

Below the Beltway: Activist Trouble

JOHN JUDIS JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1998

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In the last year, Greenpeace and Citizen Action, two important national left-of-center organizations, have fallen on hard times. This summer, Greenpeace USA closed down all of its field offices, eliminated its canvassing operation, and slashed its staff from 400 to 65. Several of Citizen Action's state affiliates have either disbanded or severed their ties to the national federation, while the organization's Washington office, which was implicated in the Teamster fundraising scandal, closed down in late October. Citizen Action could survive, but it is hard to imagine it regaining the kind of clout it enjoyed during the last four years. Though these organizations faltered for very different reasons, they shared a common objective: Both of them sought to overcome the destructive separation between politics—as practiced by politicians, political consultants, pollsters, and powerful Washington interest groups—and the mundane, largely apolitical concerns of most Americans. While both organizations were headquartered in Washington and functioned as lobbies, they also had active memberships and offices around the country. And while both sought support from wealthy donors and foundations, they used a door-to-door canvas as a means of raising money and of nurturing a local base of supporters.

Greenpeace, which was founded in 1971, made its mark by sailing into nuclear testing zones. It was initially funded by Greenpeace staffers going door to door for contributions, but in the 1980s it also began soliciting contributions by direct mail. When French commandos sank the Rainbow Warrior in 1985, killing a photographer, the organization's membership and income skyrocketed. By the end of 1990, it had 1.2 million members in the United States and a budget of \$45 million, about half of which it contributed to Greenpeace International. It became the organization of choice for Hollywood stars, international jet-setters, and top-ranked tennis players, drawing much of its financial support from the same upper-income liberals who had backed Amnesty International and Planned Parenthood. Since 1990, however, the organization's membership has steadily declined—it lost 400,000 members in 1991 alone. In part, it simply ceased to be fashionable. But Greenpeace USA was also affected by the Cold War's end, by its unequivocal opposition to the Gulf War (it even opposed sending troops to Saudi Arabia in August 1990 to prevent an Iraqi invasion), and by the public's growing indifference to its media stunts.

In 1993, a new director, Barbara Dudley, a former head of the National Lawyers Guild, tried to refashion Greenpeace. Dudley envisaged a smaller organization that would focus on issues like toxic wastes and chemical pollutants that worry Americans who have never heard of the Rainbow Warrior. "My theory was we could combine direct action with community organizing. I believed that there were half a million people in the country who would support that kind of Greenpeace," she explained. Under Dudley, Greenpeace USA initiated a campaign to halt the construction of a factory in Convent, Louisiana, that planned to make PVCs (polyvinyl chlorides), which would have produced carcinogenic emissions. Greenpeace organized the town against it and eventually helped win an Environmental Protection Agency order stopping plant construction. Greenpeace also organized local fishermen in New England to stop the industrial-scale trawling by Tyson, Stephens, and other agribusiness firms that was depopulating the Northeast's waters.

But these were not the kind of issues to attract John McEnroe and wealthy suburban matrons. Greenpeace's income and membership continued to fall. Last summer, Greenpeace's board, acting under pressure from Greenpeace International, forced Dudley out. It closed the canvas (which was barely breaking even after Dudley began paying minimum wage and bonuses instead of commissions), shut the field offices, and set new priorities of slowing global warming and protecting the forests—two issues more amenable to an upper-income direct mail base. While Dudley's plan for attracting more middle Americans might not have been feasible—the organization's membership had already fallen to 400,000—the board's plan might not work either. For now, Greenpeace has become just another Washington letterhead organization that duns the wealthy. If it can find the right kind of exotic cause, it will succeed. If it can't, it will go the way of the old Friends of the Earth and other organizations that have squandered their organized local base in search of success through the mail. (In 1984, Washington operatives, emulating the example of New Right direct mail groups, ousted Friends of the Earth chairman David Brower, shut its field offices, and focused its operation on Washington, where within a year it had ceased to exist except in name.)

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Like Greenpeace, Citizen Action grew out of the New Left. Its founders, who were veterans of Students for a Democratic Society and the Indochina Peace Campaign, built statewide organizations that attempted to draw unions and blue-collar Democrats into campaigns against plant shutdowns, high energy prices, and tax abatements for corporations. Like Greenpeace, several of these state groups used a canvas to raise money and to attract support. In 1980, the leaders of state organizations in Ohio, Oregon, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Illinois formed Citizen Action as a national federation with a Washington office. Heather Booth, its first president, and Ira Arlook, its executive director, initially conceived of it as a kind of a Sam Gompers—like pressure group on the political system rather than as a direct participant in elections or in the Democratic Party.

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In its first twelve years, Citizen Action gained some impressive new affiliates while periodically losing others to financial or political mismanagement. But when Bill Clinton was elected President, the organization's Washington office suddenly assumed new prominence. With Booth going to the Democratic National Committee to direct its health care campaign, Citizen Action itself became a major player in the debate, arguing publicly for a single-payer plan, while, to the chagrin of some affiliates, attempting privately to keep the single-payer advocates in line behind the Clinton plan for managed competition. "It brought out the best and the worst in the organization," says Tom Swan, the director of Connecticut Citizen Action. After the Republicans captured the Congress in November 1994, the organization held a meeting of its state leaders to plot a strategy for the next two years. It laid out six priorities, only one of which was about national elections—to develop a "Campaign for a Responsible Congress"—but that effort quickly eclipsed all the others. Citizen Action raised \$7 million from unions and wealthy Democrats to run "independent" television ads attacking Republican candidates [see Robert Dreyfuss, "**Harder Than Soft Money**"]. It also participated, whether knowingly or not, in a Teamster scheme to launder money illegally back into Teamster president Ron Carey's re-election campaign. Under the wing of John Sweeney's AFL-CIO, Citizen Action became, in effect, an unofficial arm of the Democratic Party and of the Clinton presidential campaign. Its leaders became swept up in the rarified world of Washington politics, where voters are seen as consumers whose tastes in issues and candidates have to be manipulated. One former staff member quipped, "What started off as people who wanted to build a movement ended up as people who wanted to create a political consulting firm."

Soon after the election both the Ohio and Indiana affiliates—claiming about 650,000 of Citizen Action's two million members—quit the federation. They accused the Washington office of accepting contributions from the tobacco and nuclear power industries—two traditional Citizen Action foes—but the broader issue was whether the Washington office had assumed a life of its own, separate from the affiliates and from the political base in the states that the affiliates were trying to create. Paul Ryder, the communications director of Ohio Citizen Action, says that "what happened was a very old story: an office in Washington which was set up to serve the interests of states grew up to think it had created the states." Even those Citizen Action leaders, like Connecticut director Swan, who have remained loyal to the organization, voiced similar misgivings about the Washington office and its priorities.

As the Teamster scandal surfaced this summer, Citizen Action lost some of its best lobbyists, including health care expert Cathy Hurwit. With revenues reduced, it discontinued its own canvas in states where it was trying to organize and shut down several efforts in the South. If Greenpeace began to resemble a head without a body, Citizen Action increasingly resembled a set of limbs and organs without a brain. It still had effective organizations in states such as New Jersey and Connecticut, but its Washington office was in disarray. Its national fundraising was crippled by the specter of scandal. And it lost much of its political credibility both inside and outside of Washington: As the federation began its own organizing drive for campaign finance reform, a critical editorial in the *Omaha World-Herald* was headlined, "When Citizen Action knocks, it may be time for questions."

Clearly, Greenpeace's board and director and Citizen Action's leadership blundered, but it would be wrong to attribute their organizations' decline entirely to poor management. Whereas most of the left-wing and liberal organizations that have endured have taken the easy way out—doing local organizing without challenging national relations of power, or functioning as Washington letterhead organizations that exist primarily for the benefit of their staff and mailing list—Citizen Action and Greenpeace were attempting something much more ambitious. They wanted to create organizations that would link the citizens of Convent or West Orange with a new politics in Washington. But it's very difficult these days to construct a national organization out of the specific grievances evoked by HMOs in Hartford, trawlers in New Bedford, and bank redlining in Patterson. Such an organization is constantly pulled either toward local issues like redlining or toward national issues like campaign finance reform that are popular with foundations and direct mail donors but don't resonate on street corners and in shopping malls.

In their essay in the recently published *The New Majority*, Marshall Ganz and Margaret Weir contend that the Christian Coalition could serve as a model for liberal organizing. But the left's circumstances today are far different from those of the Christian Coalition. A few years ago, in the coalition's heyday, it combined local movement and national organization, both galvanized by a common, apocalyptic fear of Democratic immorality and national decline among Protestant evangelicals and their ministers. (As that fear abated, the coalition has faltered—and like Citizen Action, it has found itself mired in scandal.) For a left-wing national organization to replicate the early success of the Christian Coalition, it would have to discover a comparable set of deeply felt concerns around which it could mobilize. These kinds of concerns surfaced briefly in the early 1990s, and were present in the 1930s and 1960s, but do not exist right now in sufficient force. Middle America is too fragmented by today's uneven prosperity to support a left-wing version of the Christian Coalition.

National liberal organizations certainly will exist, and will serve a useful purpose, but in the absence of changed circumstances, they will not be able to resolve the tension between local organizing and Washington lobbying. Under the best circumstances, they will serve, along with the AFL-CIO, as an effective counterweight to extremely powerful business lobbies and organizations that shape much of Washington politics, but they will also continue to suffer defections, disaffiliations, and financial crises. If Greenpeace's board of directors and Citizen Action's leadership can be faulted for anything, it is for seeking quick and easy, and ultimately illusory and self-destructive, solutions to the uncertainty and disorder that their organizations have been fated to endure.

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