without a college degree --75% of the American workforce--saw their wages decline 12%. [9] Labor Secretary Reich says one important reason for the decline of wages is that growth in corporate profits is not being passed along to workers. The Secretary issued a stern warning November 22: "If American business continues to pursue short-term profits at the price of insecurity and falling living standards for a large portion of our society, it will sooner or later reap the bitter harvest of popular rage."[10]

In a recent national poll, 55% of American adults said they no longer believed that you could build a better life for yourself and your family by working hard and playing by the rules. Of those without college degrees, 68% said they no longer believe it.[10]
Corporate America, guided by a wealthy, self-serving "overclass," has polluted our politics, hijacked our democracy, and diminished the American dream. For now the anger and frustration of the public is being manipulated by Newt Gingrich and other children of George Wallace. For now, the targets of rage are immigrants, welfare mothers, government officials, gays, and an ill-defined "counter-culture." But this could change; it represents an unprecedented opportunity for organizers and activists.

Dan Cantor, executive director of the New Party, formed in 1992 as an alternative to the two major parties, and now active in 10 states [phone: (212) 302-5053], sums it up: "This election marked the end of liberalism, but not in the simplistic way Mr. Gingrich believes. The state has failed, and the free market is failing. For most Americans, getting government off our backs is just one piece of the job. The real task is to get government on our side and to rein in a market system gone berserk."[11]

Where do we begin? "We connect with people through their health," says Michael Colby of Food & Water. "Then we talk to them about family, community, and the principles of the Founding Fathers. Corporations aren't just poisoning us, they're running us off the land, taking our skills, destroying our democracy. People understand that."

[To be continued.]

--Peter Montague


[8] "Can't buy me love, but...," IN THESE TIMES November 28, 1994, pg. 7.


Descriptor terms: michael colby; food & water; pesticides; bgh; radiation; food irradiation; food safety; newt gingrich; republicans; democrats; farming; farmers; elections; campaign finance reform; contract with america; military buildup; consumer products; lawsuits; product safety; wall street; wealth; income distribution; ellen miller; center for responsive politics; bill clinton; supply side economics; trickle down economics; reaganomics; robert reich; dan cantor; new party; political organizing; corporations;