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Earth Day, Race Day, Gun Day, Money Day



By Marty Kaplan

Is change even possible?

The national conversation about excessive use of police force that we're supposed to have been conducting since Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and Eric Garner were killed didn't save Walter Scott's life. The Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre of 26 children and staff that we hoped would be the tipping point on gun violence hasn't slowed the NRA by a heartbeat. Earth Day is April 22, but if the bad news about heat, drought, sea levels and dying oceans hasn't loosened the fossil fuel industry's death grip on Congress by now, it's hard to imagine any millions of marchers in any number of cities making a difference.

Will we ever learn?

In some ways, of course, we really have changed. Gay marriage and the recognition that LGBT identity is a natural fact, not a moral flaw, have won legal and social momentum at an astonishing tempo. Women may still earn less than men for the same work, but feminism and the suffrage movement that preceded it have transformed American society. The civil rights of people of color have only been partially secured, but the contrast with the legally sanctioned discrimination dominating our history is undeniable.

Efforts to reverse those changes — masquerading as “religious freedom,” “pro-life,” and “voter fraud” laws — are rampant, but if public opinion polls are any guide, the rising demographic of young and diverse Americans will pose an increasingly powerful counterforce to reactionary politicians.

So if change like that is possible, why, when it comes to racism, guns and planetary catastrophe, does my inner pessimist have the upper hand? The answer: Follow the money, a line *All the President's Men* screenwriter William Goldman attributed to Watergate informant Deep Throat.

Start with income. Lower-income Americans and minorities are less likely to vote. Before the Supreme Court eviscerated the Voting Rights Act, before a sham epidemic of voter fraud gave cover for voter I.D.

laws that disenfranchise the poor even more, they already faced disproportionate barriers like the cost of time off from work and the cost of transportation to distant polling places with long lines. Since they vote less, it's no wonder there have been glaring disparities between minorities in the population and minorities on the city council and in the police force in places like Ferguson, Mo. and North Charleston, S.C. Whether or not racism plays a role, cities whose power structures don't reflect who their citizens are don't think twice about basing municipal revenues on traffic stops and arrests that have the effect of targeting people of color.

Then there's the money in politics. The NRA and its affiliates spent \$36 million on campaign contributions, ads and lobbying in the 2014 federal election cycle. This understates its influence, which flows from its power to mobilize its members to bombard Congress with anti-gun control messages; the NRA spent \$57 million on internal communication alone in 2010 (the most recent figure I could find). Former New York mayor Mike Bloomberg said he would spend \$50 million to fight the NRA, but so far the gun lobby has been more effective than its opponents at threatening to make politicians' lives miserable if they don't do their bidding.

Yet Americans back gun safety policies by outsized majorities: 85 percent favor background checks for private and gun show sales; 80 percent favor preventing people with mental illness from purchasing guns; 67% want a federal database to track gun sales; 58 percent want a ban on semi-automatic weapons; 54% want a ban on high-capacity ammunition clips. Only 9 percent say they or someone in their household is a member of the NRA, but the fortune the NRA spends to mobilize that minority has meant that no public revulsion, no matter how horrifying its cause, gets translated into changes that most Americans want.

April 22 is the 45th anniversary of Earth Day. Its organizers say "more than 1 billion people in 192 countries will take actions at Earth Day events, making it the largest environmental civic action in the world." Those actions include the largest climate petition ever; Climate Change Education Week; a Green Cities initiative; Faith Based Earth Day; and Acts of Green, whose goal is two billion people taking steps to protect the planet by December 2016, when the UN's climate change conference in Paris will put a global agreement to a vote.

Will Earth Day matter? Has the news that 2014 was the hottest year on record mattered? Or the death of coral reefs and the collapse of fish stocks? Or water rationing in California? The first Earth Days helped awaken the world to toxins in our earth, air and water, to renewable energy and recycling. But the carbon-industrial complex has spent billions ever since - more than \$721 million just in the U.S., just in the 2014 midterm elections and much of it undisclosed dark money - to buy politicians and sow science doubt and climate change denial.

Political campaigns require billions of dollars each campaign cycle to buy advertising on TV stations that get free licenses from the public to profit from airwaves we own, effectively making candidates rent-boys and -girls for special interests. Thanks to the Supreme Court, corporations can now secretly spend as much on that as they want, and states can now erect barriers to voting by many of the people most affected by the policies those special interests are purchasing.

It would be great if Earth Day, and days devoted to combating gun violence and racism, could catalyze the kinds of change most Americans want. But change is elusive when every day is Money Day.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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