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Jim Hightower is less an activist or strategist than a cheerleader.

Even now - when the Republican and Democratic parties are virtually indistinguishable, when the executive branch of the federal government has curtailed civil liberties in the name of national security with little opposition from Congress, and when popular sentiment seems to have little power in Washington - the Texan finds plenty of silver linings.

Hightower's gift is that even though he's an unapologetic leftist, he tries to connect with the full spectrum of disenfranchised and disenchanted citizens. He argues compellingly that pocketbook issues will eventually unite a majority of voters in a way that "liberal," "conservative," and party labels never have.

But make no mistake: What Hightower calls "progressive" is undoubtedly liberal. One major challenge Hightower faces is bringing together angry voters when a large number of

them will chafe at his favored solutions - which almost universally focus on a government safety net rather than the private sector.

Another problem with Hightower is that he continually predicts a populist revolution that, so far at least, hasn't developed on a national level. He predicted that John Kerry would be elected president, for example. "I don't care if he's a sack of cement, we're going to carry him to victory," Hightower said.

The radio commentator and newspaper columnist will be speaking at 7:30 p.m. on Friday, September 8, at the Veterans Memorial Park Band Shell in Bettendorf, stumping for Iowans for Sensible Priorities (http://www.sensibleiowans.org), an organization that advocates cutting defense spending in favor of programs such as Head Start and health care.

In an interview with the *River Cities' Reader* last week, the homespun Hightower argued that populists are making progress but lamented a lack of national leadership. Edited excerpts of the interview are reproduced here. To listen to the full interview, visit (http://www.qcspan.com).

"**Wars Are Extra"**

"We're going to go after that big, bloated Pentagon budget, which now is $463 billion, not counting Iraq and Afghanistan or actual wars. Wars are extra in the Pentagon budget. Four

hundred sixty-three billion just to keep the machine idling, and to put it in gear takes, in the case of Iraq, $300 billion extra that we've spent already.

"We need a Pentagon budget that protects us and defends our national interests, not one that overwhelms us. And that's what we've got here: a budget that's more than the rest of the world combined. All of our ... potential adversaries have a [combined defense] budget of possibly $150 billion a year ... and we're spending this. ...

"Let's take $60 billion of that - that's only 15 percent of that budget - and let's put that into things we actually need, like Head Start, and health care, and job training, and that sort of thing. And we can do that without affecting national security at all, primarily because we can take it out of absurd weapons programs that were designed for the bygone era of the Soviet Union. ...

"The point of Iowans for Sensible Priorities is we can't wait for the candidates to decide to be on our side. Instead of them telling us what the agenda is, we need to tell *them* what the agenda is. ... And Iowa is particularly ideal for it, because you're able to meet candidates in small groups, and say to them, 'Here's something we care about.' We're trying to put this issue on the table for 2006, 2008, 2010, and beyond.

"**Top to Bottom"**

"Even in the red states, even in New Hampshire, I believe there's a level of people fed up and wanting something truly different that will transcend the ideological and political labels. As I say, the real spectrum in American politics is not right to left; it's top to bottom. Right to left is theory. Top to bottom is experience; that's where people actually live.

"You have the *New York Times* now running front-page stories admitting that the majority of Americans are falling behind now. It's not just the working poor; it's the middle class itself that is being knocked down.

"There's a potential for rebellion, but they don't see a flag flying at the national level that's on their side, saying, ... ‘We're going to stand with you unequivocally against these corporate greed heads that are running roughshod over you.' If that flag were to fly, people would rally around it rather dramatically.

"**Corporate Interests"**

"My politics has always been sort of a maverick style, so it's been a little different than just a classic lefty run. My populist stance cuts across a lot of lines.

"Opposing NAFTA, for example - is that left wing or right wing? Both sides were against that. The corporate interests prevailed there. And that's mostly what's prevailing in all of our politics.

"Even people who call themselves conservatives have not been winning under Bush. The corporate interests have been winning. The conservative interests who favor smaller government, who favor less executive power, less intrusion into our individual liberties - they've been losing just as surely as the liberals have been losing.

"The only clear winners out of Bush have been the corporate interests. And more and more Americans are aware of that. And so when you run ... campaigns that are based on that economic populism, then you're going to see people turn out to vote who have not been voting in a long time, or have been voting on social issues because they don't see their economic issues even being discussed.

"**Prairie Fires of Rebellion"**

"I'm not stuck in Washington and so don't get ... all my information from the established powers. Rather, I'm able to travel the country a lot. And out there, I find people lighting these prairie fires of rebellion against the economic and political exclusion that the powers-that-be have been hanging around our necks. People doing everything from taking on Wal-Mart and winning, fighting for living-wage ordinances - more than 130 cities have already passed that in America - taking on the military-industrial complex ... . And, more often than not, folks are winning.

"And yeah, we had that little setback in November of '04 - a bit of unpleasantness that I did not think would happen. But while Kerry lost, he was always the least of it. Let's admit it: He couldn't connect with working people if we put him on a street corner handing out free Budweisers and Slim Jims.

"But while he lost, he still got 55 million votes - more than any other presidential candidate in history, just short of George W. So we gained, and we - the people who generated that vote - were that activist base that has moved into the countryside, focused on the countryside rather than on Washington.

"And groups like MoveOn and TrueMajority, but also groups like the League of Rural Voters, the League of Conservation Voters, a new group called the League of Pissed Off Voters - which is great, a bunch of young people - not only did they increase registration and turnout in the '04 election, but they have not gone away.

"Indeed, many of those groups ran people for local and state offices, and won those. So we're building in the countryside, we being the progressive movement. And it has just kept growing since '04. Meanwhile, of course, George W. has rolled over the in ditch, even in terms of his own base of support. So they are weakened, and we are strengthened."

"**Negative Victories"**

President George W. Bush "should be winning everything that he wants, since he controls both houses of the Congress, and essentially now controls the courts. So he's amassed all the power.

"But no, he's not winning everything that he wants. We won some victories, but they tend to be more negative victories, of denying him everything that he wants. But after all, he's making an unprecedented grab for executive power in America. And the courts have begun to slap a bunch of that down, but also just people standing up against it have begun to win some.

"But our failure in Washington to me has been my own party. Its unwillingness to stand against the power grab by the executive; against the plutocracy that is being imposed on the workaday majority in America, where the rich get richer and the rest of us get shtooked; [against] the devastation of our environment; and really [against] the undermining of something that I think is fundamental to our country in terms of who we are, and that is the undermining of the common good, that's the social glue that holds this big, sprawlin', brawlin' nation together, the notion that we're all in this together. That's what they're doing away with.

"And the question is not who Bush is going to be. He's an absolute corporate wet dream, and he always has been. The question is: Who are we going to be? We've got to toughen up our Democratic party. I see that happening at the grassroots level. We saw it recently in Connecticut in the big race there, with [U.S. Senator Joe] Lieberman losing the Democratic primary. And until we've got at least one party fighting on our side, then we're going to have this plutocracy, autocracy, imposed upon our land of the free.

To the Countryside

"We do have Democrats and other officeholders - Greens and others - standing up at a

local and even state level and ... making the big changes. That's why, to me, the true progressive focus right now is not Washington, even though we continue to fritter away a majority of our money and our energy on Washington. The real movement has moved out to the countryside, where these battles are being fought and won.

"And then that builds up to national power. But we're not the national power right now, and to recognize that is the first step toward victory. Because it means you've got to go get power. And you don't get power in Washington; you get it in the countryside. ...

"And now I think we have the ... electoral base that is progressive that can sustain a national candidate. I don't necessarily think we have that national candidate yet; we'll see. But if somebody like Russ Feingold, for example, were to run, I think he would tap into just a ... progressive, maverick base in the countryside that would make him victorious.

"I would say we're one or two presidential election cycles away from being there. And being there in an important way - not just that somebody by freak accident who is a progressive could get elected president, but that they could govern as a progressive, because they have the base behind them.

Waiting and Wondering

"My point is that we don't have to create a progressive movement. It's already out there. ... It's waiting, wondering where the leaders are.

"Our failure's in leadership. The Democratic party could do it today if it would stand up.

"And even they're beginning to make some stands. Harry Reid, the Democratic Senate

leader, in July took a stand on minimum wage, refusing to let the congressional pay raise go through until the minimum wage was raised. So neither have happened.

"But that's a good populist stand; that's something that the American people can understand. ...

"**Leading the Polls"**

"I don't know about the leadership yet. You've got the Democratic Leadership Council, that just is trying to say, 'Oh my gosh, the defeat of Joe Lieberman is just disastrous. The Democratic Party has abandoned the American center.'

"Well, the American center is way over to the right now *because* of the DLC, because of its failure to stand up against the corporate rampage over the middle class. It's not a matter of reading the polls but *leading* the polls. ...

"I don't know what the Democratic leadership is going to do. And that leadership has got to change some. And Lieberman is a sign that it's beginning to change. You can't just go along the same old way and think that everybody's going to just stick with you. People are now rebelling.

"That's why you see the unions now moving out of Washington. Not only the breakaway unions, ... but the AFL-CIO itself now running independent campaigns in the countryside. They're not going through the Democratic party or whoever is the latest middle-of-the-road presidential, corporate-approved candidate. They're creating their own bases.

"**Energizing the Populist Element"**

"I think the power base is there. What's been missing ... is a clear populist candidacy or maybe several candidacies that would cause people to come into the process who've not been there before, whether that's going to vote in New Hampshire or going to the caucuses in Iowa. For the progressive movement to win, it has to tap into that anger and angst that is out there about what is happening economically and politically in terms of lobby power and money power in politics ... . Our great need is just more people voting, and people aren't going to vote unless they see their self-interest in it."