

# The BLACK C o m m e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine  
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African Americans and the African world.

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**February 12, 2009 - Issue 311**

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## **Is the Government Off Our Backs Yet?**

**Solidarity America**

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For decades, the mantra of politicians on the right has been: "Get the government off our backs."

One such anti-government, anti-tax advocate said and it's been repeated many times - probably because it seems so absurd, yet he is dead serious - I want to halve the size of government in 25 years and "get it down to the size where we can drown it in a bathtub."

The current economic meltdown in the U.S. and around the world is proof enough that they have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Deregulation and wild speculation with other people's money that came with deregulation are the main reasons for the financial crisis in America, but the problem goes back far beyond that.

What brings this into clear focus is the recent salmonella outbreak that has been connected to eight deaths and hundreds of illnesses in 43 states. The source was traced to the Peanut Corp. of America, of Georgia, and its peanut butter - used in many other products - has been recalled. It could take many months to trace and recall all of it.

PCA was inspected in January by the Food and Drug Administration, after the outbreak. It had not been inspected since 2001. The reason? There were not enough inspectors. The reason for not having enough inspectors? Budget cuts that reduced staff.

The last inspection of PCA, in 2001, happens to coincide with the first year of the Bush (Dubya) Administration, which did everything it could to get government off the backs of corporations. The aim was to let them inspect and police themselves.

They have not done a good job of this task. There are examples all over the country and, even, some in other countries - Iraq, for example, where troops have been electrocuted just going about their daily routines, because of shoddy work by KBR Inc. (formerly Kellogg Brown and Root), a favorite company of the Bush Administration. Apparently, they were overseeing and inspecting their own work.

This reduction of government oversight goes back many years, but a shocking example was the explosion and fire at Imperial Foods, a chicken processing plant in Hamlet, N.C., in September, 1991. Twenty-five workers died and more than four dozen were seriously injured, many never to completely recover. The reason for the catastrophe? Many of the doors were locked, some from the outside, to prevent the theft of chicken. Some workers knew the danger of the closed doors, but the jobs were so valuable to them that they didn't complain in that community of less than 7,000.

If inspectors from North Carolina looked at the plant, they didn't enforce the law and free the locked fire doors. Imperial reportedly went for 11 years without an inspection. The South is not known for its protection of working men and women. In this case, their neglect was deadly.

At that time, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was 21 years old and was created to ensure that workplaces did not injure and kill workers with the impunity that these crimes had been committed in the past. One problem, though, was that, 10 years into OSHA's existence, Ronald Reagan was elected president and one of his main themes was: "Don't look to government to solve your problems. Government is the problem." With that kind of attitude about the efficacy of government, where could workers go but down?

Reagan didn't outright kill OSHA, but he cut the budget, as he did in other agencies, so that it could not do the job Congress had set out for it - protect the lives and limbs of workers. The administration at that time also busied itself with reducing the other agencies of government.

In the aftermath of the deadly Imperial Foods fire in September, 1991, someone calculated how long it would have taken OSHA inspectors - in the course of their regular inspections - to visit Imperial and force the company to unlock the fire doors. With its bare-bones budget, it would have taken some 80 years! For his crimes, Emmett J. Roe, Imperial owner, pleaded guilty to 25 counts of involuntary manslaughter and the plea deal got him a sentence of 19-plus years in prison. He was freed just short of four years, and his son and another manager served no time because of the father's plea bargain.

People from all parts of the political spectrum were infected by the smaller-government theme and, for a long time, it became a bi-partisan effort, with a kind of contest to see who could badmouth government most skillfully. The attitude was passed along and became common among the people, not that there wasn't reason for skepticism about government oversight in some areas of our national life.

But the purveyors of the smaller-government theme seemed to be concentrating on getting the government off the backs of Corporate America. Right-wing think tanks were created to push the theme, and they did. Newspapers, magazines, and the airwaves were filled with their propaganda, until even working people thought it was okay to shrink government - or, drown it in a bathtub.

They thought their interests coincided with those of Corporate America. Thus, the

people didn't notice when the money manipulators of Wall Street were successful in getting their manipulations removed from the scrutiny of government regulators. It was all part of the effort to fulfill St. Reagan's goal of handing much of the world to the rich and powerful - those in his own country, that is.

Mortgages, savings, and investments of ordinary citizens were going to be affected by this mass deregulation that took place over so many years that it all seemed normal. Wage workers didn't recognize that their welfare was tied to the government operating on an even keel and ensuring that the institutions of the private sector were functioning in a fair, efficient, and honest manner.

Somewhere along the way, deregulation took on a life of its own and nothing could stop it. Eventually, the economic lifeblood of the nation hung in the balance. With deregulation of banking and finance - and with two wars of choice that drained the economy even further over the past eight years - the U.S. economy has gone into a tailspin and it has taken the rest of the world with it.

Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, the great guru of American economics and ruler of the dollar, was stunned by the failure of Corporate America to regulate itself. He was stunned by the impending collapse of America's financial system.

The right-wing government killers had succeeded beyond any expectation. Government, indeed, was going to be a shadow of its former self. But few of them, if any, are going to come forward to take credit for what they have wrought. We haven't seen them making the rounds of talking-heads shows on television, and their explanations in print - on the few occasions that there are any - are feeble, at best, because they will not take credit, or blame, for the job done.

If America is to recover from this assault, it will be the people who will be the instrument of the recovery. Predatory capitalism will have to retreat to its cave for the foreseeable future and let a naturally industrious people prove that local and regional production of the goods necessary for life is possible. Finally, the people will prove that they can govern themselves, without the controlling hand of corporations and their lobbyists.


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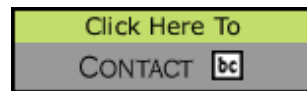
**BlackCommentator.com** Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.

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