

Among the many reasons to care about politics is the move to privatize water

By Carla Binion

May 28, 2001—When average Americans don't participate in politics, they put their fate in the hands of professional politicians and the corporate leaders who pull the politicians' strings. Around half of eligible Americans don't bother to vote, and fewer participate in politics between elections.

In an interview with the New York Times, November 10, 1972, Richard Nixon said, "The average American is just like the child in the family." Nixon wasn't right about many things, but he was right to imply that people who hand their fate over to parental-figure politicians voluntarily assume the role of children in our national family.

Apolitical Americans don't see the connection between politics and their daily lives. They trust that professional politicians and the corporate moguls who pull their strings always have good motives and will always take care of the "children," meaning ordinary citizens.

Why should average Americans participate in politics? Motive is the key. Obviously, the decisions of politicians and corporate leaders are often motivated primarily by power and money. (Not always, but often.) By contrast, when ordinary citizens participate in politics—people such as schoolteachers, nurses, doctors, artists, carpenters, and so forth—their motive is often the desire to make the world a safer, healthier place. Would you rather trust your fate to people with the former or latter motive?

The following illustrates ways in which professional politicians and corporate leaders (given their power and profit motives) choose to manage world crises when large numbers of citizens abdicate their right to self-govern, think of themselves as children, and generally sleepwalk through life. This is a discussion of how some of our abusive parental-figure politicians and corporations are now handling an impending world water shortage.

According to members of the Project Censored group (described in detail at the end of this article), "global consumption of water is doubling every 20 years." By 2025, the demand for water will rise by 56 percent more than the amount of water currently available, and two-thirds of the world will suffer serious water deprivation. Monsanto, Bechtel and other corporations want to control the world's water for profit. That's right. For profit.

Maude Barlow, national chairperson of the Council of Canadians (www.canadians.org) says, "There is simply no way to overstate the nature of this [water deprivation] crisis." She states that governments are giving control of water supplies to multinational corporations, and that those

companies want to treat water as a commodity and sell it on the open market to the highest bidders. This approach means that in a crunch, only wealthy cities and individuals will have easy access to fresh water.

Trade agreements such as The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) now give corporations “the unprecedented right to the water of signatory companies,” according to the Project Censored report. The report also states that Monsanto plans to net \$63 million by 2008 from its water business in India and Mexico, and that the corporation “estimates that water will become a multi-billion-dollar market in the coming decades.”

The Bechtel Corporation is northern California’s largest private company. Bechtel helped build the Alaska pipeline, the Hoover dam, the San Francisco Bay Bridge, natural gas pipelines in Algeria and refineries in Zambia, and numerous nuclear power plants. Bechtel has worked to privatize San Francisco’s water system.

In Cochabamba, Bolivia, union leader Oscar Olivera and other water activists worked to force Bechtel out of the country in order to halt a water privatization scheme. Bechtel then filed a lawsuit for up to \$20 million to compensate for losing potential Cochabamba profits. Project Censored notes that the lawsuit “pits one of the world’s wealthiest corporations against the people of South America’s poorest nation.”

The Project Censored report says that Bechtel has a history of environmental abuses, and that the corporation has built “toxic refineries for Chevron in Richmond that destroy the San Francisco Bay,” and drawn up development plans “for a man accused of killing half a million Hutu refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (former Zaire.)” The report also says Bechtel typically operates with secrecy and “jacks up the cost of projects far beyond the original bid, sticking taxpayers with huge, often unexpected bills.”

Maude Barlow asks, “Who owns water? We say the earth, all species and all future generations. Many in power have another answer. It is time for this debate.”

Barlow writes in “Blue Gold: The Global Water Crisis and the Commodification of the World’s Water Supply,” that water privatization has a documented “terrible record.” She says that with privatization, “Customer rates are doubled or tripled; corporate profits rise as much as 700 percent; corruption and bribery are rampant; water quality standards drop, sometimes dramatically; overuse is promoted to make money; and customers who can’t pay are cut off . . . When privatization hits the Third World, those who can’t pay will die.”

While the “children” in the American family slept, our parental-professional-politicians slipped NAFTA by us, opening the door to (among countless other potential disasters) corporate privatization of water. Our elected leaders might not have foreseen the NAFTA-related problems, but grassroots environmental and labor groups (examples of the few mature citizens participating politically) tried to warn them.

If you're a regular reader of Online Journal, you're probably more interested in politics than most folks are, and you probably do participate in the nation's political life. However, if you're one of the "children," it may be that as you amble through your local shopping malls, dine in favorite restaurants and drive through nice neighborhoods, everything seems fine (almost.) You experience prosperity, warmth and laughter.

However, maybe you've read or heard (and faintly remember) that the recent presidential election was stolen; that the U. S. now incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world (and that corporations now own and operate prisons for profit;) or that one in five Americans don't have adequate health care. As you sleepwalk through what remains of the American Dream, you sleep fitfully.

Your partially suppressed awareness of the stolen election; of the ten-times increase in U.S. prisoners over the past 30 years; of the broken health care system; and maybe of a potential water shortage, creates a disturbing undercurrent behind the prosperity and laughter. If you're one of the "children" in the national family, you probably resist full awareness of those and other political realities.

Most people understandably resist, for example, comparing Adolf Hitler and his era with other totalitarian-inclined leaders and eras. However, it helps to be aware of legitimate comparisons, in the interest of learning from history's mistakes in order to avoid repeating them.

Yes, Hitler was rare, because he was flagrantly sadistic and did not try to hide his bizarre, clenched-fist of a demeanor, but he was not very different, on close examination, from your everyday authoritarian corporate or political leader. As Bertolt Brecht's "Arturo Ui" said of Hitler: "Let none of us exult too soon. The womb is fruitful from which this one crawled."

World leaders and corporate moguls who respond to a possible world water shortage by scheming to make money from the life-or-death crisis (instead of working to ease potential human suffering) seem to have crawled from that same fruitful womb. The same is true for politicians and corporate leaders who refuse to repair our health care system.

The same is true of corporate and political leaders who profit financially from today's rapid increase in incarcerations. According to Joel Dyer, "The Perpetual Prisoner Machine," (Westview Press: Perseus Books Group, 2000) the U. S. now incarcerates (again, often for corporate profit) five to seven times more people than most other industrialized nations. Dyer demonstrates that this is true, in part, because other nations put non-violent drug users into rehabilitation or community service programs instead of in prison.

Why care about politics? Because when ordinary citizens don't care or participate, we turn the world over to those who crawled from the tyrants' womb.

During Hitler's ascent, some Germans were vaguely aware that he was rounding up Jewish people and carting them off to camps, but in their daily routines, they laughed in their shops, restaurants and prosperous neighborhoods. At times their laughter probably felt hollow and

tasted bitter. Many of them played the role of their nation's complacent "children," and many remained mute. Some slept fitfully. Sound familiar?

Fully awake, mature people can't separate the way in which they "do" politics from who they allegedly "are"—personally and spiritually. What people "are" and what they "do" are two sides of the same fabric, and that applies to an individual's relationship to politics as much as to any other activity. Only a sleeping person can "do" neglect while claiming to "be" concerned.

Why care about politics? Because your active participation has the potential to help rectify the above-mentioned injustices and improve the world in other realistic ways, and because caring about and participating in the nation's political life is what conscious, awakened grown-ups naturally do.

Project Censored (www.projectcensored.org) is an investigative sociology project and media activist group managed via the department of sociology in the School of Social Sciences at Sonoma State University. Over 175 people helped produce "Censored 2001" (Seven Stories Press, 2001.) This year's Project Censored edition includes an introduction by author and educator Noam Chomsky, and contributions by writers Norman Solomon, Ed Herman, Michael Parenti, Alexander Cockburn, David Corn, and many others. Project Censored's 2001 judges included Dr. George Gerbner, Dean Emeritus, Annenberg School of Communications; Robert McChesney, research Associate Professor in the Institute of Communications Research and the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; William Lutz, Professor of English, Rutgers University; Julianne Malveaux, economist and columnist, King Features, and Pacifica radio talk show host; Howard Zinn, Professor Emeritus of political science at Boston University and author of "A People's History of the United States," and many others.

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