

The Thunder of Populist Democracy

by ALEXIS A. MAISLEN

Political agendas infiltrate all areas of life, from how nations relate down to the foods we ingest. Voltaire once reclined, sipping coffee in his favorite French salon, and discussed a strange "ideal" called democracy. Not so much later, suffragettes across continents abandoned their posts in the kitchen to battle for women's right to vote. At the same time, smoky speakeasies in the United States rang with disingenuous cries for freedom from legislated morality.

Within the United States, discussions about labor, women's rights, and the New Deal characterized the first half of the twentieth century. Then, following on the tail of the Red Scare, came sit-ins, powerful orators, and marches on Washington and Selma. In art, the Beat movement emphasized breathing in the naked moments of life and spitting back the truth, however harsh.

Those harsh truths came fast and furious as the sixties ripened public figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Cesar Chavez. They were taken up and almost transformed by a hippie movement that encompassed folk, rock, and blues sensibilities in a passionate search for conscientious living. They were brought to their furthest extreme by militant Yippies, Black Panthers, and backlash FBI agents.

The seventies brought us feminism, environmentalism, and the investigative muckraking of Woodward and Bernstein. The tired, disappointed eighties saw apathy elevated to an ideal. The nineties brought the



Populist Jim Hightower brings his Rolling Thunder Democracy Tour to Chicago.

apotheosis of that ideal: individual affluence, avarice, and corporate greed highlighted some new harsh truths — and the need to set them right. Now, in the age of e-mail activism, individuals can be part of one

group, then another, lending their names to the issues that call to them.

"What's missing is a sense of movement," says Jim Hightower, Texas populist and columnist for the *Nation*. "There are ele-

Two Minutes, Better World

In a perfect world, we would read newspapers and magazines daily, staying abreast of the current political agenda. We would write our Congresspersons whenever an important issue came up for a vote, voicing our opinion. And we would pass along our knowledge to friends so that everyone stays informed.

But who has time for all that? The world is a busy place, and unfortunately, lack of time can lead to apathy toward otherwise important political and social issues. We want to make a difference somehow, but with the amount of issues out there, it's difficult to feel like we're making an impact on any one of them, much less touching on them all.

TrueMajority.com aims to do the work for us. The free service, founded by Ben and Jerry's co-founder Ben Cohen, monitors actions in Congress and notifies members with twice-monthly e-mails. Members can then learn more about the issue, click "reply," and a fax is automatically sent in their name to their Congressperson.

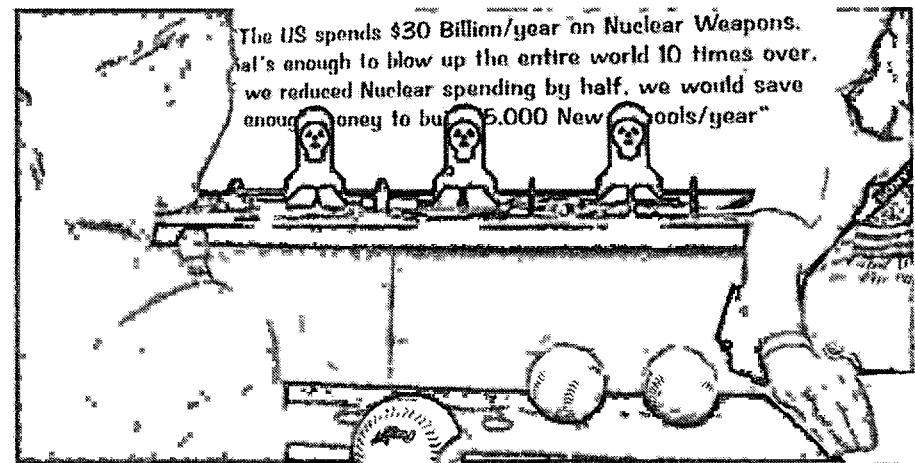
The campaign's focus is based on ten principles centered on compassion, charity, and justice, which the organization describes as "a positive blueprint for mov-

ing forward in the post-9/11 world." Principles include an end to Cold War-era military spending and nuclear arms development, payment of U.N. dues, an increased focus on human rights issues, fighting hunger, and closing the gap between America's rich and poor.

After September 11, Cohen recognized a desire in people to move forward as a society and make a difference in some way. So he started TrueMajority. The organization's aim can be summed up by their slogan, "Give us two minutes, we'll give you a better world." And that two minutes can take place from the comfort of one's own home.

Internet-driven activism has been around for a while now, in various forms. We've all received e-mails where we sign our name to the end, copy and paste the text into a new message, and forward to our friends. We hope that at some point, the e-mail will reach its designated target, but wonder if we're wasting our time. TrueMajority's "one click activism" method is gloriously straightforward in comparison.

TrueMajority is making its presence known at a number of summer events, including the Rolling Thunder Down-Home Democracy Tour (which hits Chicago June 15), and the fifteen-city tour of musical group String Cheese Incident (appearing at Alpine Valley in East Troy, Wisconsin on July 12). At these events, True-



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Majority sets up booths resembling those at a county fair and presents games that are fun while delivering a message. In the Knock-a-Nuke/Build-a-School game, for example, players throw softballs at nuclear weapons. For every nuke knocked down, a brand new school appears. The entrance "fee" for the games is registration to the e-mail list.

TrueMajority will also conduct a parade in eleven cities across the U.S., including a Chicago stop (date to be announced). The event features a five-vehicle caravan of theme cars highlighting vital issues in a fun, whimsical way. The School Bus, for example, is a double decker yellow bus that symbolizes the need to double federal funding for local school districts. The Piggies vehi-

ments of progress that are not connected. We need an excuse to come together and start a coalition building process, to see if our diverse parts can come together and build a whole."

Hightower is right. A sense of movement can't arise of itself. It must be built — by individuals who come together and celebrate the goals they hold in common. Thus, our own Chicago, city of political machines, midwestern sensibility, and international style, will host this June 15th the Rolling Thunder Tour. An event of artistic spirit, good organic beer, and an opportunity to unify on food and farm issues, the festival in Union Park will present an opportunity to bring together consumers, activists, change-agents, and political leaders on the endangered food production system.

The Rolling Thunder "Down Home Democracy" Tour is Hightower's brainchild: country swing with a hip hop attitude. Hightower describes the function as "a country fair with guts; a revival with reason; a concert with consciousness; a festival with funk and function." The first festival of the tour, focusing on genetically engineered food, racial profiling, and the 2000 court-decided election, was held this past March in Austin, Texas. It attracted such Progressive heroes as Michael Moore, film director of *Roger and Me* and *TV Nation*, Molly Ivins, Mike Dolen, Margerite Jones, and Jesse Jackson Jr., as well as many musical artists that sing progressive lyrics. Celebrities and ticketholders alike seemed delighted to "put the party back in politics."

Photo: Alan Pogue

Photo: Act New Productions

— Molly Birk