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Becker and Gerstenzang: Tea Party Misses Target

By DAN BECKER AND JAMES GERSTENZANG

WASHINGTON In their zeal to live free from outside interference, the Tea Parties are shooting at the wrong target.

They would be right to be angry with an oil industry poisoning their water, an auto industry polluting their air, and agribusiness providing unsafe food.

Instead they are attacking the government, the only entity that can protect their water, their atmosphere, their food.

Powerful corporate interests are taking advantage of Tea Party anger for their own self-interest. They are funneling vast sums to fuel and steer an anti-government campaign that would gut the rules protecting people from dangerous products and the environment from poisonous emissions.

What if they succeed? Just consider the menu at their tea party: Scrambled eggs with salmonella, a cup of arsenic-laced tea, and orange juice with a dash of cryptosporidium in the ice cubes. And if you are driving to the party in your SUV, watch out that it doesn't roll over.

The Tea Partiers issue dire warnings of the threat posed by government -- but their movement ignores the threat from corporate America: pollution, dangerous products, and banking practices that brought us the worst economic crash since the Great Depression.

Sharron Angle, the Republican Senate candidate in Nevada, proposed removing government-ordered fluoride from drinking water. But is she expressing similar concern about toxic chemicals corporate polluters put in her tea?

Glenn Beck has whined about government money sending SUVs to the scrap yard thanks to the "cash for clunkers" program. Would he prefer that the clunkers remain on the road?

The critics of government should refocus their energy: They should challenge the corporate interests that produced trucks posing rollover risks, rather than challenge a government that protects us from rollovers.

We need a government that tells automakers to not ignore new energy-efficiency technology and to produce safe SUVs that do all they do now but pollute less, cut our addiction to oil, and save money at the pump.

Why are the Tea Partiers hostile to government but friendly to big business?

Maybe it has something to do with where much of the Tea Party money comes from, including major oil interests. The owners of Koch Industries, sitting on multibillion-dollar oil fortunes, have provided what Politico.com says may total millions of dollars in as-yet-undisclosed contributions to Tea Party-affiliated groups. Koch Industries is a major player in oil refining and transportation.

The Environmental Protection Agency assessed Koch Industries a record civil fine -- \$30 million -- in 2000 for "egregious violations of the Clean Water Act": more than 300 oil spills from its pipelines and oil facilities. No wonder Koch's agenda does not mesh with that of the EPA.

Chemicals in the drinking water? If government doesn't protect us, who will?

Bacteria in the food supply? How would we even know about salmonella in our eggs if there were no government cop on the beat?

If we tie the hands of what Tea Party activist and Oklahoma State Sen. Randy Brogdon calls the "tyrannical federal government," who benefits?

The winners will be those with an excessive zeal for profit and "freedom" from proper constraints: automakers who want to make vehicles that are unsafe and pollute too much, the bankers and Wall Streeters who brought us the housing and financial crisis, and polluters who would relieve themselves -- or their factories' poisons -- into the public's air, land, and water.

Corporate America doesn't protect Americans; doing away with the government watchdogs that do would make sure no one protects us. The losers would be children, public health -- all of us, including the Tea Partiers themselves.

We'd have Wall Street monitored by a shut-eyed Securities and Exchange Commission, look-the-other-way cops running the Environmental Protection Agency, and a Food and Drug Administration passing on filthy food and dangerous drugs to the kitchen table and our medicine cabinets.

We'd be better off dumping tea like that in the harbor. Fortunately, the government won't let us.

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