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Profiting From Terror: Many Hats Thrown Into Summit Ring

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When the Wisconsin Economic Summit gets under way Monday in Milwaukee, its 900 or so participants might ask: Who's in charge of charting the state's economic future?

Right now, the answer appears to be: Who isn't?

r weapons and supplies during a time of war. We all know the scurvy type. Behind most great fortunes there is a crime, and emergencies tend to bring out the criminal element.

Right now, many fortunes are being made off the threat of terrorism, which has given an enormous new jolt of energy to a long-standing corporate and right-wing political agenda crafted in times of peace - an agenda consisting of regulatory rollbacks and bars to regulatory "takings" of all kinds, obscene tax giveaways to the rich, enhancements of corporate power, diminished worker rights in the workplace, titanic spending on unworkable weapon systems, expanded police control and surveillance powers, and the like, all coupled with further erosion of opportunity and income for the working poor.

Want to stifle congressional debate on controversial trade agreements by granting the president "fast track" authority? Want to do so specifically in service of a Free Trade Area of the Americas that will make NAFTA, in all its wage-, environment-, and labor-degrading features, a truly hemispheric compact covering all countries in both Americas? According to U.S. trade representative Robert Zoellick, the war on terrorism requires no less. "U.S. leadership in promoting the international economic and trading system is vital. Trade is about more than economic efficiency. It promotes the values at the heart of this protracted struggle," he says.

How about some more tax breaks for corporations and the rich? According to National Taxpayers Union lobbyist Eric Schlect, arguing for a reduction in the capital gains tax, this too is essential to "aiding our war against terrorism."

Want to allow big oil to drill more holes in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge? An obvious and urgent part of that same war, according to Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska. "There is no doubt that at this time of national emergency, an expedited energy security bill must be considered. Opening ANWR will be a central element in finally reducing this country's dangerous overdependence on unstable foreign sources of energy."

How about funding the next round of Star Wars? According to the right-wing Center for Security Studies, the war commands the administration to "use every tool at its disposal to ensure that the resources and latitude needed to develop and deploy missile defenses are made available."

And on and on, down a long, wacky list.

I'll spare you the rhetoric around the enormous and permanent - not temporary - expansion of police and surveillance powers the Senate recently approved by a 99-1 vote - our own Sen. Russ Feingold the sole dignified voice of caution against the unseemly. Here, with clear connection, the anti-terror argument was made again, but with almost no concern that the legislation applies to nonterrorists as well. In Wisconsin, not to be outdone, there are moves to revive the death penalty, again offered to combat the sort of terrorism we saw Sept. 11.

It doesn't matter that corporations and the rich are among those least likely to stimulate our economy right now with new spending, or that depleting domestic oil reserves hardly in

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