"It's called the American dream because you have to be asleep to believe it." – George Carlin

"There's a reason education sucks, and it's the same reason it will never, ever, ever be fixed," said comedian/social commentator George Carlin in 2005. That's because, according to Carlin, "the owners of this country don't want that." And by owners, he's referring to the wealthy who "own everything." Warming to his rant on the American Dream, Carlin continued:

"They own all the important land. They own and control the corporations. They've long since bought and paid for the Senate, the Congress, the statehouses, the city halls. They've got the judges in their back pockets and they own all the big media companies, so they control just about all of the news and information you get to hear. They got you by the balls. They spend billions of dollars every year lobbying – lobbying to get what they want. Well, we know what they want. They want more for themselves and less for everybody else."

If things keep progressing as they have been, however, there won't be much left for the rest of us in terms of wealth, power, or resources. As it now stands, the upper 1 percent of Americans already control 40 percent of the nation's wealth and take in nearly a quarter of the nation's income. Included among these very rich and powerful are mega-corporations such as General Electric that manage to rake in obscene profits while paying little to nothing in taxes. For instance, despite pulling in more than $14 billion in 2010, GE not only paid no taxes, but it also managed to claim more than $3 billion in government tax credits. All the while, more and more Americans are struggling to find jobs, keep jobs, and stop the banks from foreclosing on their homes.

It's a grim state of affairs and one that Congress, itself composed of those from the upper 1 percent, is doing little to improve. In fact, although America is supposed to be a representative republic, the numbers relating to wealth distribution among elected officials tell a far different tale. As Joseph Stiglitz writes for *Vanity Fair*:

"Virtually all U.S. senators, and most of the representatives in the House, are members of the top 1 percent when they arrive, are kept in office by money from the top 1 percent, and know that if they serve the top 1 percent well they will be rewarded by the top 1 percent when they leave office. By and large, the key executive-branch policymakers on trade and economic policy also come from the top 1 percent. When pharmaceutical companies receive a trillion-dollar gift – through legislation prohibiting the government, the largest buyer of drugs, from bargaining over price – it should not come as cause for wonder. It should not make jaws drop that a tax bill cannot emerge from Congress unless big tax cuts are put in place for the wealthy. Given the power of the top 1 percent, this is the way you would expect the system to work."

Indeed, one almost has to be rich to aspire to public service today. Whether it be the Oval Office or the halls of Congress, the road to the ballot box is an expensive one, and only the wealthy, or

those supported by the wealthy, are even able to get to the starting line. Just consider the costs involved in running for president. All told, the amount spent on the entire 2008 presidential race was $2.4 billion, with Obama and McCain collectively spending in excess of $1 billion. And with the 2012 election looming, Obama is already gearing up for what, according to the *New York Times*, "is likely to be the most expensive political race in the nation's history."

Running for Congress is no bargain, either. Newly elected Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut) reportedly used several million dollars of his own money to defeat Republican Linda McMahon, also a multi-millionaire, in what has been dubbed the most expensive congressional campaign of the 2010 election cycle. In the 2008 elections, those running for the House of Representatives spent close to $1 billion.

Not even the Tea Party, with its vocal anger over fiscal overspending, did much to alter the status quo in Congress. In reality, there are actually *more* millionaires in this year's freshman class in Congress, with 60 percent of Senate freshmen and 40 percent of new House lawmakers belonging to that rarefied group. "Some are Democrats, some are Republicans, [and] many are Tea Party conservatives, while others are unabashedly liberal," notes Dan Auble with the Center for Responsive Politics. "What unites these freshmen is that, on balance, they're rich."

Collectively, the Center estimates that the full freshman class of the 112th Congress has an estimated wealth of $533.1 million, with a minimum net worth of about $221 million and a maximum net worth of about $845.2 million. As Dan Eggen reports for *The Washington Post*: "The new figures underscore a long-standing trend of wealth accumulation in Congress, which is populated overwhelmingly with millionaires and near-millionaires who often own multiple homes and other assets out of reach for most of the voters they represent."

The unfortunate but simple fact is that the rich sit perched at the top of the government. At least half of President Obama's 15-member cabinet are millionaires, the richest being Hillary Clinton. Her assets range from more than $7 million to more than $35 million dollars. Many of Obama's cabinet members were generously paid in their corporate jobs, such as Eric Shinseki, secretary of Veterans Affairs, who worked as a corporate director, advisor, and consultant at various companies. It is not unusual for some of them to own vacation homes, such as Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of Health & Human Services, who owns a "summer home worth more than a million dollars."

As Stiglitz points out: “The top 1 percent have the best houses, the best educations, the best doctors, and the best lifestyles, but there is one thing that money doesn’t seem to have bought: an understanding that their fate is bound up with how the other 99 percent live.” The simple truth of the matter is that those who have, and have in abundance, do not have any connection with the working poor – those who live from paycheck to paycheck. The rich have an entirely different mindset. They are not caught in the exhausting struggle to survive on a day-to-day basis.

This means that the very rich cannot in actuality represent the average American for the simple fact that, as F. Scott Fitzgerald once recognized, they are different from you and me. They have a very different concept of need from those of us who work for a living. Consequently, once in office, these already privileged wealthy bureaucrats enter into a life of even greater privilege, unfortunately at the expense of the American taxpayer. It doesn’t even seem to matter whether they’re Democrats or Republicans – they all take full advantage of what one news report described as “a mountain of perks that most Fortune 500 companies couldn’t begin to rival.”

These perks range from generous six-figure salaries to even more generous allowances for multiple offices, staff salaries, and related office expenses including travel, furniture, and constituent mailings, as well as top-of-the-line health coverage and retirement plans and a three-day work week. According to one *Politico* article: “Lawmakers appear to have great flexibility on what qualifies as an office expense. Money is spent on everything from security services for district offices to thousands in mileage reimbursements for individual’s cars.” Additionally, as the *Wall Street Journal* reports, taxpayer money is also spent on “luxury car leases, big-screen TVs, pricey laptops known as ‘Toughbooks,’ and fresh-cut flower arrangements.” Nancy Pelosi (D-California) has repeatedly been criticized for her penchant for fresh flowers and expensive bottled water bought at taxpayer expense, but she’s not alone in her frivolous spending. At a time when more and more Americans are turning to food stamps to supplement their meager incomes, John Boehner (R-Ohio) spent nearly $25,000 on catering costs, while Eric Cantor (R-Virginia) spent about $24,116 on food and beverage, and James Clyburn (D-South Carolina) spent roughly $18,000 on food – again, paid for by the American taxpayer.

Clearly, there is a disconnect between the rich bureaucrats in Congress and the working-class Americans they are ill-equipped to represent. Nevertheless, the rich continue to get richer and get elected, while the average American remains blissfully unaware of the fact that the basic foundations of the country are being steadily eroded by a wealthy, mostly corrupt overclass whose values are largely dictated by lobbyist dollars.

Indeed, with an estimated 26 lobbyists per congressman, it should come as no surprise that once elected, even those with the best of intentions seem to find it hard to resist the lure of lobbyist dollars, of which there are plenty to go around. Oil and gas companies alone spent $44.5 million lobbying Congress and federal agencies in the first quarter of 2009, more than a third of the $129 million they spent lobbying in all of 2008. As of 2010, mega-corporations have spent $3.49 billion on lobbying and campaign contributions. Hence, a 2010 poll indicating that 70 percent of those surveyed believe most lawmakers will sell their votes for cash or campaign contributions was no great revelation.

Most Americans have fatalistically accepted the fact that we are operating under a corrupt government. As Citizens for Responsibility & Ethics in Washington (CREW) points out: “2010 offered a witches’ brew of political scandals proving many politicians are limited by their creativity, not their morals, when finding new lows.” CREW concludes: “It’s clear that the system for holding accountable those members of Congress who sacrifice the public interest for special interests is not working. Whether members take bribes, violate gift rules, or flout campaign-finance regulations, those charged with enforcement look the other way.”

Thus, thanks to irresponsible spending by elected officials with little care for we the taxpayers, the nation is now riddled with an insurmountable debt and teetering on the edge of financial ruin. The national debt (the total amount of money owed by the government) is more than $13 trillion and has increased by $4.1 billion *per day* since September 28, 2007, while our national budget deficit (the amount of spending that is greater than revenue) clocked in at a record $1.4 trillion this year.

What we are faced with is a government by oligarchy – in other words, one that is of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich. Yet the Constitution’s Preamble states that it is “we the people” who are supposed to be running things. If our so-called “representative government” is to survive, we must first wrest control of our government from the wealthy elite who run it. That is a problem with no easy solutions, and voting is the least of what we should be doing. However, George Carlin hints at the answer in his diatribe on the American Dream and the wealthy elite who have co-opted it for their own purposes:

“You know what they want? They want obedient workers. Obedient workers, people who are just smart enough to run the machines and do the paperwork. And just dumb enough to passively accept all these increasingly shitty jobs with the lower pay, the longer hours, the reduced benefits, the end of overtime and vanishing pension that disappears the minute you go to collect it, and now they’re coming for your Social Security money. They want your retirement money. They want it back so they can give it to their criminal friends on Wall Street, and you know something? They’ll get it.”

Carlin continued: “What they don’t want [is] a population of citizens capable of critical thinking. They don’t want well-informed, well-educated people capable of critical thinking. They’re not interested in that. That doesn’t help them. That’s against their interests.”

A population of citizens capable of critical thinking? That’s a good place to start, and it’s a sure-fire way to jump-start a revolution. As Abraham Lincoln said: “Wise men established these great self-evident truths, that when in the distant future some man, some faction, some interest, should set up the doctrine that none but rich men, or none but white men, were entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, their posterity should look up again at the Declaration of Independence and take courage to renew the battle which their fathers began.”

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