

**MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE**

THE BILLIONAIRES' TEA PARTY
How Corporate America is Faking a Grassroots Revolution

A Film by Taki Oldham
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NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds:

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In the summer of 2009, shortly after Barack Obama and a Democratic Congress swept to power promising a new era of hope and change, a citizens protest movement emerged out of nowhere threatening to derail their agenda. Some said this uprising was the epitome of grassroots democracy. Others said it was a classic example of ‘astroturfing’ — an elaborate corporate public relations ploy designed to create the impression of a spontaneous uprising. Curious to find out for himself, Australian filmmaker Taki Oldham went undercover and traveled straight into the heart of the movement. He listens in astonishment at raucous health care town hall meetings as irate voters parrot insurance industry talking points; discovers that self-proclaimed citizen groups skeptical of climate change are funded by big oil companies; and, infiltrating the tea party itself, shows how the famed working class populism of the movement is in fact the fictional creation of a couple of billionaires. In the end, *The Billionaires' Tea Party* offers a terrifying look at how corporate elites are exploiting the anxieties of ordinary Americans — capitalizing on anger, resentment, and paranoia to advance a narrow, anti-democratic agenda.

KEY POINTS

- After Barack Obama was elected president, a citizens' uprising called the Tea Party movement emerged. The movement is opposed to big government spending, universal health care, climate change legislation, and Obama himself.
- In November 2010, 32% of the candidates elected to the House of Representatives were affiliated with the Tea Party movement.
- Australian filmmaker Taki Oldham came to the U.S. to examine the Tea Party phenomenon, in particular the accusations that corporate America is pulling the strings behind the movement.
- The movement takes its name from the Boston Tea Party, a tax revolt that helped kick-start the Revolutionary War. This revolutionary theme has attracted everybody from gun-toting militia groups to people who believe Obama is really a Kenyan.
- The movement began as a reaction to successive White House administrations bailing out irresponsible Wall Street banks while leaving the rest of the country to deal with the recession.
- In February 2009, CNBC reporter Rick Santelli first raised the Tea Party idea during an on-air rant.
- The vast majority of tea partiers are middle-class Americans with little or no experience in political organizing.
- On April 15, 2009, tax day in America, there were over 850 tea parties across the country with 1.2 million people in attendance.
- In January 2010, a group of prominent leaders released the Declaration of Tea Party Independence, a document decreeing a belief in a radical form of free market capitalism.
- For more than three decades, two billionaire industrialists, brothers Charles and David Koch, have funded a citizens' movement to create a privatized America – seeking the abolition of public protection agencies, social security, public schools, and virtually all taxes.
- In 1984, the Kochs founded a group called Citizens For A Sound Economy, which was secretly backed by the tobacco industry. In 1994, the group played a leading role in defeating the Clinton administration's proposed health care reforms.
- In 2004, the group split in two. The Kochs began funding Americans For Prosperity (AFP), a group that would become heavily involved in the Tea Party movement.
- Within hours of Rick Santelli's rant, an AFP staffer was able to offer Santelli half a million names to get the movement started.
- Propaganda expert Mark Crispin Miller describes the term 'Astroturf' as fake grassroots agitation where the people who are chosen to represent the group are paid.
- The leader of AFP is Tim Phillips, whose former clients include Enron, disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, and George W. Bush.

- Free market groups like AFP have guided tea partiers to oppose key elements of the Obama agenda by using rhetoric designed to appeal to the American spirit of individualism and fear of communism.
- America is the only country in the developed world without universal health care for all its citizens.
- Wendell Potter, a former health insurance industry spin-doctor who worked with free market groups in the past, has turned whistle blower about the deceptive practices of groups like AFP.
- AFP ran a multi-million dollar ad campaign against health care reform claiming that “treatments and potentially life saving drugs could be withheld, and seniors could even lose their doctors.” This campaign led older people to overwhelmingly vote Republican in the 2010 midterm election.
- The Koch brothers are tied for the fifth richest person in the country. They inherited Koch Industries, the second largest private company in the U.S., from their father, who built the company doing oil refining and pipelines.
- AFP opposed Obama’s proposed climate change bill, known as cap and trade, which was designed to phase out the use of coal and oil – a major source of the Kochs’ revenue.
- During a series of summer tours, known as the Hot Air Tour, AFP attacked Obama’s bill as an agenda to tax people more, to harm their freedom, to impose socialism, and grow the government.
- Tea Partiers are resistant to the idea that their “grassroots movement” is corporate-sponsored because they put so much money into their own organizing.
- While many individuals in the Tea Party movement are struggling, each of the Koch brothers has seen their personal wealth increase by an estimated \$4 billion in the last year alone.
- A study by Pew Research found that only one in three Americans believes human activity is causing global warming. However, a vast majority of the scientific community believes climate change is real.
- Free market think tanks employ so-called policy experts to appear in the media, testify before Congress, and pump out reports – all without revealing that their funding comes from the likes of Koch Industries or oil giant Exxon Mobil.
- During the 2010 midterm elections, many outright climate deniers were voted into office.
- The emergence of Tea Party politicians and political stars like Sarah Palin embodies a rising “us-and-them” culture in America – fed by the free market propaganda machine and the conservative media, which includes the 24-hour cable news network Fox News.
- Fox News urged its legion of loyal fans to get involved in the Tea Party movement – all the while claiming to be “fair and balanced.”

- Fox News pundit Glenn Beck is regarded as the darling of the Tea Party movement. Nine million people tune in to his TV and radio shows each day. He has referred to Obama as both a racist and a Marxist, which many tea partiers have echoed.
- The free market group FreedomWorks hosted the first national Tea Party. FreedomWorks, like AFP, also spawned from the Koch-funded Citizens for a Sound Economy.
- Filmmaker Taki Oldham went undercover as a budding fiscal conservative at a training session for tea partiers held by the Competitive Enterprise Institute. He was taught guerrilla Internet tactics by a collection of libertarian groups, including the practice of rating liberal books and movies with low scores on the Internet.
- In June 2010, the Koch brothers hosted a secret strategy session at a resort in Aspen, Colorado with a network of ultra-wealthy donors and powerful allies, including Glenn Beck.
- AFP spent \$45 million on the 2010 midterm election, running attack ads against politicians supporting the Obama agenda.
- In a test case known as Citizens United, the Supreme Court, which included two judges who had attended secret Koch meetings, ruled that corporations were free to anonymously invest as much as they wanted in front groups like AFP.
- Wendell Potter believes we have an emerging plutocracy in the U.S. because of the rise in power and influence of corporations and the way they have been able to use public relations and propaganda to get what they want.
- Mark Crispin Miller believes the U.S. is drowning in propaganda, making real democracy all but impossible.
- James Hoggan believes that the real currency in democracy is honest information. If you're able to pump out false information on a mass scale, then the whole democratic system breaks up.
- Kert Davies believes the Tea Party movement consists of motivated activists who are willing to fight for what they think is right, but that they are forwarding a corporate agenda that will continue through the 2012 election.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

- 1) What are the Tea Party movement's core beliefs? How do those beliefs differ from President Barack Obama and the Democrats in Congress?
- 2) Do you believe the Tea Party movement is powered solely by its active citizens? Or do you believe the movement is "Astroturf," fake agitation created by corporate America? Explain.
- 3) Should the President of the United States provide his or her birth certificate to prove he or she was born in the country? Why or why not? Do you think this is a legitimate issue in the case of President Obama, or designed to achieve some kind of political result?
- 4) How do you feel about both the Bush and Obama administrations bailing out Wall Street banks? Should taxpayer money be used to save corporations that are "too big to fail"? Why or why not?
- 5) What do you think about the Koch brothers' vision for a privatized America? Should regulatory agencies charged with protecting public health and safety be expunged? Why or why not? What about Social Security, the public school system, and taxes?
- 6) What are your thoughts on the front group Americans For Prosperity (AFP)?
- 7) What is propaganda? How have groups like AFP used it to gain citizen support for its agenda?
- 8) Are you suspicious of the government? Why or why not? If so, do your suspicions parallel the kinds of suspicions that seem to animate the Tea Party? Or are they different? Explain.
- 9) Do you believe in universal health care for all U.S. citizens? Why or why not?
- 10) Do you believe that human activity is causing global warming? Why or why not? In whose interest is it for global warming to be a myth? In whose interest is it for it to be true? Explain why in both cases.
- 11) Is the Koch brothers' war on regulatory agencies like the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency more than ideological? What else could it be? Explain.
- 12) Do you watch Fox News? Why or why not? What about Glenn Beck? If you've watched him, what do you think of his show? If not, what have you heard about him?
- 13) Do you think the guerrilla Internet tactics taught during the Tea Party seminars are a successful form of protest? Why or why not? How else could you try to control online dialogue?
- 14) Should corporations be free to anonymously invest as much money as they want in front groups like Americans For Prosperity? Why or why not? Is this simply a free speech issue, or something a bit more complicated?
- 15) How do you think the Tea Party movement will affect future elections?

ASSIGNMENTS

- 1) Research the Boston Tea Party. How is it similar to the current Tea Party movement? How is it different? Be as specific as possible.
- 2) Read the Declaration of Tea Party Independence, available to download at the following link: <http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/153/DeclarationOfTeaPartyIndependence.pdf>. Write a synopsis of the declaration, summarizing its main goals. Then explain what you think of it.
- 3) Look into the business and political histories of the Koch brothers. Is there anything interesting about them that the film didn't touch upon?
- 4) Write a research paper on propaganda. Give examples of it throughout history. Compare and contrast examples of propaganda in America with examples in other countries.
- 5) Visit the Americans For Prosperity website, and write a report on what they're up to lately: <http://www.americansforprosperity.org/>
- 6) Conduct Internet research on the history of "Astroturfing" in the United States. Cite other examples, and compare them to the Tea Party movement.
- 7) Research cap and trade legislation, also known as emissions trading. What is it? Do you believe it could help reduce pollution? Why or why not?
- 8) Pick a topic discussed in the film (for example, universal health care or global warming), conduct a research study on your college campus, and report your findings to the class.
- 9) Fred Singer is a physicist who has provided information to influence legislators to make laws that benefit corporate America. Research his past work for the tobacco industry as well as his more recent work to disprove climate change.
- 10) Watch Glenn Beck's television program on Fox News, and keep a journal of what happened during the show.
- 11) In the film, a person at one of the Tea Party demonstrations refers to the expression "tar and feather." What does this mean? Research the history of it in the U.S.
- 12) Research what's new with the Tea Party movement since the events shown in the film.