

**REAL MONEY**  
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**MAKING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN OUR PERSONAL SPENDING AND THE  
PROSPECT OF ENDLESS WAR**

Violence against civilian populations is a common occurrence of most late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century conflicts. The reason for this is the increasing concentration of wealth in a few people's hands and the frustration of large numbers of disenfranchised people in reaction to their desperate situations. In participating in business as usual, each of us bears some responsibility for a portion of our world's movement towards permanent conflict.

By buying at chain stores, we give money to multinational corporations. They use that money to lobby our government to expand and protect the system that allows goods to flow into mega-stores. Our nation's ongoing forays into foreign lands are directly related to our purchases of consumer goods. The impending war in the mid east will be fought for protection of our personal standards of living.

The U.S. government's declaration of war on terrorism and demarcation of an "axis of evil" was a reaction to September 11, 2001, but it was also based on a premise, unchallenged since the Reagan administration's rise to power in 1980, that the expansion of American business interests is the primary focus of our government's actions. To fulfill their responsibility, our government must secure continued access to other countries' resources. This is supposed to

benefit the general populations of those countries, as well as our own, although other countries seldom seem to be very appreciative of our thoughtfulness. World peace, or at least the new world order, is supposed to be based on a “free exchange” of goods. Economic politics has become a springboard for military and diplomatic acts that are tools to advance our nation’s commercial interests, primarily the importation of cheap consumer goods and the exportation of our financial services.

When we shop at Wal-Mart or other national chains, it is hard to connect our access to inexpensive imports with global political conflicts, but it is an undeniable reality. If we look at the shift in U.S. owned manufacturing plants to China, or at our constant need for foreign oil, we see how backroom politics allows for the suppression of Tibet, or wars that seek to preserve our gasoline-based lifestyle?

Some people believe that technology will provide answers to these issues. Science and large corporate and government organizations will be up to the tasks facing the planet. The seemingly inextricable problems that we read about every day may be solved through our present approaches, but, if not, we are in for some big adjustments. Public dissatisfaction with corporate America’s excesses and deceptions is widespread.

One thing that we can do is to try to support our neighbors who are struggling to make commercial ventures happen right in our own backyards. An example of this is the resurgence of interest in local farmers markets. Locally grown food is an obvious first manifestation of consumers desire for local products.

Household goods is another area where community based exchanges have gained momentum to counter national chains. Professional services also can operate outside the sphere of corporate control, such as in Ithaca, NY where citizens use a local currency exchange called "Ithaca (H)Ours," which have generated more than \$2 million in commerce for local businesses over the last eight years.

Our use of credit cards has allowed us to consume too much in the present with the tradeoff of anxiety about the future. Reducing our dependence on credit also helps us regain control over our lives and also lessens our dependence on impersonal corporations to whom we are just numbers on a computer screen.

Our political system runs on money and politicians who spend the most tend to get elected. Public corporations are the most effective players of this game. We saw how Enron, Worldcom, and finance conglomerates were effective at getting money into the political system so they had input into policy making. Many people feel that the intertwining of auditors,

investment bankers with greedy executives was a result of the political influence wielded by business during the 1980's and 1990's. The world's agendas, set by elected and appointed government leaders, flows from their source of campaign finances, which corporations get from our purchases. Corporate priorities come first in line and yet they are funded by our dollars.

One way to work for change is to consciously adapt our consumption patterns to the reality of corporate control. The money we use to shop with is our best way to vote. It is the main way we have, as individuals, to influence corporate, and indirectly, government behavior. As consumers, we directly influence the strength of corporate power because our dollars are our votes. Our purchases allow us to vote our consciousness on a daily basis.

We vote at the polls once, maybe twice a year. Even then, our personal views are filtered through the lens of whoever is elected. Our money vote works in a completely direct manner. We can say "yes" or "no" to every single corporate entity, signaling our approval or withholding of our consent to corporate influence by buying or not buying locally. Each corporation spends billions of dollars to influence our behavior, so why not return the favor? Being informed is the key.

Recognizing which stores are locally owned and learning how you can support local businesses will soon become easier. Independent business people hold a wide range of political

views but we share basic concerns about the long-term health of the local community. Citizens should feel good about spending money locally as it improves our common quality of life.

National franchises and corporations that are not based in local communities do everything they can to extract money out of our community for the home office's benefit.

Much has been written about excess corporate executive compensation. There has been, up to now, scant attention paid to how little large corporations pay in local real estate and income taxes relative to the magnitude of their economic activity. Through tax breaks and concessions given by local governments to attract big companies, local citizens often end up footing the bill for corporate development. The main beneficiaries of public spending on infrastructure are large companies who pay back to the community far less than do the locally owned companies. It is estimated that locally owned business generate twice the level of community economic activity as compared to public corporations. For every two jobs Wal-Mart or other huge retailers "bring" to the community, three jobs are lost locally.

Buying from local companies is not always easy, as it may be more expensive and less convenient in the short run, but in exchange we get to have a voice in how our society is structured. Now that elections are over, and corporate interests seem to have won the day, remember the next time you go out to buy something to look for a store with a sign that says,

“Supporting Sustainable Community.” It may be one of the few acts you can take to make a difference. We cannot blame others when it is within our power to act. Our power to influence the future is right here in our own wallets.

Rob Rikoon is an investment advisor and armchair activist. The views expressed herein are his own. For more information on Supporting Sustainable Community and a list of local businesses that are part of the newly formed “Santa Fe Independent Business-Citizen Alliance”, contact Rob at [rrikoon@aol.com](mailto:rrikoon@aol.com) or 989-3581.