

PRA Founder Jean Hardisty's Reflections on the Last 30 Years

1) What motivated you to study the political Right?

I spent eight years in academia in the 1970s as a political scientist and my field was contemporary political philosophy. I'd become quite interested in neo-Conservatism (Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Norman Podhoretz, Jeanne Kirkpatrick) and saw that this ideology had the potential to catch on in the U.S. It had a focus on individualism, supported capitalism, was avidly anti-communist, and was not entirely incompatible with Christian fundamentalism, so it seemed to me that it would have appeal at that time of growing backlash against my own historical period—the 1960s.

I was motivated by intellectual curiosity and a growing disillusionment with the wisdom of the voting public. In 1978 I left academia, feeling that the campus life was too isolating. I went to work for the ACLU for a year, then, in Chicago, where I lived at the time, I opened what was then known as Midwest Research. Very quickly we grew to a staff of three!



Jean Hardisty in 2004

2) What were PRA's founding principles? Our opening occurred on the heels of Ronald Reagan's inauguration. I had followed the growth of the New Right and could see its influence in his campaign and administration. I felt its increasing power as a serious threat to everything

I had spent my life working to support – efforts to advance equality, the women's movement, gay rights, reproductive rights, anti-racism, militarism, and workers' rights, to name a few. Meanwhile, the Left and other progressives seemed to dismiss the New Right as a band of "hillbillies" and "rednecks." My colleague Chip Berlet and I knew them to be White, middle-class business people, who were excellent political strategists. Our only goal at Midwest Research was to correct this misperception, on the grounds that if it were not corrected, the progressive movement would make serious and destructive mistakes in opposing New Right initiatives.

Chip, Peggy Shinner, our board and I all agreed on a founding set of principles:

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



PRA AT THIRTY: HERE FOR THE LONG HAUL!

I can hardly believe that Political Research Associates is turning thirty! I hope that old chestnut, "don't trust anyone over

thirty," won't apply to us! As PRA celebrates this milestone, we've been taking stock of our contributions over the past three decades and asking ourselves what is most needed from us today and in the years to come.

PRA first opened its doors in the fall of 1981, under the name Midwest Research. The previous November, a powerful coalition of conservative religious, business, and ideological interests calling itself the New Right had shattered forty years of liberal consensus by propelling Ronald Reagan to the presidency of the United States. A young political scientist who closely monitored the rising conservative tide had anticipated the right-wing shift in American culture and politics. Finding that both the academy and liberal media institutions blithely disregarded the insurgent rightists as fringe actors unworthy of serious attention, Jean Hardisty decided to create a new kind of social justice organization: a research institute that studied the U.S. Right in order to equip social justice groups to fight back.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that Jean and PRA put the right wing on the map for many social justice groups in the United States. Before PRA, terms like "Nazis," "fascists," "reactionaries," "bigots,"

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM 30 YEARS OF RESEARCH ON THE RIGHT

Founded as Midwest Research by Jean Hardisty in Chicago.

1981

Produces two award-winning posters emphasizing the broad spectrum of right-wing violence.

1982

Researcher Chip Berlet appears live on the NBC "Today Show" to discuss the violence-prone survivalist movement Posse Comitatus.

1983

Chip Berlet is named as a defendant in a defamation lawsuit brought by Lyndon LaRouche against NBC News and others. LaRouche loses the case.

1984

PRA launches an online computer bulletin board system (BBS), the first progressive BBS in the United States devoted exclusively to challenging the Right and defending civil rights and civil liberties.

1985

Apartheid in our Living Rooms: U.S. Foreign Policy and South Africa, by Prexy Nesbitt, is published in response to the Reagan administration's constructive engagement policy and the U.S. presence in South Africa.

1986

Jean Hardisty's Reflections *continued from page 1*

- We would remain independent. In the past, most fight-the-right groups had been part of a left party or formation. We wanted and sought no affiliation, though we have developed innumerable collegial ties with other groups in the progressive movement.
- We would back up everything we said with documentation and avoid rhetoric or inaccessible language.
- We would operate with transparency and make our materials, including our substantial library, available to the public.
- We would track only on leaders of the Right, not followers, and we would educate the public on the difference.
- We would not promote hate, but instead would work to advance understanding.
- We would defend free speech and other civil liberties, even when the speech itself was hateful.

3) Why did you feel you and your tiny staff were qualified?

Although I have always found it helpful to have a Ph.D., that alone is not a qualification to do this work. Rather, it requires an ability to think analytically, to work with great care and attention to detail, and to keep an open mind. In Chip's words, "Even a broken clock is right twice a day." The learning curve at PRA is very steep for incoming staff, and the work requires people who are not daunted by that. It also helps to be brilliant, as was the late Margaret Quigley. Surina Khan, Nikhil Aziz and Palak Shah all brought enormous skills and talent to PRA over the years.

4) What were your greatest hopes?

On a personal level, I wanted to do work that allowed me to look in the mirror in the morning and feel that I was doing my best to promote social justice. I felt that every day at PRA, which is not to say that the work wasn't also frustrating, complex, and challenging. But to do this work in the way it should be done—with care and a certain amount of compassion—always made me proud, especially of the staff. We never felt that an olive branch was the best answer to the Right, but excellent public education is something to be proud of.

On an institutional level, I wanted PRA to play a constructive role in the progressive movement and to guide our supporters and colleagues with wisdom about how to understand the Right. I saw PRA as an organization that existed to serve the movement and the public, and I believe we did, and continue to, accomplish that. Our early work predated the Internet, but we were one of the first progressive organizations to have a high quality web site.

5) What are you most grateful for?

Of course I am deeply grateful to our donors, some of whom have been with us since the beginning. It takes a profound understanding of movement structure and movement building to appreciate the role that PRA plays. Our supporters have had that understanding. Both individuals and foundation have been aware of the threat posed by the Right, even when the general public believes that the Right was "over" or "defeated," as was the case with the election of Bill Clinton and Barak Obama.

As organizations struggle today with inadequate funding and our donors

struggle with fewer resources to support us, we see smaller organizations going under every day. Further, there is a generational change in leadership of the movement that is both exciting and requires new thinking on the part of us older folks. I am grateful to live in "challenging times" and glad that I did not spend my life on the sidelines as the country has been ravaged by right-wing ideology, the Right's devious tactics, and the mobilization of religion for political purposes.

6) What do you most regret?

I am tremendously disappointed that the progressive religious community has not stepped up in a more assertive way to stand against the Christian Right. And, of course, I regret that PRA has had to struggle for financial stability over the years and still does, despite wide acknowledgement of the high quality of its work. Fundraising would be easier if PRA were to trim its sails and speak less truth to power. I am proud to say that such a change is unlikely, if not to say out of the question.

7) How do you see PRA now that you are gone?

I think PRA is a better organization now than it was when I was the Executive Director. The material the organization generates is of greater volume and even more impressive, and the impact of PRA's work is greater. While the transition was a bit rocky, it is now on very solid ground – with principles completely intact. Fundraising is still a challenge and is the one thing that may be PRA's "Achilles heel." But if there is any justice, PRA will be doing its work for years to come, as I become increasingly its proud godmother.

Midwest Research is presented the Citizens Alert "Rev. Willie Baker Award" for "outstanding efforts" in working for racial justice in Chicago, centering on research and analysis of the dynamics of race hate organizing.

Midwest Research moves to Boston and is renamed Political Research Associates.

1987

PRA works with the Center for Constitutional Rights, the National Lawyers Guild and other groups in a national network to expose FBI spying on the progressive movement against U.S. intervention in Central America.

1988

PRA leads a research project on right-wing attacks on Legal Services for the poor.

PRA publishes *Lyndon LaRouche: Fascism Wrapped in an American Flag*, a topical report by Chip Berlet and Joel Bellman.

1989

PRA leads a research project on right-wing obsession with obscenity and pornography, with a special focus on their attacks on the artists Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano.

1990

PRA collaborates with South End Press to co-publish two books by Russ Bellant, *The Coors Connection: How Coors Family Philanthropy Undermines Democratic Pluralism*, and *Old Nazis, the New Right, and the Republican Party*.

1991

PRA takes over publication of *The Public Eye* magazine from the Public Eye network of the National Lawyers Guild.

1992

Celebrating PRA's 30th Anniversary

With a Briefing & Reception in New York City

On October 13th, PRA's Pam Chamberlain presented findings from a year-long project to map the anti-LGBT Right at a public briefing at Hunter College's Roosevelt House in New York City. The briefing was followed by a 30th anniversary reception co-sponsored by Hunter's Center for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Social Science & Public Policy, the International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission, New World Foundation, and Public Interest Projects. The reception celebrated PRA's founder, Jean Hardisty, and featured her, Urvashi Vaid, and Kenyon Farrow exploring the current challenges for LGBT progressives. Below are pictures from this event. Pam's full report of findings, *Who's Winning: Right-Wing Responses to LGBT Gains*, is due out next month. If you would like a print copy of this or any report, please contact PRA's office!



Jean Hardisty (R) with Sara Gould, former Executive Director of the Ms. Foundation for Women



The reception's featured speakers Jean Hardisty, Kenyon Farrow (C), and Urvashi Vaid (R)



Colin Robinson of Coalition Advocating for the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (L), host committee member Trishala Deb of Public Interest Projects (C), and Nikhil Aziz, executive director of Grassroots International and former PRA research director



Tarso Luís Ramos with PRA Board Member Janet Jakobsen

Many thanks to our speakers, host committee members, and organizational sponsors for their participation in this event!

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Editor Jean Smith

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Political Research Associates
1310 Broadway, Suite 201
Somerville MA 02144

Phone: 617-666-5300
Fax: 617-666-6622
pra@publiceye.org
www.publiceye.org

Founder and President Emerita
Jean Hardisty

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PRA begins distribution of a series of twelve organizing packets titled *Constructing Homophobia: How the Right Wing Defines Lesbians, Gay Men and Bisexuals as a Threat to Civilization*.

1993

PRA completes groundbreaking research on Christian Reconstructionism, an ultra-fundamentalist wing of the Christian Right that has been a factor behind increased violence in the anti-abortion movement.

1994

South End Press publishes *Eyes Right! Challenging the Right Wing Backlash*, edited by Chip Berlet.

PRA report warns of the rise of armed citizen's militia movement and the potential for violence—before Oklahoma City bombing.

1995

PRA Executive Director Jean Hardisty served as an expert witness in the successful legal challenge to the anti-gay Amendment Two in Colorado.

1996

In the face of the right's demonizing rhetoric about "welfare queens," PRA publishes *Decades of Distortion*, a report that documents the right's strategic misidentification and stereotyping of those aided by public assistance.

1997

A joint research report with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and Equal Partners in Faith, *Calculated Compassion*, is first to identify the Christian Right "Ex-Gay" movement as another attack on gay rights using softer rhetoric and clever re-framing of issues.

1998

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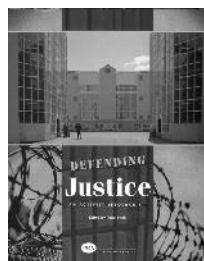
Apologies to anyone we may have missed



Chip Berlet appears live on the "Today" show in 1983.

PRA in the News

- Senior Analyst **Chip Berlet** was in great demand after the bombing and shooting in Oslo this summer. He was published in the *New York Times* in July as one of a number of prominent debaters on the topic "Will the Norway Massacre Deflate Europe's Right Wing?" on the *Times*' Room for Debate. His article, *Culture Warriors*, argues that Breivik is unaffiliated with fundamentalist Christians and neo-Nazis per se, and rather a right-wing populist crusader against "multiculturalism" and other alleged threats to Western Christian civilization.
- The Thom Hartmann radio program featured Chip's expertise in July for an hour on the link between Norway's Christian terrorist and U.S. right-wing ideology. He was also interviewed on an August *Between the Lines* Radio program, *Norwegian Anti-Islamic Mass Murderer Influenced by American Christian Right Extremists*, which addressed Andres Breivik's fear of "Islamization" of Norway and Europe and its ties to many U.S.-based right-wing Christian activists' anti-Muslim hatred.
- PRA's Senior Researcher **Pam Chamberlain** was also interviewed in response to the Oslo tragedy in July. She spoke with Jim Brown of *The*



PRA's 5th Activist Resource Kit

Current on CBC radio for "Ideological Architects," about the writers, academics, and philosophers quoted by Breivik, and whether in such cases writers should be considered responsible for the actions of others.

- Pam also spoke with Amanda Marcotte on the RH Reality Check program on Reality-Cast radio. "Terrorism in Norway, Anti-Contraception Sentiment in the U.S." explored Breivik's views on women's rights and reproductive rights and whether they contributed to his violence.
- PRA's Civil Liberties Project Director **Thom Cincotta's** 2010 report on civil liberties abuses continues to make the news. New American Media.org and the San Jose *Bee* both published articles in July about the San Jose, CA police department's possible participation in the federal government's Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) program. Raj Jayadev wrote about the controversy surrounding this decision and drew upon Cincotta's report *Platform for Prejudice: How the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative Invites Racial Profiling, Erodes Civil Liberties, and Undermines Security*. He quoted *Platform* contributor Hamid Khan



1982's award-winning poster

(executive director of the South Asian Network) and noted the main findings of the report.

- Thom's 2011 report for PRA, *Manufacturing the Muslim Menace: Private Firms, Public Servants, & the Threat to Rights and Security*, has continued to make headlines and serve as a resource for journalists since its publication in March. CNN's "Ex-Terrorist' Rakes in Homeland Security Bucks" exposed more of the controversial figure Walid Shoebat, one of the "expert" speakers for police and Homeland Security counter-terror training courses that Cincotta documented in his report. These trainings proliferate anti-Muslim among law enforcement and are partially funded by federal tax dollars. The CNN piece was originally aired on Anderson Cooper's "360," whose Special Investigative Unit used PRA as a key resource for their report.
- Chris Hedges also wrote about Walid Shoebat in *Your Taxes Fund Anti-Muslim Hatred* for Truthdig.org, interviewing Thom at length about the rise of anti-Muslim hatred since 9/11 and how it is perpetuated by news personalities, politicians, supposed "experts," law enforcement and intelligence officials, and members of the Christian Right.

Beacon Press publishes Jean Hardisty's *Mobilizing Resentment*, winner of the Gustavus Myers award.

PRA publishes *Defending Public Education*, the first in a series of Activist Resource Kits, primary and secondary materials about campaigns on the Right.

1999

Guilford Press publishes award-winning *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, by Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons.

2000

Public Eye Special Issue on 9/11 focuses on Nationalism and Nativism.

2001

PRA issues a Special Report on a Massachusetts think tank: *The Pioneer Institute: Privatizing the Common Wealth*.

2002

PRA publishes acclaimed research on the African-American anti-abortion movement and the Right's attack on LGBT safe zones in high schools.

2003

Deliberate Differences: Progressive and Conservative Campus Activism, a special report, is released.

We honor Jean in her transition to President Emerita.

2004

Defending Justice, the fifth ARK, is published, accompanied by its own website.

PRA hosts the first of a series of roundtable dialogues with activists and researchers.

We welcome Katherine Ragsdale as the new Executive Director.

2005



Tarso Ramos reflects on highlights from PRA's first 30 years

From Executive Director *continued from page 1*

and “homophobes” were used less interchangeably and as epithets. This apparently resulted in cathartic chants at rallies, but not much in the way of nuanced or useful analysis about the organized opposition to the civil rights, feminist, gay rights, peace, and other social justice movements of the 1970s. Readers of PRA’s materials have come to appreciate the distinctive agendas and strategies of the various right-wing sectors, and to consider the opportunities presented by those differences and disagreements.

PRA hasn’t exactly been alone over the past three decades. But while various groups have arisen during that time to offer a media counterpoint to right-wing campaigns, from the Moral Majority to the Minutemen, PRA has dedicated itself to producing deep, incisive analysis to inform social justice movement *strategies* rather than *sound bites*. This is not to diminish the importance of sophisticated messaging or to pass over our own substantial engagement with news media outlets, but to note that our primary audience has long been social justice changemakers: from grassroots organizers to opinion leaders to public officials.

We’ve also had the good fortune to be able to work closely with a number of research institutes and independent investigators who bring deep expertise and commitment to their work on the U.S. Right. We’re sorry to say that a good number of those institutes have closed their doors over the years, leaving PRA—and the social justice movement—with fewer sources of reliable research.

Over our thirty-year history, PRA has produced groundbreaking work and has collaborated with advocates in the areas of racial and immigrant justice, civil liberties, reproductive justice, LGBT rights, and economic justice. It’s satisfying to take stock of and celebrate our accomplishments. To that end, this issue of *PRAccess* includes a timeline of some of our best moments and an interview with PRA founder and President Emerita Jean Hardisty.

However, the current state of the country doesn’t allow for more than a brief pause for self-congratulation. In many ways, these have been three punishing decades for social and economic justice. We find ourselves again in a period of powerful right-wing resurgence. While this is a disappointing state of affairs, the fact is that PRA was founded in a moment not unlike this one. Indeed, this is what we were made for. It took the country over thirty years to get into this mess, and PRA is committed to continuing our vital work to help us get out of it—if necessary, for another thirty years!

As we look to the current and future challenges facing PRA, several issues are at the forefront of our concerns:

Economy: The free-market deregulatory agenda of the U.S. Right has wrecked the domestic economy and created a global financial crisis. As economic justice issues increasingly occupy center stage, PRA is looking at ways to strengthen the resources we offer changemakers active in this

arena. At the same time, PRA, like many of our allies, finds itself buffeted by the same economic conditions that have caused millions to lose their jobs and homes. While right-wing money continues to flow and shore up conservative institutions, key pieces of progressive movement infrastructure, like PRA, find it increasingly difficult to attract foundation support. PRA has always been disproportionately reliant on individual support and we are likely to become even more so in the years ahead.

Communications: The twenty-four hour news cycle and rise of various digital social media have continued to generate wonderful new communications and organizing opportunities. Yet those come with real challenges for those of us who produce and value comprehensive, strategic research. To maximize PRA’s value to social justice changemakers, we must continue to innovate with communications approaches that meet people—and their devices—wherever they are, without trading analysis for mere alerts or strategy for sound bites.

Organizational Change: As we honor our founder, Jean Hardisty, on the occasion of PRA’s thirtieth birthday, we have begun the transition of another longtime staff member, PRA Senior Analyst Chip Berlet. Chip has been a leading expert and commentator on the U.S. Political Right for three decades and has been an anchor at PRA almost from the beginning. We honor his outsized contributions in defense of human rights, wish him well on his new adventures, and are scheming about ways to collaborate in the future. Of course, Chip can never be replaced. PRA’s current challenge is, in part, one of generational change. We have been developing a new generation of researchers and analysts to carry on the work initiated by Jean and Chip, and will need to redouble our efforts in this area. In recent years, PRA has provided a home for new or previously unknown talented researchers such as Kapya Kaoma and Thomas Cincotta, authors of groundbreaking exposés on homophobia and Islamophobia, respectively. Despite the tough economic times, we aim to *expand* our family of contributors in the coming year by putting the “A” back in “PRA”—reviving the research *associates* model from our early organizational history. Interim Research Director Pam Chamberlain will play a lead role in organizing and developing this talent pool.

As we look to the future, all of us at PRA are excited about the opportunities to make a real difference in a time of tremendous challenge and need. We stand on the shoulders of giants, taking inspiration from their examples as we retool ourselves to be as innovative and effective in the decades ahead as we have been these past thirty years. In this issue we honor some of those who have been with us on this journey and invite all of you to join us for the journey ahead.

—Tarso Luís Ramos

PRA publishes *UNDoing Reproductive Freedom: Christian Right NGOs Target the United Nations*, a report by reproductive rights researcher Pam Chamberlain.

2006

PRA publishes *Running Against Sodom and Osama: The Christian Right, Values Voters, and the Culture War in 2006*, a report by Chip Berlet and Pam Chamberlain.

2008

PRA and the Women of Color Resource Center jointly publish two reports by Jean Hardisty: *Pushed to the Altar: the Right Wing Roots of Marriage Promotion and Marriage as a Cure for Poverty?*; *Social Science Through a “Family Values” Lens*.

2009

PRA publishes *Toxic to Democracy: Conspiracy Theories, Demonization, & Scapegoating* by Chip Berlet. PRA publishes an all-new *Defending Reproductive Justice* Activist Resource Kit.

PRA publishes *Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, African Churches, & Homophobia* by Rev. Kapya Kaoma. We welcome Tarso Luís Ramos as the new Executive Director.

2010

PRA publishes *Platform for Prejudice: How the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative Invites Racial Profiling, Erodes Civil Liberties, and Undermines Security* by Thomas Cincotta.

2011

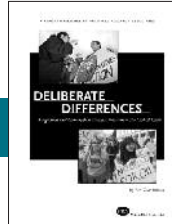
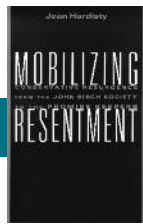
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