

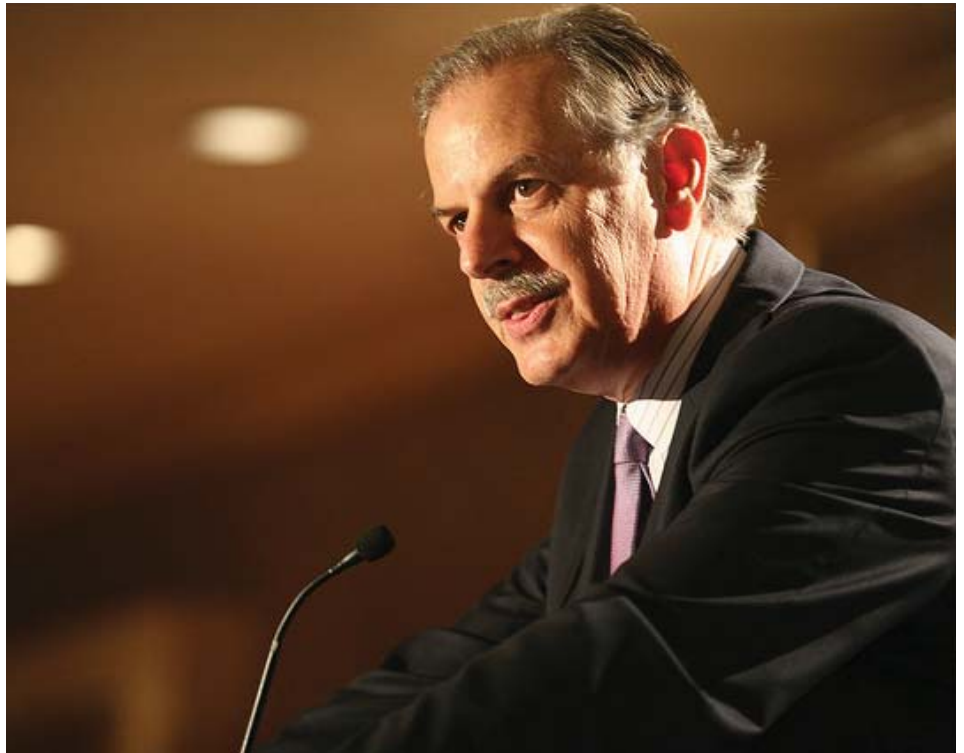
The Left's Answer to Grover Norquist

Robert Borosage Uses Class-Warfare Rhetoric to Unite the Left

By Sean Higgins

Summary: While the various pressure groups on the left all agree they want bigger and more intrusive government, they often squabble amongst themselves over the question of which agenda items should take priority. One man makes it his mission to unite these groups' efforts and messaging, in order to move America further to the left.

Robert Borosage leans back in his chair in his K Street office and grins as he recalls the recent “fiscal cliff” debate in Congress and the box that conservatives—including anti-tax activist Grover Norquist—found themselves in during it. “It was actually a great delight watching Grover explain how the greatest tax increase in 20 years was a tax cut. It was a magical moment in television,” chuckles Borosage during a lengthy on-the-record interview. He compares it to his own effort to prevent any entitlement reform in the deal. “We outlasted him,” he claims.



Leftover 1960s radical Robert Borosage is a successful progressive leader.

If anyone in D.C. is the left-wing equivalent of Norquist, who is famous for his networking efforts to bring together various conservative groups, it is Bob Borosage, a ubiquitous figure behind the scenes of the “progressive” movement. His work is key to understanding the Left’s renewed embrace of old-fashioned class warfare and its abandonment of Bill Clinton’s more moderate rhetoric.

Borosage doesn’t shy away from the term “class warfare” either. “For years, conservatives in both parties have warned against class warfare. Americans, we’re told, don’t like that divisiveness,” he wrote at the Huffington Post website late last year. “Nonsense.”

While hardly alone, Borosage is also a key figure in the Left’s newfound ability to present a united front, rather than collapse into the kind of internecine squabbles that long plagued the Left. Anyone who wants to know how, for example, Big Labor, which long defended the heavy industries in which many of its members worked, came to embrace environmentalism, which regularly wars against those same industries, needs to understand Borosage’s work.

Borosage is a man of many hats, but the two main hats he wears are as co-director for both the Institute for America’s Future, a 501(c)(3) think tank, and its 501(c)(4) political

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arm, the Campaign for America's Future. In addition to founding those two groups, he also helped to found (and now chairs) two additional groups: Progressive Majority, "an organization devoted to recruiting and training progressive [*sic*] to run for state and local office," and ProgressiveCongress.org, "an organization that provides a bridge between progressives in the Congress and the progressive community."

Both the Institute and Campaign for America's Future are part of the vast network of left-wing nonprofit groups that operate in Washington, D.C., but they have a different mission—and much lower profile—than better-known groups. The two groups are not single-issue groups like abortion rights advocate NARAL Pro-Choice America or the environmentalist Sierra Club. Nor are they a thinly veiled Democratic Party public relations firm like the George Soros-funded groups Center for American Progress and Media Matters for America.

The activities undertaken by Borosage's flagship groups are once more fundamental and less sexy: He's the guy that tries to persuade all of the liberal groups to meet together and then create and maintain a united front. He's the one who tries to get them on the same page philosophically, pushing the same ideas

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Address:
1513 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036-1480

Phone: (202) 483-6900
Long-Distance: (800) 459-3950

E-mail Address:
mvadum@capitalresearch.org

Web Site:
<http://www.capitalresearch.org>

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rhetorically and legislatively. He does it by networking with the Left's top leaders: he gathers them together for private meetings, helps forge coalition groups to deal with major issues, and hosts the Left's biggest annual gathering, the Take Back the American Dream Conference.

In all these venues, the vision he pushes is an intensely class-based economic populism that demonizes corporations and the wealthy and demands ever more wealth redistribution and expansions of the welfare state.

Sound familiar?

Virtually every campaign the Left has pushed over the last decade and half—attacks on "off-shoring," demands to roll back the Bush tax cuts, and support for Occupy Wall Street, to cite a few—has been cheered by Borosage and his groups from its earliest stages. They've succeeded in having groups across the left side of the spectrum embrace it as well.

Anyone who remembers pre-1990s liberal politics knows this unity is a relatively new development. Previously, the Left often splintered, with each group tending to focus narrowly on its own special interest, often to the detriment of the broader movement.

In some cases the groups were outright antagonistic. Feminists and minority groups, for example, clashed with civil libertarians over hate crimes laws and censorship. Big Labor clashed with environmentalists over business regulations and argued that immigration rights activists were advocates for "scab" labor. Meanwhile Democrat Party officials nervous at the prospect of losing moderate voters urged all of the groups to quiet down.

One of those Democrats was Bill Clinton. In the 1990s, then-President Bill Clinton pushed what he called, "Third-Way Politics." This involved trying to advance the liberal agenda through small steps by putting enough rhetorical distance between Democrats and liberal groups to win over moderates. This led Clinton to embrace moderate policies like free trade, welfare reform, and balanced budgets, and to distance himself from issues like gay rights and the death penalty.

Politically and economically, these efforts were successful. But Baby Boomer liberals like Borosage had hoped for so much more from the first president elected from their generation. And so Borosage vowed to undo it.

Radical Roots

A tall, mustachioed fellow now in his late 60s—he refuses to give his exact age—Borosage was raised by relatively conservative middle-class parents in Lansing, Michigan. As a student, he was swept up in the radical politics of the 1960s. He studied constitutional law at Yale Law School, graduating in 1971, two years ahead of Bill and Hillary Clinton. "In those days, Yale was a hotbed of anti-war and civil rights protest," he recalls.

He moved to Washington, D.C., and worked as a civil rights lawyer and later as a public defender to support himself, while he continued to pursue liberal activism. His first undertaking was to found a group called the Center for National Security Studies, which opposed U.S. foreign policy and the CIA. During the Reagan years he worked for the extreme-left Institute for Policy Studies think tank (where he remains a trustee).

Borosage's entrée to major-league politics came in the late 1980s, when he was introduced through his friend, Roger Wilkins—a professor and son of former NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins—to the Rev. Jesse Jackson, then about to launch his second bid for the White House. In 1988, Jackson hired Borosage as a speechwriter and all-around policy wonk.

"It was determinative in many ways to my political evolution because I saw that a populist bread and butter economic agenda could in fact unite ... a majoritarian base of white working-class people with African-Americans and Latinos," Borosage recalls. This was an ironic lesson to learn, given that Jackson couldn't get near winning the nomination of his own party that year. Democrats instead chose the charisma-impaired Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis, who then lost badly to Vice President George H.W. Bush.

Yet Jackson's vision and rhetoric became the foundation of Borosage's political strat-

egies. In our interview, Borosage recalls a tense meeting between Jackson and a group of white Teamsters while on the campaign trail in Georgia. Billy Carter, the former president's famously redneck brother, introduced Jackson. Carter, knowing this wasn't Jackson's usual audience, laid it on thick to the crowd, repeatedly telling the stone-faced union men that Jackson was "one of them."

Jackson either wasn't listening or simply disregarded Carter's efforts. Instead, he directly told the assembled Teamsters that they needed to ally themselves with others on the left, including African-Americans, the anti-war crowd, and even gays to boost their own political clout.

"We were sitting there thinking, 'Oh, geez, Reverend, you didn't have to say 'gays,' did you?' This was 1988," Borosage reminisces. "But at the end, he had them singing, 'We Shall Overcome.' It was an amazing performance."

Borosage believes Jackson should have run again in 1992, thinking the Reverend could have gone much farther that year. He remains enamored of the man to this day. "He was without question one of the most brilliant men I have ever worked with," Borosage insists. Borosage went on to work on the Senate campaigns of Barbara Boxer, Carol Moseley Braun, and the late Paul Wellstone, before deciding to cast his net even wider.

In the early 1990s, Borosage tried to go after the "peace dividend," arguing that the United States should reduce post-Cold War military spending because the U.S. would never face a major foreign threat again. (Terrorism, the thinking went, was something that happened in far-off countries like Israel.) To push this idea, he founded a group called the Campaign for New Priorities. "We went after the Pentagon's budget," Borosage proudly recalls. "That all came to an end after Clinton was elected," he adds, still chagrined after all these years. Clinton's Third Way politics and endorsement of the moderate Democratic Leadership Council agenda put a damper on radical leftism.

And so the Campaign for New Priorities morphed into the Campaign for America's

Future. It was officially incorporated as a nonprofit in 1996. "We created the Campaign for America's Future to challenge the limits of that politics and to lay out a progressive agenda and build initiatives that would drive the issues into the debate and to win," Borosage explains.

By "that politics" he means: "What we saw as the very conservative politics of the Clinton administration, which were basically grounded around economics. Instead of making the case for an investment agenda [i.e., expanding government spending], they were making the case for paying down the debt, which set off [President George W.] Bush's massive tax cuts. We were early and loud opponents of that frame [of mind]."

Of course, the same decade when the federal government began to wean itself from the habit of increasing debt was also a decade of explosive growth and prosperity. But these facts aren't acknowledged or even mentioned by Borosage. He's simply angered because under Clinton the government was not expanding further and faster and wealth was not being further redistributed. "He is the most talented politician of our generation," Borosage says of Clinton. "And he got the big things wrong.... I think of it as a wasted time."

President Obama is much more to Borosage's liking. The agenda of CAF today is to push the Left even further left. He uses the late Senator Wellstone's phrase, "the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party" to describe what he upholds. "We support the president when we can and push him [leftward] when we must," he explains.

Finances

The Campaign for America's Future, a 501(c)(4) nonprofit, had a \$1 million annual budget according to its 2010 IRS filing, the most recent one available. The Institute for America's Future, its 501(c)(3) sister organization, had an annual budget of \$2.5 million to \$3.5 million, according to a filing the same year. (That's down, though. As recently as 2006, IAF had a \$5.7 million budget. It's not clear why the budget shrank.)

The two groups, headquartered in Washing-

ton, D.C., are separate only in the narrowest, most technical legal sense. They share staff and website and have the same downtown K Street address. Borosage runs both along with his co-director, Roger Hickey. Borosage's combined salary and benefits from them is about \$197,800 annually. Hickey makes about \$178,500. That compensation doesn't put them in the dreaded richest one percent of Americans, but they are well into the highest 10 percent of incomes.

The board of directors for both groups reads like a who's who of modern liberalism. IAF's includes Roger Wilkins, publisher of the NAACP's journal *Crisis* (and son of the organization's former executive director Roy Wilkins); *Nation* editor-in-chief Katrina vanden Heuvel; former AFL-CIO president John Sweeney; actor Warren Beatty; television producer Marcy Carsey (co-creator of the "Cosby Show," "Roseanne," and other popular sitcoms); Robert Johnson, former managing director of (George) Soros Fund Management; Scott Wallace, a board member of the left-wing Wallace Global Fund; Charles Rodgers, president of the New Community Fund, another left-wing funder; and Margery Tabankin, executive director of the Streisand Foundation (as in, yes, Barbra Streisand). Tabankin was dubbed "the dean, or perhaps den mother, of Hollywood political consultants," by left-wing writer Eric Alterman in an *Atlantic Monthly* article.

CAF's board of directors includes Leo Gerard, president of United Steelworkers; MoveOn board president Eli Pariser; former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg policy advisor Andrea Schlesinger; Hilary Shelton, executive director of the NAACP's Washington bureau; Jeff Faux, founder of the left-wing Economic Policy Institute; and Lara Bergthold, a Tabankin protégé who chairs the board of the Norman Lear-founded People for the American Way.

Borosage is, as you see, a champion networker among liberals, with a knack for getting leaders together in the same room. "I'd say we are the bridge," Borosage says. "We are attuned to grassroots and in touch with the progressive leadership in Congress." He boasts of close relationships with top Democrats like House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), and Senate

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Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), and the Congressional Progressive Caucus. (Harry Reid is a different case. Borosage concedes he doesn't know the Senate Majority Leader very well.) "We have many friends who work in various parts of the White House and in bureaucracies," he adds.

Borosage has a close personal tie to both the administration and Big Labor. He has been married since 1989 to Barbara Shailor, the former director of the AFL-CIO's International Department and a close advisor to Sweeney and his successor, Richard Trumka. In 2010, she was appointed by President Obama to serve as the State Department's Special Representative for International Labor Affairs. They are a true Washington power couple.

The group's funding is from the usual assortment of liberal bankrollers. IAF has received \$3 million alone from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy between 2006 and 2008. The George Soros-funded Open Society Institute has given IAF \$1.7 million since 2009, and the Tides Foundation has given the same amount since 2007.

Other big-bucks IAF funders include: the Arca Foundation (\$450,000 since 2008); the Jewish Communal Fund (\$410,000 since 2004); the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation (\$375,000 since 2005); the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (\$272,000 since 2009); the Marisla Foundation (\$225,000 since 2006); the Wallace Global Fund (\$175,000 since 2010) and the Barbra Streisand Foundation (\$85,000 since 2000).

CAF has received: \$286,500 from the Tides Foundation between 2005-10; \$120,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation and related groups between 2002-4; \$200,000 from the Stephen M. Silberstein Foundation between 2007 and 2009; and \$25,000 each from Hollywood's Lear Family Foundation and David Geffen Foundation in 2007 and 2008, respectively.

Borosage says CAF gets much of its funding from organized labor. "On the [nonprofit] c(4) side we get union and individual donor foundations. We've been members of the Democracy Alliance. We've benefited from that." (The Democracy Alliance, a George

Soros-led coalition of wealthy left-wing donors who fund left-of-center groups, was profiled in the December 2008 issue of *Foundation Watch*.)

The group's agenda is pure class warfare. The CAF's IRS filing bluntly says its mission is to "direct public anger at banks and lax regulators, focus on making banking money and lobby [*sic*] toxic." CAF is not above taking credit for other's accomplishments, however. It cites as an achievement getting the Federal Reserve audited, which was long a project of now-retired Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tex.), who encountered considerable resistance and ridicule from the Left before now-retired Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) reversed himself and backed it.

CAF and IAF do little to directly influence policy. CAF does not lobby and while IAF does, the total amount it spent, \$210,000 between 2007 and 2010 according to its tax filings, is modest by Beltway standards. Nor do the groups disperse campaign money.

So what do they do? Mainly, they get other liberal groups to sit down together and reach consensus on how to pursue the left-wing agenda.

This may sound like a minor point, but anyone who has worked in politics knows how important it is to build coalitions in order to accomplish anything. In-fighting among groups who are nominally on the same side is a sure sign that side is losing. Borosage's job is to keep that from happening and instead to persuade those groups to use the same class-warfare talking points. His average day is spent on the phone, either arranging or attending meetings and networking at events at night.

It was Borosage, for example, who helped to found the coalition Healthcare for America Now (HCAN), which mobilized the professional Left in support of Obamacare's passage. The coalition featured most major left-wing groups and helped to paper over frustration many of them felt because the bill that eventually made its way through Congress lacked a single-payer (that is, all-government) option.

Borosage was also instrumental in founding

the Apollo Alliance, a coalition of Big Labor, Obama campaign leaders, and environmentalists who push for renewable energy projects. (Apollo Alliance was profiled in the October 2009 *Foundation Watch*.) He remains on its board, too. The group also goes by the name BlueGreen Alliance. As we noted earlier, in the past unions and green groups often fought over environmental regulations, which harm so many workers in industries like mining, steelmaking, and car manufacturing.

In fact, unions and environmentalists do still fight. The Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA) angrily criticized the AFL-CIO's leadership for not supporting the Keystone XL Pipeline project. It also quit the Blue-Green alliance. The pipeline project would have greatly benefited LIUNA's members, but the green lobby despised it.

"We're repulsed by some of our supposed brothers and sisters lining up with job killers like the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council to destroy the lives of working men and women," said LIUNA president Terry O'Sullivan in a January 2012 press release. "Their real target," he added, "wasn't the pipeline, but the oil sands [in Canada]. They missed that target—the oil sands will be developed whether Keystone XL is built or not—but hit tens of thousands of working men and women.... Construction workers are struggling with 16 percent unemployment and 1.3 million of them are jobless. The Keystone XL was not just a pipeline to them, it was a lifeline."

That the AFL-CIO was taking its cues on energy policy from environmentalists can be attributed in part to Borosage's efforts. The White House was also taking its cues from the alliance. "It had a big effect on the Obama campaign," Borosage says, rather immodestly.

But he is right. The alliance's agenda—and the whole notion that big spending on renewable energy programs would be a jobs bonanza that unions and environmentalists alike can support—became the blueprint for President Obama's own multi-billion green energy push. Obama's claim that his spending on solar, wind and biomass projects would create five million new jobs came directly

from the alliance's press releases. Obama's original pick to head the project was alliance board member Van Jones, the White House "green jobs czar" and self-described "communist" who had to leave the administration in September 2009 after his far-left background became known.

Borosage leaves unsaid the fact that this green jobs agenda has resulted in billions of tax dollars producing thus-far negligible results as well as high-profile bankruptcies like Solyndra's. (For more on green jobs, see the November 2012 *Green Watch*.)

The Left's Answer to CPAC

CAF also hosts the largest annual conference of liberal groups in the United States, which mirrors the much larger Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) on the right. For many years CAF's conference was called the "Take Back America Conference." In 2011, the event's name was amended to the "Take Back the American Dream Conference." The change was made to incorporate Rebuild the Dream, an organization founded by Van Jones.

Borosage claims to have helped nurture Jones's career in its early days. "I think he is an enormously talented young man with enormous leadership potential. So I've been a big booster of his," Borosage says of Jones. (For more on Jones, see the profile in *Green Watch*, November 2012.)

Listing the number of liberal activist groups, labor leaders, prominent left-wing writers, thinkers, activists, media personalities, and Democratic lawmakers who have attended these gatherings would be fruitless. It would be far easier to compile a list of those on the left who haven't attended.

"The conference was designed when Bush was president when progressives were almost invisible in this town. So we wanted to plant a flag – to both lay out the agenda and bring disparate tribes of the progressive community together," he adds later. "We constantly tried to show people that there was economic common ground and real advantages in coalescing."

The annual event also serves as a "screen" for progressive candidates. In 2007, Hillary

Clinton, John Edwards, and then-Senator Barack Obama were all obliged to appear at the event. Not sucking up to that crowd would have been dangerous for anybody hoping to get the Democratic nod.

Moderate Democratic politics, by contrast, was dead by 2007 thanks to events like that. The Democratic Leadership Council had simply ceased to exist by this point.

Another hat Borosage wears is founder and chairman of Progressive Majority, a PAC that recruits left-wing candidates at the state and local level. "We thought we had better build a pipeline" to create farm teams of liberals for House and Senate races, he explains.

The PAC has raised more than \$18 million for liberal candidates since 2004, with most of the money coming from Big Labor. The Service Employees International Union, for example, has donated \$2.2 million since 2004. The PAC claims to have helped to elect 411 people to office since 2004. Because these are candidates for state-level office, not the House or Senate, the group's actions have flown almost entirely under the radar of national media.

Borosage also writes prolifically, penning "here's what the Left should focus on now" pieces for the *Nation*, Huffington Post, and the *American Prospect*. His *Nation* pieces include cover stories co-written with editor-in-chief Katrina vanden Heuvel. In 2004, they co-wrote a manifesto together: *Taking Back America: And Taking Down the Radical Right*. Borosage earlier wrote, along with his CAF partner Roger Hickey, 2001's *The Next Agenda: Blueprint for a New Progressive Movement*.

Borosage is not without his critics on the left – but they don't want to be too public about it either. After I wrote a shorter piece about him for my *Washington Examiner* column in January, I received a call from another notable liberal coalition builder. The individual went on at great length to express frustration over how Borosage was driving the agenda with little—in the critic's opinion—to show for it. The individual refused to speak on the record, however, and

the anger at least partly stemmed from the way Borosage is "soaking up all of the grant money," as the critic put it.

Asked at the end of our interview to look back and declare what he thinks is his biggest accomplishment of 2012, Borosage says he is pleased that the White House was pushed into embracing economic populism and class warfare. He notes that President Obama is "not instinctively populist" but did it anyway, in hopes of winning re-election. Borosage adds that he hopes to persuade the White House to continue taking on "gilded age inequality."

"We're going to be pushing the boundaries of debate," he insists.

Unspoken is just how far America's debate has already gone in his direction.

Sean Higgins is senior editorial writer for the Washington Examiner.

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Briefly Noted

President **Obama** has converted his campaign apparatus into a permanent in-your-face campaign aimed at furthering radical politics. **Organizing for Action**, a new 501(c)(4) advocacy group, will “play an active role” in “mobilizing around and speaking out in support of important legislation” during Obama’s second term, the president said. The group grew out of **Organizing for America**, an unincorporated project of the **DNC** that whipped up popular support for Obama’s policies. Obama’s 2012 campaign manager, **Jim Messina**, is the new group’s national chairman, but day to day affairs will be run by executive director **Jon Carson**. A former White House aide, Carson has ties to **ACORN** and **Project Vote** and was previously chief of staff at the White House Council on Environmental Quality, serving under the now-disgraced **Van Jones**.

Student activists with the radical anti-war group **Code Pink** receive college credit for disrupting congressional hearings, Code Pink leader **Jodie Evans** acknowledges. Evans made the admission after **Lachelle Roddy**, an intern at the group, was ejected from Secretary of State **John Kerry**’s recent confirmation hearing for shouting “I’m tired of my friends in the Middle East dying.” Roddy is a political science major at **Hollins University**, a small, private women’s college in Roanoke, Virginia (current annual cost: \$43,295.00). Kerry refused to criticize his detractor, fondly recalling his own protest antics. “I respect the woman who was voicing her concerns about the world,” he said.

The **George Soros**-funded **Center for American Progress** is outraged that the **National Rifle Association** spends money to elect judges and state attorneys general who support the Second Amendment. The nerve! CAP writer **Billy Corriher** mocks the 22-year-old good government group, **Law Enforcement Alliance of America**, to which he says the NRA has given \$6 million-plus since 2004, and calls it a “front group” that helps to elect politicians who turn a blind eye to “violations of gun-violence prevention laws.”

In D.C., it’s who you know: The government of **Iraq** is hiring the **Podesta Group** to lobby on its behalf in Congress. *Politico* reports the firm was hired because of its ties to top Democrats. Principal **Tony Podesta** is the brother of **John Podesta**, the founder of the Center for American Progress who was also **Bill Clinton**’s White House chief of staff and co-chairman of the Obama-Biden transition team.

After publicly boasting that she voted twice in November, a left-wing Ohio activist associated with a Soros-funded group claims she did nothing wrong by double-voting. “There’s absolutely no intent on my part to commit voter fraud,” said **Melowese Richardson**, a longtime Cincinnati poll worker active in a local group called **Communities United for Action**. The group is part of a larger Saul Alinsky-inspired organizing network called **National People’s Action** (NPA), which makes no bones about its desire to overthrow what remains of America’s free enterprise system. Through his **Foundation to Promote Open Society**, Soros has given NPA \$300,000 since 2010.

The governing body of the **American Bar Association**, a guild long controlled by the Left, last month approved a resolution calculated to undermine private political association and free speech. According to the ABA, Resolution 110B urges Congress to require groups currently exempt from campaign disclosure requirements to publicly disclose the source of funds and the amounts spent. Left-wingers are infuriated that contributions and spending by 501(c)(4) nonprofits and 527 political organizations remain largely hidden from public view.