

## Corporate Invading and Escaping Greg Coleridge

Last year while in Washington DC to take part in educational events and demonstrations connected to the meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, I passed the US Department of Commerce. Above the main entrance chiseled in granite were these words:

"Commerce defies every wind, outrides every tempest, invades every zone."

The word "invade" caught my attention then and has been in my mind often since the September 11 tragedies. When something is "invaded," its violated, attacked, assaulted. There is no choice or voice by the invaded group. There is no sense of democracy or self-governance. The operative principles, instead, are force and power.

Isn't this how most US citizens felt seeing our own territory "invaded" by terrorists destroying buildings and killing innocent civilians? We felt violated, assaulted, voiceless, choiceless, powerless.

To much of the world, US corporate-dominated world commerce has subscribed to the inscription on the Department of Commerce building. Nations of the world have been subjected to a US-dominated multi-pronged invasion of their industrial bases, farms, consumer goods, overall economic policies and political systems.

Leading the charge have been US-based transnational corporations and various US dominated mechanisms they have used to shield or pave their way. These include international financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF); international trade regimes like the World Trade Organization (WTO); and bilateral or multilateral so-called trade agreements like NAFTA and the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA).

This direct and indirect economic invasion is not the whole story. Corporate commercial invasion of foreign economies, cultures and governments has been complemented by threats and actual military invasions. The dollar and gun have worked in tandem.

Throughout our history, the US military has invaded countless nations in Central America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and elsewhere. In 1962 Secretary of State Dean Rusk presented to a congressional committee a list of over 150 American military interventions abroad since the beginning of the nation. The list has grown over the last four decades to include military assaults on Cambodia, Iran, Iraq, Libya, El Salvador, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Yugoslavia and elsewhere. This list doesn't include the countless nations the US has supported over the last 40 years with training, weapons, intelligence and foreign aid to buy US weapons.

Corporate commercial and US military invasions are codependent on one another. Transnationals need military power to provide security of moving into new markets and protect foreign investments while the US military needs US-based transnationals to justify projecting power and control abroad -- invoking such terms as protecting "national security" and/or "our interests."

To many people in many nations at the receiving end of this double barrel form of economic and military policy, feeling invaded, violated, assaulted, voiceless, choiceless and powerless is not a new condition. It's the norm. They have felt it. Their children have felt it. Their grandchildren have felt it.

Victims of invasions often seek to "get even" in some way. This seems to be the attitude of much of the public at the moment. Why should anyone be surprised that other people in other nations share similar feelings?

This picture of corporate commercial invasion abroad is still not complete without shedding light on its domestic equivalent. Invading abroad has gone hand-in-hand with escaping at home.

US-based corporations have spent 150 years in this country working to escape any and all forms of public definition and control. They have sought to gain “liberty” and “freedom” from we the people at the state level.

During the early period of US history, many state laws and constitutions controlled corporations through awarding, conditioning and revoking charters. Corporate charters were privileges, not rights. They granted corporations the privilege to exist for specific purposes and limited time-periods. Profits were limited. Liabilities of stockholders, owners or managers were in some cases limited. Corporations were often prohibited from all types of direct or indirect political influence.

Following the Civil War, many corporations amassed great wealth (which corporations do following all wars -- the same will be true if and when the rockets begin firing in Afghanistan and elsewhere). They sought to translate their new economic power into greater political power. Much of this was accomplished by various forms of escaping:

- From the state level to the federal level. It was much more difficult for ordinary citizens to wield much influence on federal legislators or travel to Washington DC compared to corporate interests.

- From legislatures to courts. It was much easier to stack a few courts with corporate-friendly judges or bribe a few judges (who at the federal level aren't even elected but appointed for life) than to try to influence an entire group of legislators.

- From legislatures to “regulatory agencies.” These agencies provided a convenient shield between the public and accountable legislators to corporate interests to promote their agendas

Escaping public control of US corporations in the US was also codependent with another force. That force has not been primarily the policeman's gun or baton. It's been the law book.

Corporate attorneys with their colleagues on federal courts have perverted the law at every level. They have won legal decisions making corporations legal “persons” with due process, equal protection, free speech, search and seizure and other protections from the government and the public. This has enabled the corporate invasion of the body politic in our own nation -- of our health care, workplace, environment, education, news, food, entertainment and politics -- to continue with constancy and rapidity.

Escaping local and state controls still has not been good enough for corporate agents. There remains, after all, national laws and regulations that, while in many cases are weak and unenforced, nevertheless inhibit the ability to maximize profits, externalize costs and limit all liability. Thus, corporations have attempted to escape national controls for international arenas -- where factories can be built with few labor and environmental constraints, where rules for institutions like the WTO can be designed by corporations from the start, and where regulatory entities can be created that provide maximum protection to (yet the appearance of public control over) corporations. Corporate escaping of domestic control and invading the commerce and cultures of other nations go hand in hand.

Is it any wonder why so many people in our own communities, states and nation feel so voiceless, choiceless and powerless?

So what can we do? “Getting even” through violence is no more a solution to corporate harms than war is to terrorism. We must:

- Come to learn the story in your community, state and nation of democracy and threats by corporations, legislators, judges, and regulators to all-inclusive self-governance.
- Claim as our main social identity that of “citizen” instead of “consumer” and act accordingly to challenge every aspect of the corporate culture of overproduction and overconsumption.
- Create cooperative, all-inclusive community institutions to provide food, health care, employment, currency, housing, energy, clothing, media, entertainment, etc.
- Convince ourselves and others who work against one corporate harm at a time to shift goals, strategies and tactics to contest the constitutionalized property, personhood, contract and commerce authority of corporations (the rule of thumb should be: “Is this changing a basic groundrule and not simply relieving a single harm?”)
- Challenge and replacing public officials who give away public authority (including “Fast Track” negotiating power) to business and charitable corporations
- Change state constitutions, corporation codes, corporate charters and international so-called “Trade Agreements” to define corporations as public, subordinate entities
- Contest the exercise of illegitimate corporate authority in city councils, state legislatures and the US Congress and instead, becoming involved ourselves in creating, implementing and evaluating rules of government on behalf of people and the planet.
- Charge courts which act to shield corporations and privilege as irresponsible and unaccountable and work with others to strategically overturn decisions that threaten authentic self governance.

Only in these ways can we hope to have authentic democratic voices and choices in basic decisions governing our lives.