



Bruce Babbitt (left), like the bad penny, keeps turning up with new twists on old Clinton-era schemes. Hans Wyss (right), is generous to Green and progressive causes although his fortune was accumulated in a very capitalistic manner.

Patterns on the Landscape

Forget the war on the West. Equal Ground is part of a larger war on truth.

By Dave Skinner

So much trash crosses my desk, sometimes I feel like a pig. One whiff amid the stink gets me rooting after a treat in the mess. After enough digging, a smart pig learns that finding treats isn't pure luck—there's a pattern to the mess.

On August 7, the *Salt Lake Tribune* ran “Enviros Urge Obama to Create Monuments, Protect Lands,” concerning a Center for American Progress (CAP) report entitled “Blueprint for Balance.” Sniff, sniff. Oink!

As *RANGE* has reported, just before Sally Jewell was sworn in to succeed Ken Salazar as secretary of Interior, Clinton administration secretary, Bruce Babbitt, gave a February 5 speech at the National Press Club, in which he demanded an acre of new, permanent wilderness for each acre of petroleum leasing, putting wilderness “on equal ground.”

Sure enough, the Equal Ground “campaign” and 33-page “Blueprint” reads like a page from Bruce Babbitt’s Clinton-era secretarial playbook: “[C]reate new national monuments [and] establish new national

wildlife refuges,” through presidential executive order.

Equal Ground’s rollout was slow—seven months after Babbitt’s speech—and generated minimal press. Only the usually eco-friendly *Tribune* bothered with a story, but a full third of reporter Thomas Burr’s article covered the response of Utah Congressman Rob Bishop (R), a strong supporter of public lands resource production (and producers). Significantly, the Equal Ground Blueprint wasn’t produced by a Green group, but by the Center for American Progress, a major “progressive” player with a far-broader agenda than just environmentalism.

One tidbit buried in the blather was a name that hangs on the wall of shame of any westerner worth his/her belt buckle, especially loyal *RANGE* readers: Tom Kenworthy. Oink, Oink!

Back in 1995, Kenworthy was the *Washington Post’s* Colorado-based western correspondent. His notorious failure to report one huge western story—the secret maneuvers

by the Clinton administration to establish Utah’s Grand Staircase/Escalante National Monument—sealed his reputation forever. A full week before Clinton’s trip, Kenworthy sent an email to the White House Council on Environmental Quality’s press officer, Brian Johnson: “south rim of the grand canyon, sept 18th—be there or be square.” In a shameful breach of his journalistic duty to inform, Kenworthy kept secrets from people who needed and deserved to know.

Kenworthy finally retired from reporting in 2007, but he has stayed busy. His involvement with Equal Ground for the Center for American Progress is not a random event, but part of a long-running pattern.

What does Equal Ground have to do with cowboys? Any rancher with “grandfathered” grazing or water-development rights in wilderness will tell you why wilderness designation matters. Then there is the issue of surface occupancy and use when petroleum leases occur.

But Equal Ground matters more as a textbook example of how too darn much of what used to be “news” has degraded into political propaganda in its purest form. Equal Ground didn’t just spring whole from Bruce Babbitt’s forehead and spontaneously combust into a blaze of citizen passion. The flames are being fanned by professionals, bought and paid for. By whom? Well, after you’re finished reading what you’ll never find in your local newspaper, don’t be surprised.

A Coalition in Name Only

First, the coalition fronting Equal Ground includes The Wilderness Society (TWS), Conservation Lands Foundation (CLF), Western Energy Project (WEP), Center for Western Priorities (CWP), and Center for American Progress (CAP). TWS has been around since 1935, its mission, wilderness designation and expansion.

RANGE readers already know CLF’s ties to former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Swiss eco-billionaire Hans Wyss, and its mission of politically protecting Babbitt’s landgrabs. But the others lack a past life: Western Energy Project is “a campaign established to ensure responsible energy development” in the West, run by Defenders of Wildlife veteran Laurel Angell.

According to the Stanford *Social Innovation Review*, WEP is “an initiative of the New Venture Fund,” which in turn is the renamed Arabella Legacy Fund, the brainchild of Fel-Pro Gaskets heir Eric Kessler. A career envi-

ronmentalist and Babbitt Interior hire, Kessler very successfully reinvented himself as a philanthropic advisor. Wealthy donors such as Bill and Melinda Gates ask Eric how to spend their money “doing good,” and Eric tells them. If donors want to quietly support a cause or set up a “campaign,” again quietly, Eric takes care of the details, for which they pay Eric’s for-profit consulting firm, Arabella Advisors, very well.

The Arabella/New Venture Fund model builds on that pioneered by Drummond Pike and the Tides Foundation, providing a host infrastructure for start-up “projects” under the TF’s tax-exempt umbrella, as well as a means of shielding donor anonymity through donor-advised grants to the general TF cash pool. In fact, WEP’s website was registered in 2009 to Arabella Advisors. And the Stanford article hints WEP’s real purpose: “WEP, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and several other organizations have joined Redstone Strategy Group [another philanthropic advisor] in creating a new way to plan, monitor, and evaluate advocacy investments.”

Advocacy investments? That’s foundation-speak for political spending.

Center for Western Priorities’ slick website was first created on June 12, 2012, through DomainsByProxy. All items on the site are authored anonymously and there is no direct contact person named, yet CWP terms itself a “nonpartisan engagement center that serves as a source of accurate information.” However, a *Salida Citizen* blog post (actually, a cut-and-pasted press release) announced CWP “opened for business” Sept. 18, 2012, and names Trevor Kincaid executive director. Kincaid’s LinkedIn page indicates he’s a Floridian (up on western priorities, you bet), was communications director for Sens. Michael Bennett (D-CO) and Claire McCaskill (D-MO), and was “responsible for developing and executing media campaigns” immediately before joining CWP in May 2012. Not coincidentally, Kincaid was also a CAP deputy press secretary in 2006.

Equal Ground itself is textbook Astroturf. www.equalground.org was created (DomainsByProxy again!) Jan. 28, 2013, a week before Babbitt’s February lecture. The press contact address and phone number is shared with Center for Western Priorities—again, no names. The site is powered (or managed) by 4degree.es Political, a “social media agency” which offers “precision mes-

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saging, delivering results” and promises clients “[w]e work exclusively with progressive campaigns and organizations.”

Clearly, CWP and WEP are PR fronts, purpose built solely for hosting a campaign on behalf of their funders’ interests. The

campaign was allocated enough resources to stage a two-week, 1,600-mile “Road to Equal Ground” caravan (one RV) that started in Missoula, Mont., August 15 with a press roundtable clearly intended to generate local stories by local environmental reporters. Missoula even hosted a happy hour with “free drink tickets to the first 20 people.” Along with those drinks came fancy reports, fancy websites, and fancy spin—but no fancy questions, please.

The Creators

The backgrounds of the eight writers of Equal Ground’s Blueprint also show a pattern. Three of the four non-CAP authors (now supposedly staff for the partner “coalition”) are current or former Wilderness

The Missing Link

When Tom Kenworthy gave up playing reporter, he moved to a senior fellowship at the “independent, nonpartisan” Western Progress think tank, enjoying a salary over \$110,000 in 2008, more even than Alan Stephens, the executive director. WP’s first chairman of the board was Fred Duval, campaign manager for all Bruce Babbitt’s political campaigns and today a 2014 candidate for governor of Arizona. Also on WP’s board was John D. Leshy, Babbitt’s Interior solicitor. Coincidence, right?

Western Progress “advance[d] progressive policy” while “countering conservative rhetoric and policy.” Working alongside Kenworthy was former Lee newspapers’ editor Steve Woodruff, who now teaches journalism at the University of Montana.

But late in 2008, Western Progress shut down. Pat Williams (D-MT), co-founding former congressman, told *New West* reporter Robert Struckman (now a speechwriter for AFL-CIO), “We had thought we had three years of \$500,000 contributions from each of the two big contributors,” whom Struckman did not name. IRS records show the mystery contributors provided 100 percent of WP’s 2008 funding, shy \$20,000 from a “prohibited person.” Even so, WP claimed its income was 98.2658 percent “public support.”

Fortunately, Dianne Carman of the *Denver Post* had already spilled the beans. When the progressive think tank was just starting up in early 2007, she wrote, “Funding is coming from private donors and foundations, including the Wyss Foundation, which has been involved in conservation and other regional issues.”

Actually, Carman got it wrong. Checking IRS tax returns for both groups proves that in 2007, Western Progress was given life by a \$180,000 grant from the Center for American Progress—the largest outside grant CAP made that year. In 2008, WP got another \$143,000 of CAP cash, with the remainder of WP’s \$997,809 in gross receipts from...who knows?

But WP’s genesis as a de facto CAP subsidiary gives Kenworthy’s slide upstairs to another senior fellowship at the Center for American Progress a certain logic. Where else would he go? Furthermore, Kenworthy’s history—basically an insider at the beginning of Bruce Babbitt and Bill Clinton’s national monument orgy—which in turn set the stage for the National Landscape Conservation System, which in turn led to Wyss’ millions being spent, some of which is being paid to Kenworthy to politically defend that which he helped start! Serendipity. Kenworthy could not have landed in a better place...except one. ■



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Tom Kenworthy got honest when he retired from journalism to flack for a left-wing think tank where the thinking is largely about raising money.

Real journalists, real “watchdogs,” would be delighted to expose a scheme like Equal Ground for what it really is—special-interest propaganda from a foreign billionaire dancing on Astroturf, playing big-time politics behind a cloak of philanthropy while scoring huge tax write-offs.

Society employees. Two of those three are lawyers. Of the four CAP authors, one is also a Wilderness Society refugee. Two are government exiles, one a former deputy chief of staff for former Senator-then Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, Jewell’s immediate predecessor. The other exile has a journalism history, a former TV reporter who moved on to work for one of Ralph Nader’s groups before becoming a congressional staffer. The last is noteworthy “reporter” Tom Kenworthy. (See sidebar, previous page.)

The Center for American Progress is a fairly new and powerful entity on the American political and policy scene. Founded in 2003 by John Podesta, former chief of staff for President Clinton, CAP terms itself as “an independent nonpartisan educational institute dedicated to improving the lives of Americans through progressive ideas.”

By November 2008, just after the presidential election of Barack Obama, *New York*

Times reporter Charlie Savage called CAP “a government in exile for liberal policy experts,” intended by Podesta to be a “liberal counterweight to the conservative Heritage Foundation” and to give a “home to other prominent Democrats looking for a perch during the period of Republican hegemony” from 2000 until 2006.

CAP has grown outside influence inside the Beltway as its staff spins in and out of exile through the federal revolving door. Starting with a bang with a whopping \$11 million budget its first year, the tax-exempt 501(c)(3) CAP enjoyed 2011 revenues of \$34 or so million (all anonymous), spending at least \$9.2 million on communications and external relations.

CAP also makes grants—\$5 million, of which \$4.2 million went down the hall to Action Fund, its 501(c)(4) political subsidiary, to “support charitable educational activities.” In other words, CAP runs the

same funding shuffle as the Sierra Club Foundation, another 501(c)(3) *charitable* entity that first provides large donors charity tax breaks, then passes the funds along to pay for the real 501(c)(4) Sierra Club’s not-so-charitable politicking.

The Facilitators

The Board of Directors of the Center for American Progress reads like a social register of the progressive elite. Political bigwigs like Sen. Tom Daschle sit alongside their sponsors. At least four billionaires held CAP directorships in 2011: Farrallon hedge funder Tom Steyer (who calls himself environmentalism’s Mike Bloomberg); Peter Lewis, the Progressive Insurance tycoon (and staunch progressive); late founding board member Marion Sandler, wife and World Savings business partner of Herb Sandler (see sidebar); and Hans Wyss, on CAP’s board since 2004, a year after its creation. Now why might a humble Swiss billionaire find American nonprofit think tanks such worthy causes? [See “Passing the Bucks,” Summer 2012 at www.rangemagazine.com.]

Federal Elections Commission records show Wyss made about \$38,000 in political contributions between 1998 and 2002, all to wilderness-friendly Democrats or PACs. However, as a Swiss citizen, Wyss cannot legally make direct political contributions to either parties, PACs or politicians without a green card and permanent U.S. residence. Today, at age 78 and \$12.4 billion net worth (according to Bloomberg Billionaires Index), Wyss is either Pennsylvania’s biggest billionaire, or Switzerland’s second biggest. He resides at least part of the year in the Swiss canton (like a U.S. state) of Bern.

But compared to America’s punitive death taxes, Swiss estate taxes are minimal, with spouses or descendants exempt from any tax. Furthermore, it appears that Wyss’ assets are Swiss-based and not subject to U.S. taxation—billions of reasons for him to skip the green card, eh? However, on charitable contributions there are no restrictions of any kind—it’s *charity*, and tax deductible.

After Western Progress closed its doors, in 2009 the Wyss Foundation donated \$400,000 to “public charity” CAP, over 10 times Wyss’ lifetime direct political spending. Which had more political impact? Alongside the CAP funding went an even \$1 million to the Tides Foundation.

But there’s more. In 2011, the Hansjörg Wyss Foundation donated \$1.325 million to

The New Journalism

Herb and Marion Sandler are famous not just for helping found CAP, but also for their creation and \$10 million annual support of ProPublica, a “nonprofit,” New York-based provider of free content for mainstream news companies lacking the resources to conduct investigative journalism. In 2008, Sandler told the *New York Times* that he founded ProPublica to be a watchdog against injustice: “You go a little crazy when power takes advantage of those without power.”

Topics covered include a 151-story-so-far series on fracking—“gas drilling’s environmental threat.” Latest headline: “New Study Finds High Levels of Arsenic in Groundwater Near Fracking Sites,” and while “the findings are far from conclusive, the study provides further evidence tying fracking to arsenic contamination.”

But, as Jeff Horwitz of *Columbia Journalism Review* noted in 2010, “it’s no secret that [Sandler is] partial to stories about the issue of money in politics.” Is a ProPublica story about the money in Equal Ground’s politics on the way? ■



Howard and Marion Sandler made \$2.3 billion when they sold their subprime mortgage-laden bank in 2006. Even TIME magazine named them, among others, as blameworthy for the 2008 economic crisis.

CAP, and \$1 million to New Venture Fund. The Wyss (no Hans) Foundation donated another \$350,000 to CAP, \$1.53 million to CLF, another \$775,000 to New Venture, and \$225,000 to Trout Unlimited.

Much more. A March 2013 Web invitation to a Trout Unlimited gala (\$10,000 per table at the St. Francis Yacht Club) honoring Wyss explains: “The Wyss Foundation, which provides funding for community-based and national conservation organizations and land trusts across the West, has provided more than \$175 million” since 1998, averaging \$11.66 million annually, including “more than \$4.2 million over 11 years” to Trout Unlimited.

Furthermore, Wyss created Wyss Action Fund (c/o Wyss director and Babbitt alum Molly McUsic) in 2007. Dormant for years, the Action Fund received \$1.1 million in 2011 from “an undisclosed source.” Gosh only knows what Wyss spent in 2012.

Will you see any of this in a story about Equal Ground in your local paper? Never—and that’s the real trouble. Forget the war on the West. Equal Ground is part of a larger war on truth.

Well-informed citizens are vital to a well-functioning polity—that’s why America has a First Amendment, which *should* be used to the fullest by an aggressive, smart, honest press. Real journalists, real “watchdogs,” would be delighted to expose a scheme like Equal Ground for what it really is—special-interest propaganda from a foreign billionaire dancing on Astroturf, playing big-time politics behind a cloak of philanthropy while scoring huge tax write-offs.

But they won’t. Journalism as America needs it to be is a sinking ship. As the credibility, readership, and profits of our legacy media vanish in a systemic, self-inflicted collapse, the rats are looking for another ride for when they jump.

At least one of them, our great friend Tom Kenworthy, landed safely with CAP and Equal Ground, where he’s still doing what he’s always done so well: helping turn America’s news landscape into a wilderness of manufactured political spin, targeted at manipulating public opinion in favor of a dictated political outcome.

Nice work if you can get it. ■

Dave Skinner wishes he was floating through chest-deep powder instead of drowning in head-high political pig drizzle.