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Freedom, Incorporated

By William Rivers Pitt
truthout | Perspective

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issues

**I pulled in to Nazareth,
Feeling 'bout half past dead.
Just need to find a place
Where I can lay my head.
"Mister, can you tell me where
A man might find a bed?"
He just grinned and shook my hand,
"No" was all he said.**

- 'The Weight'

d
donate

The June 30 deadline for the delivery of 'sovereignty' to the people of Iraq is right around the corner. If the talk coming out of the administration is to be believed, this will be an historic moment: The United States of America will deliver freedom to a people long oppressed by a brutal dictator.

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editorial

After seventeen car bombings in seventeen days, with whole sections of Iraq beyond the control of American forces, and with 840 American soldiers dead, it appears that the Iraqi people are not so sanguine about this proffered American liberty. Many here on the home front cannot understand why these people would bite the hand that is trying to feed them. After all, who would not want our brand of freedom?

L
letters

Perhaps the Iraqi people know more about what we define as 'freedom' than we do.

Freedom, in this case, comes with corporate sponsorship: Halliburton, Carlyle, Bechtel, CACI, DynCorp, Parsons Corporation and many others. These corporations are, in many ways, the sharp



end of American policy decisions in Iraq. The U.S. military has the guns, and serves often as the enforcers of this corporate policy, but these are the companies doling out electricity, food and jobs to the people of Iraq. Some of these companies - CACI and DynCorp for starters - also have guns. They are the ones running the show, and the people of Iraq know this full well.

In many ways, the Iraqi people are like the citizens of newly-minted America after the Revolution. Back then, the American people had a deep and abiding mistrust of corporations. In the days when they were subject to British rule, that rule was enforced by the strong arm of incredibly powerful corporations like the British East India Company, the Hudson Bay Company and the Massachusetts Bay Company. The seminal moment of the American Revolution came when colonists defied the British East India Company's decision to tax tea, and 342 boxes of the stuff wound up adrift on the tide in Boston Harbor.

The Declaration of Independence in 1776 freed the colonists not only from British rule, but from the rule of these corporations. For nearly 100 years afterwards, the citizens of the United States were profoundly suspicious of corporate power. Corporate charters were created by individual states as a legal convenience, and were automatically dissolved if they violated those charters. Corporations were not allowed to participate in the political process, could not buy stock in other corporations, and were destroyed out of hand if they were deemed to be behaving contrary to the public trust. While these corporations played an important role in the development of the nation, they were subservient to the rule of the people.

Even so, their power worried even the greatest minds of that age. President Abraham Lincoln, in a letter written to a Col. William Elkins on November 21, 1864, wrote, "I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. Corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed."

What made Lincoln fear corporate power? He feared it because he saw that power growing before his very eyes, despite the controls which had been put in place. He feared it because he watched first-hand a process which haunts us to this day: War allows the power of corporations to grow explosively. During the Civil War, corporations made huge profits from procurement contracts to supply the federal government with everything it needed to keep a massive army

functional and on the move.

Those profits, and the disorder of the time, gave corporations the muscle to buy legislatures and courts. By the time Lincoln wrote his letter, corporations had very nearly achieved the cancerous supremacy which had been so feared and despised by the colonists before the Revolution.

That supremacy was achieved on May 10, 1886, with a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in a case titled *County of Santa Clara v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company* (118 U.S. 394). The matter before the court turned on taxes and assessments which Santa Clara County believed it was owed by Southern Pacific Railroad. The court found for the railroad company, and enshrined the following words into the annals of American law:

"The court does not wish to hear argument on the question whether the provision in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which forbids a State to deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws, applies to these corporations. We are all of opinion that it does. The defendant Corporations are persons within the intent of the clause in section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which forbids a State to deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

Section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution reads as follows:

"All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

This was the birth of corporate personhood, the idea that a corporation has the same rights and privileges as a single individual. From this point on, in the argument over how much power any single company or group of companies could gather, all bets were off. The

court's decision in 1886 essentially created what could be described as super-citizens.

Kalle Lasn, in his book 'Culture Jam', describes it this way: "Considering their vast financial resources, corporations thereafter actually had far more power than any private citizen. They could defend and exploit their rights and freedoms more vigorously than any individual and therefore they were more free. In a single legal stroke, the whole intent of the American Constitution - that all citizens have one vote, and exercise an equal voice in public debates - had been undermined. Sixty years after it was inked, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas concluded of Santa Clara that it 'could not be supported by history, logic or reason.' One of the great legal blunders of the nineteenth century changed the whole idea of democratic government."

By 1919, corporations employed more than 80% of the American workforce and produced most of America's wealth. Because they were so financially powerful, it became impossible to challenge their supremacy in court: Any challenger would be spent into the ground. Their ability to manipulate domestic and foreign policy via financial largesse to political leaders created a nation where virtually every decision purportedly made in the name of the people was, in fact, an extension of corporate desire. In every way imaginable, a slow coup d'état had taken place in the United States.

And war, as ever, increased their fortunes.

In the aftermath of World War II, corporations were rolling in the profits earned through procurements from the federal government, exactly as they had during the Civil War. The difference between 1865 and 1946 was the personhood granted by the Santa Clara decision. The power enjoyed by corporations after the war, augmented by the military ramp-up of the Cold War, motivated another American President to voice another warning. President Eisenhower, in his farewell speech on January 17, 1961, said:

"We have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations. This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence-economic, political, even spiritual-is felt in

every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society. In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense without peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together."

Eisenhower's warning, like Lincoln's, went unheeded. Revenues from government procurements to fight the Cold War, along with several actual shooting wars in places like Korea and Vietnam, further strengthened corporate rule in America. Corporations merged, expanded, became stand-alone economies more powerful than many sovereign nations. During the administration of Ronald Reagan, which worked day and night to further deregulate the controls placed upon corporations, and which spent untold billions on further expanding the American military, what can only be described as total victory over democracy was achieved by the corporate powers-that-be.

The people of Iraq probably don't know this history, but they can see and feel the effects every day of their lives. Thus, they fight and resist. We Americans also see, feel, breathe and eat the affects of this coup. Thankfully, we have television and the supremacy of rampant materialism to salve the disquiet in our souls. When it becomes too much, we have Prozac and Ritalin to tame the inner rebellion. When airplanes come from the sky and blast our self-assurance into flaming bits, we are counseled by our President to go shopping. Words like "freedom" and "democracy" lose their truth as they are transformed into marketing vectors.

The 'War on Terror' fills the coffers of corporations with umbilical ties to those who run the country. Those in office today purportedly serve in the interest of the citizenry. In truth, it is the super-citizens who benefit. War increases their power, which in turn makes war inevitable. It is an old story, too often repeated.

To do, think or say anything else is unpatriotic, you see. Such is life

under freedom, Incorporated.

*William Rivers Pitt is the senior editor and lead writer for **truthout**. He is a New York Times and international bestselling author of two books - 'War on Iraq: What Team Bush Doesn't Want You to Know' and 'The Greatest Sedition is Silence.'*

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