

The editor divided a comprehensive essay in two. This is the first part, published on August 9, 2023. Editor's headline: "Art versus Industry."

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Wyoming, a mid-western state with a northerly lay that has been my home state since retirement, is often derided as fly-over by folks to the east and west of us. Despite being the tenth largest by area, it's the least populous state, with the second-lowest population density after Alaska. The state's indigenous tribes who, before the arrival of Europeans, had lived here for thousands of years—the Arapaho, Crow, Lakota, and Shoshone—has shrunk to 13,000, a mere two percent of the state's overall population of a little over half a million inhabitants. Cheyenne, its capital, is the state's most populous city, boasting a capitol building with gleaming dome and spacious rotunda, where legislators convene for their law-making sessions. The building also houses the spacious offices of other elected state officials—governor, secretary of state, treasurer, etc.

While I lived in Cheyenne I liked to visit friends in Laramie, a university town about 40 miles to the west. There, faculty offer distinctly critical perspectives on the state's politicians and the laws they enact; after all, what happens in Cheyenne affects Laramie, and rarely for the better. Unlike officials elected in Europe, American politicians are beholden to campaign donors which, in Wyoming, means lobbyists from the fossil-fuel industry—the coal, gas, and oil (petroleum) extractive corporations with their deep pockets.

A dozen years ago British artist Chris Drury, having been commissioned by the university's art museum, installed a 36-foot-diameter sculpture, *Carbon Sink*, on the UW campus. The sculpture consisted of a swirl of dead pine-tree trunks interspersed with lumps of coal, representing the link between global warming and the pine-beetle infestation that has

ravaged forests in Yellowstone National Park and other woodlands of the American West, well into Canada. When friends took me to view the exhibit, I was puzzled to find no plaque identifying its creator or its message. Come to find out, in Wyoming, where the extractive industries are at the heart of a lopsided economy, the artist's symbolism was seen as a declaration of war. Soon the state and the university became embroiled in a bitter controversy. Wyoming newspapers reported that local lawmakers, prompted by industry reps, had gotten their hackles up.

“What is this?” Marion Loomis, the executive director of the Wyoming Mining Association, emailed a university official. “I am all for freedom of expression, but putting a permanent piece blasting the coal industry while taking millions in royalties and severance taxes strikes me as a stab in the back.” He added that his group was not trying to tell the university what art to display, but that it had a right to complain about something it deemed offensive. “We felt like it was a slap,” he said.

Not to be outdone, State Representative Thomas E. Lubnau II threatened to introduce legislation that would ensure, no fossil-fuel-derived tax dollars would find their way into the university's funding stream. “I don't think the university planned for the consequences of its actions very well,” he said later, claiming he had never commented publicly on the artist or the merit of his artwork. “I've always maintained that tensions in ideas make us stronger.”

University administrators caved in and the artwork was demolished. Trying to save face, the university's president pointed out that the sculpture remained intact for nearly a year—evidence, he said, that the university had not acquiesced to pressure.

“Any institution is smart to be mindful of controversy,” said Chris Boswell, Vice President for Governmental and Community Affairs at the University and previously a liaison

for Governor Matt Mead. “Does that translate into the muddling of opinions? No, I don’t believe so.”

Subsequently, lawmakers passed a measure requiring artwork for a newly renovated recreation center to reflect Wyoming’s history of transportation, agriculture, and minerals. The measure gave the final say on selected artworks to the governor and the university’s Energy Resources Council, a body mostly comprised of extractive-industry representatives.

Jeffrey Lockwood, a professor of natural sciences and philosophy, was outspoken about the university’s handling of the art controversy, saying outrage kept growing among students and faculty. “I’m disappointed that the university caved in to extortion and implied threat,” he said. “And I’m angry that this behavior on the part of private industry, as well as their effectiveness in lobbying our elected officials, would lead to artistic censorship on a university campus.”

Dr. Lockwood eventually incorporated the clash over *Carbon Sink* into his book, *Behind the Carbon Curtain: The Energy Industry, Political Censorship, and Free Speech*. The author finds two structural defects that uphold censorship in Wyoming: The hegemony of the energy industry, and the connection between political elections and corporate money.

The author offers climate change as a stark example of how energy corporations have controlled public discourse. Well-funded think tanks and their scientists-for-hire have successfully manufactured the illusion of scientific controversy where none exists, aping tobacco-industry techniques that delayed action in the 1960s.

Earlier in the nation’s capital, George W. Bush and his vice president, a Wyoming native, obtained congressional consent to bomb Afghanistan and invade Iraq, a punitive reaction to the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks, when the militant al-Qaeda carried out four coordinated suicide attacks that demolished the twin towers of the World Trade Center and a portion of the

Pentagon. (The passengers and crew of the fourth plane fought back, and the plane, which was headed for the White House, crashed in a Pennsylvania field with no survivors.)

The Iraq invasion was the brainchild of Vice President Dick Cheney who, against all evidence, convinced President Bush that Iraq's Saddam Hussain harbored weapons of mass destruction. To be sure, Hussain was a bloody dictator, but so is the Saudi royal family, with whom the U.S. maintains cordial relations—in spite of the Saudi pilots who flew those U.S. passenger planes into perdition.

The Bush Administration bombed Afghanistan and invaded Iraq, countries that had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks. Dick Cheney instituted torture techniques like waterboarding, and he brought about reward payments to snitches that foisted untold abuses on Middle Easterners. No thanks to these policies, at Abu Ghraib and other black-box secret prisons, torture and abuse became so common, many prisoners lost their lives. “We were told to treat them like dogs,” said one commander after the Abu Ghraib abuse photos surfaced. (Not included were the “triumphant rape pictures” bandied about by American troops.)

A few years later when a retired Cheney was confronted in Wyoming, he said he'd permit the torture techniques all over again. “Cheney is a war criminal,” said the organizer of our group of protesters who flanked the road his motorcade took to the university campus. “He ought to be brought to justice.” Instead, Cheney donated a million dollars to the University of Wyoming—and was rewarded with a building named after him.

To add insult to injury, the campus building that today bears the former vice president's name is . . . the humanities building. The faculty furiously expressed their opposition; professors who could afford to do so resigned or retired on the spot; still, the tone-deaf administrative decision prevailed.

Wyoming, which provides more of the nation's energy than any other state, is a sociopolitical lens that magnifies the conflicts inherent in the country's political system, states Lockwood. In the starkest sense, free speech has become the property of those who purchase it; when speech can be bought and sold, only the rich can speak in ways that are heard, particularly after *Citizens United*. Today in the U.S., the top 0.1% own as much wealth as the bottom 90%. With the outsize concentration of wealth comes the consolidation of speech.

Regrettably, Wyoming is not the only state where politicians meddle with public universities. More on that in my next column.