

On the morning of July 5th, there were monumental traffic jams all around the National Press Club by 7:30 a.m. In front of the building, dozens of camera crews were unloading their gear. People who worked at the Press Club found the entrance blocked by Japanese reporters finishing their dispatches on Japanese time and readying themselves for the big event. By 9:00 a.m. the ballroom was full. The Secretariat quickly rented two spillover rooms with closed-circuit TVs, and by 10:00 a.m. they were full too.

The news conference was to be televised live, not only by C-SPAN, CNN, and PBS, but by the three major networks, which were breaking all precedent for this group of private citizens without portfolio. Bill Joy had hired cameramen to videotape the whole session in case of future attempts at distortion, along with a photographer to take pictures of everyone in attendance. He suspected that the audience would include corporate lobbyists and the usual grim gumshoe types who just couldn't learn how to dress. Luke Skyhi and some associates from the PCC were there to take notes so they could go to the media fast with the progressive business reaction.

At 10:15 a.m., the Meliorists walked briskly to the dais at the front of the ballroom. The cameras went wild in a frenzy of metallic clicking that sent images of the core group, publicly together for the first time, all over the country and the world. In the back row, Lobo sat erect and alert, scanning the SROs one by one—until his eyes alighted upon Yoko. It was as if a silent lightning bolt had struck. Her eyes, her facial features, the way she held her dainty hands, the angle of her chin, her beautifully styled hair, her confident posture—he was a man consumed. His long-repressed libido erupted into a series of escalating fantasies, culminating in the recognition that she was quite a bit older than he was. She also despised everything he stood for, but didn't James Carville, arch liberal Democrat, share a matrimonial bed with Mary Matalin, arch conservative Repub-

lican? Wild thoughts careened through his brain and sent his pulse rate soaring. He tried to compose himself, for the news conference was about to start, but his superego was wrestling mightily with his id in the classic Freudian tussle.

Phil stepped up to the lectern, which looked like it might topple over from the weight of the twenty or so microphones attached precariously to the front edge.

“Good morning, folks, thanks for coming. I’m Phil Donahue, and we”—he paused as his arm swept the group sitting behind him on the platform—“are the Meliorist Society. Since January, we’ve been working together for the betterment of our country, which is what our name means, no more, no less. We hear that the corporatists who oppose the changes we’ve initiated refer to us as the SROs, for Super-Rich Oldsters. Apparently they forgot that the initials also stand for something else, which I leave to your quick wits. We’ve got an acronym for ourselves too. It stands for Prodigiously Rich Oldsters, so feel free to call us the PROs. Each of us will make a brief statement, and then we’ll take questions for forty-five minutes. There will be no one-on-ones afterward, but we’ll make ourselves available in due time. My colleague Warren Buffett will begin.”

“Thanks, Phil. I’ve spent my whole adult life investing my own and other people’s money with some success. I had intended to leave my estate in its entirety to a charitable family foundation, but I’ve changed my mind. Our country is sinking deeper and deeper into troubles that are sapping its collective spirit and blinding it to the solutions that are ready at hand. From my observations of the rarefied world of business leaders, I’ve concluded that the vast majority are not leaders except for themselves. A society rots like a fish—from the head down. I want no part of that lucrative narcissism, that abdication from the realities that are blighting our country and the world. I am here to do my part, my duty, in persuading some of my very wealthy peers to live by the words of Alfred North Whitehead: ‘A great society is a society in which its men of business think greatly of their functions.’ The Agenda for the

Common Good that you will find in your press packets is only a down payment on a great and caring society."

Warren sat down, and the rest of the Meliorists rose to make their statements one by one.

"I am George Soros. I was born in Hungary, but I came here as an immigrant in the aftermath of World War II. The United States is my country by choice, my home. My personal experience of both fascism and communism has attuned me to the urgent need to reinvigorate and expand democratic institutions constantly, for the concentration of power also goes on constantly, left to its own many devices. The concentrated power of the few over the many is the antithesis of democracy. It breeds injustice and chronic suffering. In recent months I have joined with my colleagues to help launch many new democratic institutions with millions of dues-paying members. These are growing every day, helping to shift power from the blinkered few to the informed many, helping to build democracy. They have reached critical mass and are close to self-sufficiency. If they remain steadfast in purpose and diligence, their impact in creating a fair and equitable economy will be formidable and will portend well for the future of our country."

"I'm Ted Turner. You all know me. The world is going to hell in a handbasket. We've got to do something about energy and the environment. We've got to enlist the services of the Sun God. Those festivals are just the beginning. We're going to make the twenty-first century the Sun Century, and not a century too soon. The big fossil energy companies have had us looking under the ground for our hydrocarbon BTUs. We're going to look up toward the sun and toward a carbohydrate economy. No more obstructionism from the fossil and uranium companies. Either they convert to solar or they'll be fossils themselves. From now on Congress stops being their feed trough and patsy. When we stop to think about conditions in our country, the good ones were most likely brought to us by the organized demands of the people throughout our history. Time for an encore. This is the twenty-first century, when democracy becomes an adult."

“You may remember me, I’m Ross Perot. I’m here today for many of the same reasons I ran for president in 1992. I love my country, but my country is not in the hands of people who love her or her children and grandchildren. Piling debt on our descendants is what the power boys love to do. Mortgaging our country’s future to the hilt is what they love to do. Well, they’re not going to get away with it anymore. From now on, they’ll be paying their fair share of taxes individually, and so will their corporations. They’ll be getting off the corporate welfare gravy train. They’ll be standing on their own feet and taking the verdict of the marketplace. They say they’re capitalists? Okay, they’re gonna act like capitalists. No more Uncle Sam to bail them out while small businesses go under. The *Business Week* poll was right—most Americans believe big business has too much control over their lives and their government. The *Business Week* editorial in the same issue was also right—corporations should get out of politics.”

“I am Bernard Rapoport, from Waco, Texas. Too much is wrong in our country. There’s too much greed, and too much power attached to the greed. Too much poverty, illiteracy, hunger, and homelessness. Too much despair and too pervasive a sense of powerlessness. Too many good people doing nothing about all this and making too many excuses for themselves. Too much graft and too much waste. Too much lying and too much sighing. Too much speculation and too much sprawl. I’ve spent a lifetime in the business of insuring risks, but all the things I’ve mentioned are things no one can insure, even though they are huge risks for our society. So we’re going to get control of these risks—we, millions of aroused Americans—in the streets, in the voting booth, in the hearing rooms and courtrooms and boardrooms. The people are already on the march, and they are unstoppable. This news conference is only an anticlimax to the work that has been done already, and a prelude to the work to come.”

“My name is Max Palevsky, and I am proud to be a Meliorist. As one of the pioneers of the computer business, I used to believe that this new technology would work to the vast betterment of our

society. That hasn't happened. Why? Because promising technologies that are under the sway of concentrated economic powers and their political agenda never come close to fulfilling their promise. Until we break the grip of big money on our public elections at all levels of government, fundamental democratic values and critical economic priorities will not be translated into political policy and implementation. It was Thomas Jefferson who described representative government as a counter to 'the excesses of the monied interests.' His hope must become our reality. The electoral reform platform of the Agenda for the Common Good will clear the way with its call for public money for public elections, full ballot access for voters and candidates of all parties, and open competitive contests to produce the best results on Election Day, with *all* the votes counted, including those for binding None of the Above. No more one-party districts, and no more two-party elected dictatorship. We're ready to take on the merchants of politics once and for all."

"I'm Joe Jamail, and I sue big corporations hard. I want everyone who's wrongfully harmed or defrauded to have full access to our courts of law so as to secure justice and deter the greedy miscreants by proving them culpable before judge and jury. The courts are the last resort of American democracy when the other two branches fail us. For too many years, regular folks have had the courthouse doors slammed in their faces by legislative fiat greased with corporate money. Faith that justice can be achieved is crucial to our social solidarity. For us Meliorists, open access to the courts, without political interference, is bedrock constitutionalism. The same goes for the exercise of defendants' rights in criminal trials. We are a nation of checks and balances. The checks have been out of balance for too long. That will change."

"I'm Paul Newman, and I'm here to say that the people believe our country is on the wrong track. They want to see America move in a direction that spells a better life for themselves and their children, and this is not a partisan sentiment. Check out the veterans' groups, the NASCAR crowds, the senior centers, the voluntary associations and clubs down at the community level, and you'll see how

disdain for those who rule us is growing. For a long time the people have wanted change, but they've felt trapped, powerless, helpless to make it happen. Now those feelings are giving way to a sense of empowerment and hope. You've all reported on this rising tide over the last six months. The Congress is starting to feel the heat and the light from the aroused citizenry, and that's just the beginning. Congress itself will be redirected. Votes will start to nullify money instead of the other way around. The Corporate Congress will become the People's Congress. Once Americans taste popular sovereignty and its benefits, they'll want it on the menu daily. They'll tell their senators and representatives, 'Stand with the people or stand down.'"

"I'm Bill Cosby. Look, folks, you know something has to be done when there's no correlation between hard work and having the necessities of life. The bottom half of America is working harder all the time and falling farther and farther behind. The rich are getting richer beyond their wildest dreams. Those of us here on this stage represent the older rich, and we are doing our best to multiply our numbers and help more billionaires find a purposeful life. As far as I know, our coming battle with the entrenched super-rich on behalf of the people is unique in recorded history, and as a sometime actor, I find it a prospect filled with drama and suspense. How, where, and when are the corporate supremacists going to respond? Stay tuned."

"My name is Peter Lewis. This ballroom is already historic for all the valedictory speeches that have been delivered here in recent weeks. There will be many more, synchronized with the introduction of the seven bills comprising the Agenda for the Common Good. Imagine the high-level whistle-blowers who'll come forth once Congress starts debating universal quality-controlled health insurance. They'll be lined up from pillar to post. You know of my views regarding my industry's abdication of its responsibility for loss prevention. Today's insurers operate on the principle that making money from waste, inefficiency, and damage is part and parcel of doing business. As Meliorists, we intend to redefine what productivity, efficiency, and superior management really mean in

this twenty-first century. Our yardstick will be the well-being of the people, and you know the axiom—whoever controls the yardstick controls the agenda. So to big business I say, we're taking the yardstick out of your hands, and with it your control over public expectations, not to mention your wholesale stifling of invention and innovation."

"My name is Sol Price, and I'm a consultant to Wal-Mart." Ripples of laughter coursed through the ballroom, which had been preternaturally quiet till now. "I came of age in the 1930s, a time of economic depression, but also a time of forceful response from FDR's Washington, a time of deliberate, thoughtful striving to jump-start the economy, diminish the armies of the unemployed through useful public works projects, and bring Americans together in a common cause. Today we have immensely more wealth, more ways to communicate and mobilize, more of everything except heart, will, and leadership. At my age I don't want to leave my country in decline, dominated by greed and gluttony, in a downward spiral of lower wages and a lower standard of living for the majority. I don't want to leave our children and grandchildren a country where 'only the little people pay taxes' while millionaires become billionaires and billionaires become trillionaires, a country where millions can't pay their fuel bills while oil chieftains running sure-bet companies subsidized by the taxpayers make more than a hundred thousand dollars a day. That's why I've joined hands with some of my peers in age and wealth to give back to our beloved land, not a little charity masquerading as justice, but the real thing—systematic justice safeguarded by a permanently organized populace."

"Phil Donahue again. Our culture is in decay. Our media is a relentless merchandising machine. It has insinuated itself into the minds of our children, turning them into feverish Pavlovian bundles of conditioned craving, and undermining parental authority. Corporate commercialism, in alliance with the forces of repression around the world, is ruthlessly trampling down budding civic efforts to alleviate agonizing destitution and redress staggering inequality. Four hundred of the world's richest hold wealth equivalent to the

assets of the bottom three billion humans sharing that same world. What in hell are we, the super-rich, doing with our days in our later years, wallowing in a leisurely drudgery when we could be changing the world? Ours is not a messianic mission. It is a dutiful, deliberate quest to achieve today what should have been achieved years ago in a society with pretensions to ‘liberty and justice for all.’ We intend to make good on ‘for *all*.’”

“I am Yoko Ono. Our society is dying of spiritual starvation. Everywhere the human spirit labors under the yoke of materialism, the dull and the bland usurp aesthetics, the myopia of instant gratification keeps us from looking toward the horizon for our posterity. A society that genuinely cares for its offspring and future generations is a society that cares for its adults today. That wreath”—she gestured gracefully to the Meliorists’ banner—“symbolizes an embrace, a caring and reaching out and ministering to our collective anguish and our collective needs. We on this platform strive to become worthy ancestors for our descendants, for if we do not, they will surely curse us.”

Lobo sat transfixed as Yoko left the lectern. He was losing control of his bodily fluids. Blood rushed to his head and extremities, his stomach gurgled, sweat poured from his armpits and dampened his palms. It was all he could do to keep from trembling.

“I am William Gates Sr., and I heartily second Yoko’s emphasis on posterity. That is our proper measure. Wisdom, judgment, and knowledge—in that order—must be our bequests. Only real people—not artificial persons, not corporations, those mere legal fictions—can leave behind such a legacy. Real people must be supreme over corporations in our constitution, in our laws, and in our regulations. There can be no equal justice under law, no equal access to the law, under the present empire of corporate supremacy. Global corporations stride the planet, commandeering governments and writing their own laws and rules of adjudication. They are becoming the government *de facto*, they are corporatizing governmental functions *de jure*, and through their amassed control of capital, technology, and labor, they are creating a new serfdom. Arti-

ficial intelligence, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, communications technology—all are in their grip. Distributive justice is deteriorating from an already low base. In past years, some of the super-rich have organized to preserve the estate tax. Now some of us are engaged in a broader revolt against the enveloping matrix of plutocratic privilege and power. Rest assured that if the corporatists refuse to bend before the oncoming pressure, they will break.”

“I’m Jeno Paulucci, and I’m a veteran of many clashes with business competitors and predators. Like my fellow Meliorists, I know how the business barons think, how they react, and how artfully cunning they can be. I know how practical, expedient, and opportunistic they are, I know when they are likely to cut the deck and make a deal. I also know how they swing from fury to fragility, how they save their own skins or line their own pockets at the expense of the very companies they run. To them I say, take heed of the rapid growth of the People’s Chamber of Commerce, take heed of the hundreds of thousands of smaller and midsize businesses for whom you do not speak through your sprawling trade associations in Washington, DC. The coercive harmony of the business world is no more. ‘Stand up and speak out’ is replacing ‘Sit down and keep quiet.’ More and more flowers are blooming. There is more than one way, one path, one ideology to animate economies and sub-economies. Note that word, sub-economies. Note it well, for the sub-economies will turn the stubborn and stagnant status quo upside down.”

“They call me Leonard Riggio. Half of democracy is just showing up. Today, people all over the country are showing up at marches, rallies, hearing rooms, courts, city council meetings, and the fountainhead—their neighbors’ living rooms. The lunchtime rallies are growing and spreading all the time. Leaders and orators are emerging from their midst. These rallies are showcasing new directions, nurturing determination and stamina, producing mass resolve for a basic shift of power in our society. As a child growing up in New York City, I could never stand bullies. The downtown skyscrapers are full of bullies of a different kind, bullies in three-piece

suits, and they're at work all the time. What's different these days is that when they look out their windows, they see the ranks of those who will send them home sniveling in the very near future. And it's worth noting the rendezvous points for some of the ralliers: fraternal organizations like the Elks, Kiwanis, and Knights of Columbus, women's clubs, senior centers, farm associations, union halls and churches, even the VFW and the American Legion. Sure, not all of them or even most of them, but who would have thought that thousands of members of such groups are joining the ralliers? The rebellion is swelling—just what Thomas Jefferson called for in our country from time to time.”

“I'm Barry Diller, and you're wondering what I'm doing on this side of the bench. Hey, media moguls are people too. Broadcasters can be broad-minded citizens too. I've chosen to use whatever influence and knowledge I have in the cause of my county and its aborted promise. The big media outlets are straitjacketed by their clients' advertising dollars. They ignore the voices of conscience and the cries of affliction among our people. I want to see the public airwaves reverberate with these voices and cries. The people own the airwaves that we in the industry use so freely and so lucratively. The people must reclaim their property in the public interest and use it to air suppressed or unpopular views, calls for change, demands for responsible government and accountable corporations. The first test will come in Congress, that stained and monetized arena, when the Agenda for the Common Good is introduced. We ask viewers and listeners to join with us in support by e-mailing us at info@RedirectAmerica.org or logging onto our website, RedirectAmerica.org. The power of good people pulling together for the good life can overcome all opposition, no matter how wealthy, greedy, and powerful. Organized power can only prevail over unorganized people. Join together, throw off that subservience, speak your minds, and power shifts in your favor. Take it from someone who knows a little about corporate power and who has *been* corporate power until recently.”

“Well, that's it folks,” Phil said, returning to the podium. “I want

to second Barry’s invitation to the viewers at home to extend their talents and time to the Agenda for the Common Good. The forthcoming action in Congress demands action back where you live and work—in your cities, towns, villages, farms, and neighborhoods. What you do there will feed the thunder rolling over your senators and representatives. The Agenda consists of seven bills—we call them the Seven Pillars of the Common Good—so simply select the one best suited to your interests and talents and put whatever time you can afford behind it. Be part of this rising citizen movement to shape the future for the benefit of all Americans now and to come. The RedirectAmerica.org website is packed with information and ways to participate at all levels, and it will guide you to others in your community working along the same paths. We need you, folks, and thanks. Now we’ll take questions for forty-five minutes. Out of consideration for your fellow members of the fourth estate, please be brief, and please identify yourself and indicate which of us your question is addressed to.”

Hands shot up by the dozens. Phil called on Basil Brubaker of the *New York Times*.

“My question is for Mr. Buffett. What if any legal entities are you all working through, how much money have you spent, and how much have you budgeted?”

“We are working through a number of nonprofit corporations, 501(c)(3)s and 501(c)(4)s, and several PACs. Each of us is also spending our own money, directly as individuals, on various improvement projects that have been reported in the press over the past half year. As for amounts, what the law requires to be reported is on the public record. What the law does not require will remain confidential, for reasons obvious to those of us in the business community—you don’t show your hand in a struggle where resources signal levels of capability and persistence.”

Yoko popped up beside Warren at the podium. “You wouldn’t expect Mr. Lobo and his clients to reveal their war chest, would you?”

“Lancelot Lobo, the corporate raider?” said Brubaker. “What’s he got to do with it?”

“Surely you saw the full-page ad that an anonymous group of CEOs took out in the *Wall Street Journal* some weeks ago?” Yoko replied. “Well, Lobo is the spearhead they hired to lead the charge against the Agenda.”

In the back of the room, a reporter recognized Lobo—his picture was often in the papers—and shouted, “Hey, he’s right here!” For a few seconds Lobo was oblivious, utterly enthralled that Yoko knew his name and what he was doing, and those few seconds cost him his exit. In no time he was surrounded by reporters bombarding him with the basics of their profession: Who? What? Where? When? Why?

Phil rapped the lectern with his pen. “Can we please have order? Mr. Lobo, will you kindly go outside to answer their questions so we can finish up here?”

Lobo did not oblige. He did go outside, but he didn’t stop to answer questions. Pursued by a dozen scribes, he no-commented his way to the elevator and down thirteen flights to the front door of the National Press Club, and thence into a fortuitously waiting taxicab that sped him away. Half of him was outraged by his outing, the other half was still in libido land. Fortunately, the taxi driver was talking on his cell phone in Urdu and did not try to converse with him. Unfortunately, the photographers got what they wanted, and their pictures would speak a thousand words in the next day’s newspapers.

Back in the ballroom, the press conference resumed.

“James Drew, *Washington Post*. My question is directed to Leonard Riggio. Sir, there is an old saying that ‘when you’re everywhere, you’re nowhere.’ There are so many proposals in this Agenda and so many causes you’ve been espousing individually in the past six months that it seems to me you’re spreading yourselves too thin and have no focus. Are you going to winnow your proposals down when Congress returns from its Fourth of July break?”

“We are working to build a deliberative democracy with a broad embrace. The more issues we take on, within limits, the more people will organize and swell their own leadership ranks. Down at

the street and neighborhood level, they'll select the causes currently most pressing to them and take advantage of the winds of democratic possibility sweeping across our country. People are motivated by what Saul Alinsky, the legendary Chicago organizer, called 'perceived injustices.' And if you study the Agenda more closely, you'll see that it is in fact a very careful and detailed winnowing down of urgent and long-unaddressed needs and reforms into seven precisely drafted bills. Taken together, they represent a great advance in two respects: the substantive improvement of the material conditions of life in our country, and the expansion and safeguarding of our democratic institutions.”

“Mark Melville of CBS. Mr. Diller, are your television and radio networks going to support the Clean Elections Party and its candidates, and if so, just how do you intend to do that without violating FCC and FEC rules?”

“Simple, Mr. Melville. We'll report all the news on all the candidates who have something to say or have done something of note. We'll do features and interviews and sponsor open debates for all ballot-qualified candidates of all parties, large and small. The Clean Elections Party is running exclusively on the single most important issue of electoral reform—money in politics. It has pledged to disband once it secures public financing of public elections in law and in fact. It has over fifty candidates on the ballot, among them challengers to the most senior incumbents in the House and ten of the most powerful senators. Finally, what I do to support candidates as a private citizen is between me and the Federal Elections Commission, as it is for everybody.”

“Laurie Newsome, ABC, question for anyone. I've been covering Capitol Hill for years, and I can tell you that Congress and its committees have a whole arsenal of tactics for delaying, hamstringing, and hogtying legislation. What makes you think you can steer your Agenda quickly through the congressional maze of arcane rules and procedures?”

“I'll take the question,” Bernard said. “First of all, our deep awareness of the workings of Congress as you describe them underlies

all our efforts in this regard. You will see that our relative inexperience on Capitol Hill, though some of us have lobbied it often, does not translate into naiveté about what it’s going to take. I might add that the members of Congress have no experience whatsoever with what’s coming at them from the folks back home. What’s more, among our allies in this fight is a group of seasoned former legislators and staffers who know the rules inside and out. Some of them helped write the rules. They know the escape hatches, the dodges, the moods that can sweep Congress into action. Corporations push their special bills through Congress all the time. We’ll just be doing it on a grander and more public stage.”

“Rita Dawn, Associated Press. Ted, what can you tell us about your Billionaires Against Bullshit? Will you release their names? What they are working on? How much they are donating?”

“Well, you know some of them already. Jerome Kohlberg on campaign finance reform, the ones who are after Wal-Mart, the ones interviewed in *Billionaires on Bullshit*. I’ll ask those who haven’t gone public yet whether they’re open to interviews. There’s a lot of autonomy among these billionaires, as you might expect.”

“Alberto Adelante, Univision. Speaking of Wal-Mart, are you trying to destroy it, Mr. Price?”

“As I’ve said on previous occasions, what we’re trying to do is give workers an opportunity to form a union, if they so choose, without intimidation and Wal-Mart SWAT teams descending on them. The overall objective is to turn Wal-Mart into a pull-up giant instead of a pull-down behemoth outsourcing its suppliers to China, hollowing out communities, offloading its responsibilities to its workers onto the American taxpayer, and driving its competitors to break their labor agreements and downgrade wages and benefits. Otherwise the vast Wal-Mart sub-economy will keep metastasizing and depress the standard of living for millions of American workers. This is not the way our economy grew in the past.”

“Charlene Jepson of the *Liberator*, question for Bill Cosby. How do you feel in this sea of white men?”

“Andy, the Meliorists are all about justice. Justice is color-blind.