

THIEVES IN HIGH PLACES

JIM HIGHTOWER ON TAKING AMERICA BACK FROM THE PLUTOCRATS

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Last year in California I attended one of Jim Hightower's public lectures, which feel like a cross between a revival and a town-hall meeting. It was August, the presidential campaign was heating up, and Hightower was rallying the troops at Santa Barbara's Trinity Church as part of his "Show Bush the Door in '04 Tour."

A fast-talking, cowboy-hat-wearing, all-denim-all-the-time radio commentator and writer, Hightower doesn't mince words. "Bush is like a sand flea on steroids," he told the group of fifty or so supporters. I'm still not sure what he meant, but his Texas accent and Southern charm made it go over well.

Hightower's plain, albeit colorful, way of speaking reflects his populist roots. He was born in Texas to a tenant-farming couple who had started a small business in the town of Denison. One of Hightower's early mentors was his Uncle Earnest, who raised cotton, corn, chickens, a few pigs, and a cow. "I spent a lot of time on his farm in my formative years," Hightower says. "He was the kind of person I wanted to be, though I didn't particularly want to be a farmer."

Away from his uncle's farm, Hightower lived a childhood centered on family, friends, school, and baseball. As he entered high school, he began to take an interest in the larger world, keep up with current events, and drink beer. "All eye-opening experiences," he says. Hightower first got involved in politics as a high-school sophomore, during John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign.

At his Methodist church Hightower was exposed to sermons on economic justice, and at home he listened to his parents talk about battling the banks to keep their business going. Hightower also attributes his populist leanings to the rural Texas music he heard while growing up. "All blues music is about battling the system in one way or another," he says. Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys used to play barn dances in Hightower's part of the world, singing "Take Me Back to Tulsa": "Little bee sucks the blossom, / big bee gets the honey. / Poor man picks the cotton, / rich man gets the money."

Together, these experiences primed Hightower to fight for the common man and woman. But it was the civil-rights movement that really cinched it for him. Hightower attended the University of North Texas, which had been the first college in the state to integrate. The schools in Denison had been segregated, and it was at UNT that he first got to know African Americans from his hometown. "By then I'd already been through a political awakening," he says, "but sitting next to

black kids from my town in college classes was a powerful personal experience, bringing home the big lie we'd been taught from childhood, which was that black people were somehow inferior and unworthy of mixing with us."

After graduation, Hightower headed to Washington, D.C., where he spent a week and a half at law school before going to work for Ralph Yarborough, a populist Democratic senator from Texas. Inspired by consumer advocate Ralph Nader, Hightower went on to cofound the Agribusiness Accountability Project to battle corporate power in the food industry. In 1976 Hightower was the national coordinator of former sharecropper Fred Harris's presidential campaign. He then returned home and became editor of the Texas Observer, an alternative bi-weekly. In the 1980s Hightower served as director of the Texas Consumer Association and was elected to two terms as Texas agriculture commissioner.

In the nineties Hightower began spreading his populist message via his monthly newsletter (the Hightower Lowdown), his newspaper columns, and his national radio commentaries. Hightower's latest books are *Thieves in High Places: They've Stolen Our Country and It's Time to Take It Back* and *Let's Stop Beating around the Bush* (both Viking Books). He is currently working on a book, due out next year, about rebuilding America from the ground up by creating successful alternatives to corporate domination. His daily radio spots began airing on Air America this fall.

When I first met Hightower in Santa Barbara in August 2004, I was struck by his casual, self-effacing demeanor. He could speak with me only briefly that day, but he continued the conversation after the election with a series of phone interviews from his office in Austin, Texas. Though we discussed mainly serious issues, he often had me grinning.

Cooper: You call yourself a "progressive populist." How is that different from being a liberal?

Hightower: Populism is an economic-fairness and social-justice movement that focuses not on providing government aid to people who fall through the cracks, but on filling in the cracks. It calls for the decentralization of political power and economic power — specifically the global corporate powers.

The populist movement started back in the 1870s and sprang initially out of the hardscrabble farm country just two counties west of where I sit, in Lampasas, Texas, where small farmers were being driven out of business by the bankers, the



railroad monopolies, and other corporate entities. Finally four farmers gathered around a kitchen table and said, “We’ve got to do something.” From that initial conversation emerged a movement that spread rather rapidly through the South, up through the Plains states, and into the upper Midwest. The movement took on the combines and trusts and robber barons that were squeezing out the small farmers and running roughshod over labor. The populists developed cooperative financing for farmers. They started their own magazines and newspapers. They invented the first syndicated news service. They trained forty thousand public speakers to deliver their message at grange halls, county fairs, and chautauquas.

The populists eventually gained so much strength that they created their own party, the People’s Party, and ran candidates for president several times. More importantly, they elected significant numbers of state legislators and governors and members of Congress.

That’s the kind of structure we’re lacking today, though we have the elements. The political descendants of those dispossessed, displaced farmers are out there.

Cooper: What happened to the People’s Party?

Hightower: It was ultimately crushed by the Democratic and Republican parties’ coming together to forbid what was called “fusion voting,” which still exists in New York state, where the Working Families Party (WFP) is a strong third-

party force. The idea of fusion voting is that each party gets a line on the ballot, but they can nominate candidates from other parties on their line. So the WFP can nominate Hillary Clinton for Senate, and her name will appear on the WFP line as well as on the Democratic Party line. That allows WFP members to show their strength without abandoning their party affiliation. They can vote their party line and then say to Hillary Clinton, “Look at the number of votes you got from our members; you need to be responsive to our issues.” This mechanism allowed the populists to gain strength as a third party in the late nineteenth century, but it has been done away with, with the exception of New York and two or three New England states.

Cooper: Is there still a true populist movement in the U.S. today, or just elements of populism in other movements?

Hightower: There is a broad and deep populist constituency, but I can’t say there’s an effective movement to rally and organize that constituency. There’s a strong populist element in the broad-based opposition to the World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and other “globs of globaloney,” as I call them. We have expressions of populism in people like Wisconsin Senator Russ Feingold, who take on corporate money in politics. And we have it in the form of groups that battle corporate power internationally, fighting such giants as Union Carbide in Bhopal, Occidental Petroleum

in Colombia, and Monsanto everywhere.

Cooper: Is there any sign that we're moving toward an organized populist movement?

Hightower: I think we saw it in last year's presidential election, where the typical top-down presidential campaign run by the Democratic National Committee was the least of the effort. The real campaign was led by organizations like MoveOn.org, True Majority, Progressive Majority, and the League of Pissed-Off Voters. [Laughter.] This last one is a great group of young people, and its members not only turned out new voters for Kerry, but also ran candidates for such local offices as school boards and won. These were true grass-roots efforts, not operating under the umbrella of the Democratic Party or the Kerry campaign, but totally separate. And they're still active, organizing, and growing.

Cooper: You've said that the true political spectrum is top to bottom, not right to left.

Hightower: Right and Left, conservative and liberal are theoretical divisions. Top to bottom, however, is the reality in which people actually live.

Cooper: Where does that put wealthy or upper-middle-class liberals?

Hightower: Well, having money doesn't mean you can't rise above your class interests. [Laughter.] Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt are two sterling examples of people who did. The Bible doesn't say that money is the root of all evil; it says the *love* of money is the root of all evil. That's what we have today: an orgy of people who love money and are willing to abandon the common good in pursuit of their own individual fortunes.

Cooper: Do you think it's possible for a capitalist system not to evolve in such a way?

Hightower: Yes, but it takes constant effort both on the regulatory and also on the small-*d* democratic side of capitalism. Wall Street likes to say we have democratic capitalism already because 60 percent of the population owns stock. Well, most investors own very little stock and have no control over any of the companies whose stock they own. It's not an issue of mere ownership but one of control.

I believe we are essentially a capitalist people. So are the Chinese, even though they're technically a communist nation. As a people they are inherently entrepreneurial, and it's pretty impossible to suppress that spirit, as the Chinese government has found. They have their problems, just as we have ours. That's why politics is so important in a democracy: because it allows the larger population to control individual greed, whether through legislating a living wage to promote a middle-class economy, or through public financing of elections, or through challenging the notion of corporate personhood. All of these are part of the grass-roots struggle for democracy, which is ultimately the fight to have a say in decisions that affect your life.

Cooper: Do you really believe that there's not a Right and



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a Left?

Hightower: I think there are many Rights and many Lefts. On the Left, for example, are the liberals, the populists, the environmentalists, some libertarians, and a wide range of other progressives who don't share a single philosophy but still fit within that progressive context. Most people, including myself, are really a mix of ideologies. I've got a lot of libertarianism within me, as well as liberalism, and a ton of populism.

Cooper: Do the Americans on the bottom really resent the wealth of those on top? Many of them seem, instead, to take vicari-

ous pleasure in it. There are magazines and television shows based entirely on celebrities showing off their wealth. What causes some poor people to worship the wealthy?

Hightower: I don't think they worship them at all. I don't think they spend a lot of time resenting them either, mainly because they're too busy trying to make ends meet and hold everything together. But I think that there is a small-*d* democratic spirit in people that rebels against plutocracy, or rule by the rich, which is what we had from the robber-baron era to the 1920s and what the New Deal was designed to eliminate. Now here we are again with this increasing concentration of wealth. It's not that people resent wealth; they resent greed.

Cooper: What about other divisions, such as rural and urban, religious and nonreligious?

Hightower: I don't think those are fundamental divisions. It all boils down to who has power and who doesn't. When you talk about redistributing democratic power, it allows inner-city residents and rural farmers to find common ground.

A good example is the living-wage campaigns, which have forged coalitions of inner-city residents, African Americans, women's organizations, small businesses, labor, and environmentalists, and have won sweeping victories. The possibility is there, but we have to make the effort. Affluent liberals have an extra responsibility to reach out. Don't ask, "Why don't black people come to our meetings?" Go to their meetings and ask, "What are your issues, and how can we help you?" That's how you develop trust: by reaching out and showing people that you are on their side.

Cooper: What's it like for you being a progressive in Bush country?

Hightower: I don't consider Texas "Bush country." I know these people around here, and I know how to reach them. You've just got to be able to talk to them. When I first ran for office in the early eighties, I did it in part to show others that Texas was not as conservative as the liberals were complaining it had become. Texas was, and is, a populist state. My own daddy would've called himself a conservative if a pollster had shown up at the door, but if you talked to him about the ability of the banks or the chain stores to drive a small retailer like him out of business, or the power of the oil lobby, or how the Texas legislature taxed small-business owners more than the wealthy, then you'd find you weren't talking to a conservative

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at all, but to a radical. I find that Texans, like most Americans, generally are not liberals but radicals. It's part of our history. The Boston Tea Party was not about British taxation. It was about the British East India Trading Company squeezing out the domestic producers of tea. So the radicals went onboard that ship and took private property and threw it into Boston Harbor.

Cooper: Do you think people today are actively involved in civic life and in touch with the issues?

Hightower: Not enough, but more so than we give them credit for — “we” being the media and the politicians, liberal as well as conservative. As I travel around the country giving talks, I find a very different America than the one described by the media. People are engaged and active at a grass-roots level, but it doesn't get national media attention, or even local media attention. When people feel that their participation can make a difference, they get involved, and more often than not they win.

Cooper: And that was part of your goal for your Rolling Thunder speaking tour: to get people involved?

Hightower: The concept behind Rolling Thunder was that politics ought to be fun. It shouldn't be just a series of tedious meetings. My friend John Richard once heard an organizer complain that people wouldn't come to meetings, and John said, “You know, if you'd pour a little bit of red wine every now and then, I might come to one of your meetings.” [Laughter.] I made it a point that if we were going to get people together, then we were going to have food, some beer and wine, and some music to make it as enjoyable an experience as possible. Our slogan was “Let's put the party back in politics.”

The problem with developing a progressive movement is that we're not a unified, march-in-step sort of people. What I've found in my travels is that we have all the elements of a progressive movement in place in this country, but the elements don't know each other; they're not connected. So why not give people a reason to get together? A good way to start building a coalition is to form a partnership and to throw a

citywide event.

It can be an ongoing effort. There's a group in Seattle called Seattle Thunder that has events every month. A group in Baraboo, Wisconsin — the old home of the Ringling Bros. Circus — draws four thousand people a year to its annual Fighting Bob Fest [named for “Fighting” Bob LaFollette, the Wisconsin senator who ran for president in 1924 as a Progressive Party candidate].

Cooper: The Left seems to have trouble reaching out to the common person. Why is that?

Hightower: I don't think the Left has that problem. I think some of the people who are cast by the media and by the political establishment as the leaders of the Left — say, John Kerry in last year's presidential campaign — are clueless about reaching out to common folks. Let's be honest: Kerry couldn't connect with working stiffs if we put him on a street corner handing out free Budweisers and Slim Jims. [Laughter.] But I would say the majority of people on the Left are common folks.

Cooper: The Republicans and the Right seem to have co-opted populism's appeal to the working class without actually borrowing its positions.

Hightower: They have not stolen populism. They have stolen some of its constituency by making an appeal against cultural elitism, but they cannot steal populism because they are antipopulists.

Cooper: But they've certainly done a good job of portraying liberals and progressives as elitists.

Hightower: Yes, they have. And the Democratic Party leaders have allowed this to happen because they have tried to be social liberals and economic conservatives, thus abandoning the one appeal they have to common folks: economic populism. And they've abandoned it because they are mired in the same corporate money that the Republicans are.

Cooper: You wrote in your book, “I wish for the good of' days of environmental protection . . . under Nixon.”

Hightower: Nixon signed the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act, and the legislation creating the Environmental Protection Agency. So he did have some redeeming values. Bush's environmental policy is essentially to open all the doors for corporations to do whatever the hell they want, and good-bye and good luck to everyone else who needs air, water, and food.

Cooper: Yet Bush has a “green” ranch.

Hightower: That's because it's become a status symbol. Cheney's mansion in Washington, D.C., was retrofitted for conservation purposes as well. There are all kinds of rich people here in Austin and elsewhere who build these green homes. It's like a toy to them, the SUV of homes. They can say, “Look at what my house does. I've got a rainwater-collection system.” But if you ask, “Shouldn't everybody have a system like that?” they'll say, “Sure, go out and buy yourself one,” rather than creating the means for widespread energy and resource conservation.

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