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## **Reviving the American Liberal Movement**

Close to 600 people in the San Francisco Bay Area gave up their President's Day Monday vacation to spend some nine hours in a "Strategy Conference for Liberals and Progressives" to address "How To Support Obama to BE the Obama Americans Thought We Elected" and "How to Launch a Constitutional Amendment to Restrain Corporate Power" after the Supreme Court's recent decision to allow unrestrained corporate spending on elections.

For many, just being in the context where this discussion was happening in a face-to-face encounter with others, rather than an isolated individuals reading it on a computer monitor, seemed an important step toward re-empowerment. Many are suffering from post-traumatic Obama abandonment syndrome--an ailment that came from being severely traumatized by Obama's political moves in the past thirteen months. A palpable sadness, depression, anger and even despair carried by many who had worked for Obama and now felt betrayed by his choices in his first year in office was mixed with compassion and a strong determination to not allow the political Right to use our despair as their ticket to a political revival. The conference was conceived by Tikkun Magazine and its interfaith Network of Spiritual Progressives (including secular humanists and atheists who consider themselves "spiritual but NOT religious") as a way to allow people who have been having these feelings privately to both receive the comfort of sharing those feelings with other liberals and progressives, and then to move beyond them to actually face the critical question: "What do we in the liberal and progressive world do now, if we face three, or hopefully seven, years of an Obama presidency?"

The first step toward answering that question was to grieve what we had lost, honestly acknowledging the painful, for many quite humiliating, fact that after having built so many walls of self-protection against allowing ourselves to get sucked into some new moment of idealism, we had allowed those walls to come down as we became energized about Obama, only to find that once again our hopes had been dashed. This was not a crew of hardened

lefties who might say: "You were always foolish to hope in Obama--don't you know that the military-industrial-health-agricultural-banking-investment-energy complex controls the society." Most people in the room had already integrated that knowledge of corporate dominance, but rejected the notion that repeating its truth was a sufficient way to change it. Instead, they had imagined that Obama could play an important role in sustaining the powerful mobilization that had already occurred around his campaign, and direct it toward significant steps to challenge the corporate power in ways that might even excite and attract the tens of millions of Americans who don't even bother to vote.

In psychological research in which I was the principle investigator for some twenty years at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, I came to understand the most people have a strong voice in our consciousness telling us that "everyone is just out to promote their own narrowly conceived self-interest and that they will seek to manipulate or even dominate you unless you can more effectively manipulate and dominate them first," a voice that gives credence to the need to "look out for number one," always suspect that others are interested in you primarily to get something for themselves and not because they can genuinely see and appreciate you, and that security for ourselves or our country is best secured by dominating others (either in the hard way that the Right and centrist Democrats champion, namely military power, or the soft way that some Liberals advocate, namely through economic and media penetration of other societies coupled with diplomacy backed by the threat of economic boycotts or future military interventions).

Happily, there's another voice in most people that advises them, based in part of their own experience in the world with others, that safety and security can sometimes be achieved much more effectively by communicating genuine love, caring and a generosity of spirit and of deed toward others.

Most people are somewhere on a continuum between the first fearful consciousness (call it the Domination world view) and the second more loving and caring consciousness (call it the Generosity world view). And where exactly we are at any given moment is determined in part by our own childhood experiences, adult life experiences, the ideological or religious worldviews we hold, and, importantly, by our own sense of where the social energy is moving at any given moment. So, during the early years after 9/11 social energy was so overwhelming moved toward fear and the Domination worldview that even many liberals and progressives became timid about articulating an alternative based on love and generosity. Conversely, the Obama campaign momentarily opened up a new set of possibilities, and many people did in fact move closer to the Generosity world view).

What happened in Obama's first year is that most of those who had allowed themselves to hope began to appear to themselves and others as naïve fools, and the humiliation that they experienced will take some years and psychologically or spiritually sophisticated interventions, of which the conference in San Francisco was a first example, though Tikkun and the Network of Spiritual Progressives (in co-sponsorship with many other groups including The Nation magazine, Progressive Democrats of America, Yes! Magazine, Peace Action, The Institute for Policy Studies, the Shalom Center, and Code Pink) will be holding a 3 day conference of this sort in D.C. June 11-14 and is seeking to encourage and support similar gatherings around the country in the next few months. More info at [www.tikkun.org](http://www.tikkun.org).

Social energy is never static -- it is always moving in one direction or another. So as many Americans became disillusioned by the failure of Obama and Congressional Democrats to take up the electoral mandate (bigger than that of any president in the past 20 years) and

create a pro-people, peace and social justice administration and legislation, but instead managed to give priority to the banks and investment companies, the pharmaceuticals and the health care profiteers, the coal industry and the nuclear industry, the war-makers and the ideologues of the American Empire, the stage was set for Right-wing opportunists to cast themselves as a quasi-populist voice, and to attract to the Tea Party movement not only those racist and domination-prone Americans waiting for their chance to pounce on Obama, but also many confused middle income people who might have been equally attracted to a pro-democracy, anti-corporate movement had that emerged in time.

So, the most important first step for liberals and progressives is to explain to themselves and each other that history is not over, that the Obama years still retain some possibilities, and even though we need to give up our (often unconscious) fantasy that Obama was our messiah who would save us and the world, we can and must still retain our understanding that the suffering in this world through poverty and oppression, the destruction of the environment and the possibility of ending all human and animal life on the planet Earth, and the survival of our own souls and mental health requires that we revive a movement based on love, kindness, generosity, ecological sanity, and caring for each other, including everyone on the planet. And, indeed, were the Democrats to put those values at the forefront of their own reelection campaigns, they'd be far more successful than trying to defend policies or legislation that has been more about compromising with the powerful than promoting a fundamentally different kind of world.

The SF Conference and its follow up in D.C. focused on two first steps in this direction: 1. An Environmental and Ethical Responsibility Amendment to the U.S Constitution and 2. A Global Marshall Plan.

The EERA is designed to go along with, not replace, a narrower amendment that will simply overturn the Supreme Court's "Citizens United" decision. Such an amendment is currently being worked on by a coalition of inside-the-beltway liberal and progressive groups and deserves our support. But the EERA seeks to use this moment -- in which corporate power has been so clearly exposed not only in the Supreme Court decision but also in the capitulation to the corporate agenda by many in the Obama Administration and in the Congress, and simultaneously in the recognition that the economic system itself is not a solid rock but might actually lead to future disasters even worse than what happened in the past two years -- to mount a more serious challenge to corporate power.

The NSP conference presented four different variations on an amendment, from a one sentence version already introduced by Congressional liberals John Conyers and Donna Edwards ("The sovereign right of the people to govern being essential to a free democracy, Congress and the States may regulate the expenditure of funds for political speech by any corporation, limited liability company, or other corporate entity.") to a much lengthier one based on the assumption that if the people of the US really want to restrain corporate power, we can't rely on the strategy of a short statement that the Congress is supposed to implement, but rather that we'll need to write the legislation into the Amendment itself.

Many people seemed most taken by the following version:

### **The Environmental and Ethical Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. (EERA)**

Article One: Corporations are not and shall not be considered "persons" or given the rights of

individual human beings under the terms of the U.S. Constitution or the constitutions of any state in this Union, nor shall Congress or the courts give them similar rights or protections. The use of money in elections is not a protected form of "speech" and Congress shall limit the amount of money spent on any election campaign, lobbying or advertising to shape public opinion on any given piece of legislation or issue, and shall require equal time from media or equal print space to present the major alternatives in elections and ballot measures in the words of the candidates or those supporting any ballot measure, and may take other steps to insure that the American people are well-informed about the major alternative positions being debated in American society on economic, environmental, health and health care, corporation's environmental and ethical responsibilities, high-tech, science, defense, human rights, child-rearing, elderly care, product and food safety, social justice, war and peace, labor, wages, employment, housing, immigration, transportation, foreign policy, nutrition, education, the legal system and prisons, and caring for each other issues, and the worldviews and ethical and environmental values that lie behind the differences in position, and informed of these alternative views by the advocates of the different positions who must also be given adequate and equal time to explain their critiques of the alternatives to the positions they hold.

Article Two: Congress shall require that any corporation with an income of over \$100 million per year must obtain a new corporate charter once every five years, and that charter will only be granted to those corporations that can prove a satisfactory history of social, environmental and ethical responsibility to a grand jury of ordinary citizens.

Article Three: It is the responsibility of the United States Government and all its offices, and all other state and local governments, to develop policies and implement them, for the sake of enhancing the environmental sustainability of the planet and the well-being of all people on the planet, including, but not limited to the well-being of all Americans. Citizens may receive injunctive relief from policies that are environmentally destructive, and Congress shall provide adequate funding for a judiciary sufficient to inquire thoroughly about these alleged threats to the environment, hear the testimony from different perspectives, and then issue relief to the impacted individuals or communities as they may deem appropriate, and impose fines or imprisonment to corporations whose boards have not taken adequate steps to protect the environment or government officials who have been similarly negligent.

Article Four: Every educational institution in the U.S. from k-graduate or professional school training shall require at least one course each year to train people on how to become aware of the ethical issues faced in decision making in the various aspects of daily life, the world of work, government, the military, police, the courts, the corporations, banks and investment firms, the stock markets, educational institutions, foreign policy, economic policies, human rights policies, health institutions, immigration policies, and the pursuit of environmental sustainability, food and agricultural policies, regional planning, and homeland security. This training shall allow for a variety of perspectives on the ethical responsibilities that people hold not only to their clients but also to the larger society, the entirety of humanity, and the sustainability and flourishing of the natural environment of the Earth.

The second major focus was on the Global Marshall Plan. The NSP version (read it at [www.spiritualprogressives.org](http://www.spiritualprogressives.org)) calls for the US to take the lead by example in creating an international consortium of advanced industrial societies, each of which would dedicate 1-2% of their GDP each year for the next twenty to once and for all end global poverty, homelessness, hunger, inadequate education, inadequate health care, and repair the global environment. Part of the plan involves changing the terms of international trade to favor the poor instead of only the advanced industrial societies. Though few of the attendees believe

that such a plan could pass the present Congress, they argue that the anti-war movement has been hobbled by only knowing what it is against, not what it is for, and the Global Marshall Plan gives that positive vision. The NSP has consistently argued that it is the Strategy of Generosity rather than the Strategy of Domination that is the most rational path to achieve Homeland Security, and that the GMP could be funded by the same monies that will be squandered in endless wars. While supporting the more limited ideas of the Millennium Goals, NSPers argue that Americans are more likely to rally around a program that could in fact end global poverty than one that only promises amelioration of the worst suffering in the poorest of states, but not a fundamental transformation of the economics that continues to maintain this situation. In late January, Congressman Keith Ellison introduced H.Res. 1016 which called on the President and the Congress to embrace this strategy of generosity for homeland security.

The final part of the action program includes a petition to the President and the Congress to 1. declare that the war on terror is over and refine terrorism as a police issue and terrorists as well as armed-criminals, not a threat to our national survival 2. Support the EERA and the Global Marshall Plan 3. Support "Medicare for Everyone" and require that any hospital or clinic receiving US funds and any part of the US military and the US government use generic drugs and purchase them wherever in the world they can be safely produced as the lowest cost 3. Education reform to teach students that what should count in life is to maximize our own and each other's capacities to be loving, kind, generous, caring for each other, ethically and environmentally responsible, and filled with gratitude and awe at the grandeur of the universe. 4. Articulate a fundamental worldview of generosity and caring for others and make it obvious how your decisions and policies and legislation flow directly from that worldview.

Of course, there were many concerns about how "realistic" this agenda was. And if we allow ourselves to have "what is realistic" be defined by our media, our well-intentioned but inside-the-beltway consciousness bent liberal elected officials tell us "what is realistic," not much can change. The most significant changes have happened because the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the Women's movement, and the GLBT movement refused to be realistic in this sense. And precisely because they refused to be realistic they succeeded in changing reality in dramatic ways. Or to put it in terms that should be on everyone's banner: you cannot know what is realistic in politics until you engage in fierce struggle for your highest ideals, because what looked unrealistic before you engage in that struggle can suddenly become very realistic when others get the sense that it is safe for them too to fight for their highest ideals. So to our politicians, we must insist: Don't be realistic -- be principled, and even a little utopian -- because that is precisely what will make major steps toward a more humane, just, peaceful and loving society possible.

The San Francisco Conference of Liberals and Progressives may not have changed the world--but it did re-energize and give new hope to many who had previously felt defeated. If this can be repeated in city after city around the U.S., we might not yet have to accept the inevitability of a resurgent Right.

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