

Political Radicalism and Animal Rights: People For The Ethical Treatment of Animals

Media-Grabbing Stunts and Corporate Bashing Campaigns Win Big For PETA
By Brian Tubbs

Summary: Compared to traditional humane societies, People For The Ethical Treatment of Animals is a relative newcomer. Founded in 1980, PETA has quickly become one of the best-funded and most recognized animal rights group in the nation. PETA targets corporations for alleged mistreatment of animals and often succeeds even though its allegations lack merit. Even many animal rights activists believe that PETA does the movement more harm than good with its media stunts.

Ask anyone to name a headline-grabbing activist organization that arouses passion and controversy, and you'll often hear "PETA," People For The Ethical Treatment of Animals. With a single-minded message and core activist base, PETA has elevated "animal rights" to the top tier of radical causes. PETA combines intense zealotry and uncompromising radicalism with an organizational flair for publicity stunts and corporate-bashing campaigns. The combination has made PETA a financial and public relations heavyweight among 501(c)(3) nonprofit advocacy groups.

Founded in suburban Washington, D.C. in 1980 by activists Ingrid Newkirk and Alex Pacheco, PETA now has offices in the United States, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, South Africa, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom. It has reported income of \$13,867,001 and assets of \$4,480,988 (FY 2001) and is governed by a three-member board of di-



People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals scores many successes with its flamboyant tactics. But some animal rights activists believe PETA undermines the movement's goals.

rectors.

Yet PETA may become the victim of its own excesses. It has alienated many fellow animal rights activists who argue that its tactics detract from the movement's effort to highlight animal suffering. Indeed, co-founder Pacheco left PETA in 1999 to found his own organization. He came to believe that Newkirk, for all her obvious success, was harming the animal rights movement.

History

Ingrid Newkirk, 52, was born in England and grew up in India in a home filled with ailing people and animals. Eventually

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she made her way to Montgomery County, Maryland where she worked as a deputy sheriff. Newkirk has said she was drawn to the animal rights issue after seeing conditions at an animal shelter where she dropped off stray pets. But soon she wanted to do more than improve animal welfare. Operating out of her home, Newkirk and fellow activists handed out vegetarian recipes and printed lists of companies manufacturing non-leather shoes and wallets. According to author and PETA activist Kathy Snow Guillermo, "Newkirk and Pacheco agreed a new grassroots organization was needed to expose what they believed was the institutionalized abuse of animals used for food production and experimentation." Soon they were planning protests against slaughterhouses and government agencies overseeing animal research.

PETA first achieved public notice in 1981 when it protested the use of monkeys at a Silver Spring, Maryland research lab. Pacheco, then a 22-year old college student, was a volunteer at the federally-funded Institute for Behavioral Research

(IBR), where he worked for biomedical researcher Dr. Edward Taub. A new PETA member, Pacheco's real mission was clandestine investigation.

Horrified by the lab's unsanitary conditions, Pacheco and Newkirk created a public controversy that led Montgomery County investigators to raid IBR and seize the monkeys. Taub, however, convinced a judge to return them to his care.

It was at this moment that some PETA supporters took actions that would help define the group's future activities. Sometime during the night of September 21, the monkeys were removed from their location by activists inspired by the Animal Liberation Front, a British group known for raiding and vandalizing laboratories in the cause of "animal liberation." The kidnapping jeopardized the shaky alliance Pacheco and Newkirk had with sympathetic county officials. The two were not charged with the monkeys' disappearance, but they made no secret of their support for the action. The "Silver Spring Monkey Case" ended inconclusively (the monkeys were returned; the lab lost its federal funding; Taub was never convicted of criminal charges; and civil litigation dragged on for years). However, it produced one clear result: PETA began its ideological dive off the deep end.

Organization

But from the standpoint of organization—and to mix metaphors—the Silver Spring case catapulted PETA into national and then international prominence. Within a decade of its campaign against Dr. Taub's research lab, PETA had grown to over 300,000 members and it had a budget in excess of \$7 million. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, PETA was center-stage in the worldwide debate over animal rights. By 2001, its budget exceeded \$13 million, it boasted a membership of 700,000, and it had offices in countries from Spain and South Africa to India and Taiwan. While most PETA revenue comes from small individual donations, its average amount is twice that of the American Humane Association, one of the nation's oldest animal-related organizations. A donation of \$16 or more entitles members to many benefits

including a free subscription to PETA's quarterly magazine *Animal Times*. In 1996, PETA moved its headquarters from the Washington suburbs to a \$2.2 million four-story building overlooking the Elizabeth River in Norfolk, Virginia. It has 132 fulltime employees, 96 in Norfolk.

By most accounts, PETA is an unpleasant place to work and Newkirk a harsh taskmaster. Says John Newton, a Norfolk-area animal lover, "They're brutal on their people." Using the term "cultlike," Newton says, "If you're not radical enough, they drive you out." Newkirk acknowledges that she drives her people hard: "It is true, I am tough. I believe we should be... a lean, mean fighting machine. This is not a rest home for people who just have warm feelings about animals."

Newkirk doesn't have warm feelings about people either. In an interview with *The Virginian-Pilot*, Sue Perna, a Norfolk-area animal activist and former PETA employee, says firings were sometimes so frequent that staff labeled the internal telephone directory "Schindler's List." Perna says Newkirk "seems to take joy" in throwing people out of work. Perna finds it ironic that a woman dedicated to fighting animal abuse is "an abuser of the human animal."

From Animal Welfare to Animal "Rights"

PETA used the Silver Spring case to separate itself from other animal organizations. It adopted aggressive grassroots tactics and set goals that went beyond the traditional concern for cruelty to animals. For PETA the fight was no longer about more humane laboratory conditions. It had become a crusade to end animal experimentation altogether. Using animals for food and clothing was also forbidden. Said Pacheco, "Our primary focus would be on those animals largely ignored by traditional humane societies—animals used for experimentation, food and fur."

PETA argues that animals have the same rights as humans. In Newkirk's words: "When it comes to feelings, a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy. They are all mammals. They all feel pain. There is no rational basis for saying that a human being has special

Editor: John Carlisle

Publisher: Terrence Scanlon

Organization Trends

is published by Capital Research Center, a non-partisan education and research organization, classified by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) public charity.

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Organization Trends welcomes letters to the editor.

Reprints are available for \$2.50 prepaid to Capital Research Center.

rights.”

Denver radio talk show host Mike Rosen wrote recently of a debate he had with PETA’s leader. “I implored Ingrid Newkirk, PETA’s founder and fanatic-in-chief, to concede that it wasn’t unethical for me to swat a mosquito sucking the blood out of my arm. She wouldn’t.” That’s not surprising when you consider that this is a person who once said, “Six million Jews died in concentration camps, but six billion broiler chickens will die this year in slaughter houses” (*Washington Post*, November 13, 1983.)

Publicity Stunts, Euthanasia Policy Alienate Activists

PETA excels at creating publicity stunts and making outrageous claims.

- It erected billboard ads claiming “Jesus was a vegetarian. Show respect for God’s creatures - follow Him.”
- It urged terrorist Timothy McVeigh to reconsider his life—and become a vegan, pleading with McVeigh to select a last meal that did not “involve bloodshed and the slaughter of an unwilling victim.”
- When an 8-year old boy lost his arm in a violent shark attack in south Florida, PETA put up a billboard asking: “Would you give up your right arm to know why sharks attack? Could it be revenge?” Public outrage forced the organization to cancel an advertising campaign.
- In September 2001, PETA put up a billboard in Canada telling people to “Eat the Whales.” Its point was to criticize anti-whaling environmentalists for not supporting the animal rights movement. “They’re always ready to condemn...whalers...while ignoring the greater suffering from the buckets of chicken wings or fish sticks that they harvest at the drive-through or haul home from the file meat counter,” explained PETA spokesman Andrew Butler.
- Last year, Newkirk expressed the hope that hoof-and-mouth disease would infiltrate U.S. livestock and “bring eco-

nomic harm for those who profit from giving people heart attacks and giving animals a concentration camp-like existence.” Her reasoning: the disease “wouldn’t be any more hideous for the animals—they are all bound for a ghastly death anyway. But it would wake up consumers.”

- PETA uses big-name Hollywood stars and supermodels—some in states of undress—to promote its campaigns, which can quickly multiply. Its main website links to no less than 20 different PETA websites, including “MilkSucks,” “JesusVeg,” and “March of Crimes,” a spoof of the March of Dimes, which supports animal research to overcome birth defects.

Even animal rights activists who accept the movement’s premises are increasingly put-off by PETA’s publicity stunts. Kim Bartlett, publisher of *Animal People*, worked for PETA in the 1980s but now disagrees with Newkirk’s policies. “I admired Ingrid in many respects,” Bartlett says. But while she’s accomplished a lot, Bartlett says Newkirk is “totally confrontational” and “doesn’t understand the concept of compromise.”

Many activists applaud PETA media ploys. In November 2000, for example, PETA activists stripped naked in front of the White House and posed next to a banner, “I’d rather go naked than wear fur.” But some no longer see such behavior as productive. Feminist groups condemn PETA’s use of naked models and charge that it exploits women. And J.P. Goodwin, founder of the Coalition to Abolish the Fur Trade, doesn’t see how it helps animals. He charged in an online forum that PETA’s tactics detract from the movement’s goal to end animal suffering. “We are right on the issues,” says Goodwin. “However, some people have positioned the movement as flaky, based on silly claims and goofy stunts. It’s time to say no to pie throwing, manure dumping, and naked models, and get back to talking about animals.”

PETA’s tactics against animal research also have angered AIDS activists,

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and former New York City Mayor Rudy Guiliani. In spring 2000, PETA ran “Got Beer?” ads on college campuses suggesting that, based on its nutritional content, students drink beer instead of milk. PETA pulled the ads after fierce criticism from MADD. Similarly, after Mayor Guiliani announced he had prostate cancer, PETA responded to his participation in the “Got Milk?” campaign by putting up billboards depicting the mayor with a milk mustache and the caption “Got Prostate Cancer?” Guiliani threatened to sue PETA and taunted it by drinking milk on TV while praising its health benefits.

But perhaps the most bitter rift between many animal rights activists and PETA concerns the group’s euthanasia policy for animals. According to Virginia state statistics, PETA euthanized 1,325 of the 2,103 animals it took in during 1999. Dr. Gail Furman, an animal lover who regularly picks up stray cats, says, “For an organization that feels there’s a place for every fish in the sea, I could not believe that they would kill healthy cats.”

Newkirk insists euthanasia is better than “a slow, uncomfortable death.” But the debate over “No-Kill” animal shelters played a role in Pacheco’s decision to quit PETA in 1999 after working nearly 20 years beside Newkirk. Pacheco has founded a new organization called the Humane America Animal Foundation in Los Angeles. Its number one mission is the creation of a “no-kill nation” by promoting aggressive spay-neuter and adoption strategies for animals. In an interview with *Animals’ Agenda* magazine, Pacheco said he split from PETA because he felt Newkirk’s confrontational tactics were not working to save large numbers of animals. Newkirk has acknowledged that she frequently differed with Pacheco on strategy: “Our differences go back to the very beginning.”

PETA “Corporate Campaigns”

PETA is adept at giving companies a black eye in public and then extracting concessions from them. Like Jesse Jackson and many labor unions, it has learned the art of the shake-down. It knows how to publicly attack a corporation as evil and greedy at

the same time that it persuades the corporation's management to accept its demands. AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer Richard Trumka explains how the "corporate campaign" works: "Corporate campaigns swarm the target employer from every angle, great and small, with an eye toward inflicting upon the employer the death of a thousand cuts rather than a single blow." Similarly, Pacheco explained in a recent interview that to achieve its ends the animal rights movement learned that it had to develop strategies to force change on the corporate economy and culture of America.

PETA's website explains how local animal rights activists can successfully mount a corporate campaign. "A campaign is a long-term plan of action focused on one particular issue," the website says. "Set an ambitious but achievable goal, plan escalating levels of action, and be prepared to stick with it until you win." The site includes helpful hints on thoroughly researching who you plan to attack, identifying the public sympathies to which you will appeal, and deciding how best to cajole and threaten your opponent to achieve your goals. Victims of PETA corporate campaigns include McDonald's, Burger King, Gillette, General Motors, Calvin Klein, The Gap, and even the March of Dimes. "Our opponents know we never let up," boasted Newkirk in a recent Reuters news story. "They have to concede to some degree. They have to alleviate some of the misery they are causing before we back down." (See CRC's *Organization Trends*, April 2001, and *Labor Watch*, January 2002, for more on the "corporate campaign.")

PETA vs. Ringling Bros. Circus

One of PETA's most bitter campaigns is against Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. For years animal rights activists have alleged that the venerable 132-year-old circus systematically mistreats its animals. PETA hosts a separate website that denounces Ringling Bros. and claims trainers use a bullhook, a three-foot-long training pole with a dulled hook at the end, to beat elephants. Says PETA's Brandi Valladolid, "We have footage of trainers bullhooking elephants in the face and bodies, swinging steel instruments in

their faces." The circus denies all charges. Ken Feld, owner and producer of Ringling Bros. says, "We have the best value family entertainment in the world, and we're living proof of great animal care."

The dispute boiled over on August 25, 2001 as trainer Mark Gebel led a line of elephants into a San Jose, California arena for the circus's grand finale. A San Jose, California police sergeant and two Humane Society investigators alleged that Gebel, son of legendary trainer Gunther Gebel, yelled and lunged at a female elephant named Asia, striking her with the bullhook. According to these witnesses,

"Some people have positioned the movement as flaky, based on silly claims and goofy stunts. It's time to say no to pie throwing, manure dumping, and naked models, and get back to talking about animals."

Asia lunged forward and was later found with a "bloody spot" on her left front leg. The witnesses acknowledge the spot they saw on the 8,000-pound elephant was no larger than a nickel. Nevertheless, Gebel was charged with "elephant abuse" under California Penal Code Section 596.5c. The case went to trial in December 2001.

Under oath, the witnesses admitted that they did not see Gebel strike Asia. The police officer testified that he had attended an animal rights conference which discussed "new tactics" to ban circuses. And a veterinarian's examination found no sign of injury. The jury took a mere two hours to clear Gebel of all charges. In the trial aftermath, Ringling Bros.' Feld declared: "The whole case was an orchestrated campaign by a group of extremists who feel their mission is to put an end to animals in circuses by ruining the good name and integrity of an innocent young man with an impeccable record."

Feld is fighting back. He has taken out full-page ads in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* against PETA and pointedly criticized its policy of euthanizing stray pets. Said Feld, "I wanted to let the public know that they don't care about the welfare of animals, that their money goes toward lawsuits against responsible animal care providers, like our circus."

McDonald's, Safeway & Calvin Klein

PETA's attack on McDonalds is a notably successful example of its corporate campaign strategy. It began in Great Britain in 1997 when Britain's High Court

ruled that the company was guilty of animal abuse for failing to ensure that its suppliers adopted humane animal practices. In May 2000, PETA launched its "Unhappy Meals" campaign, a satire on the popular "Happy Meals" for children. PETA members planned to distribute 10,000 "Unhappy Meals" to children at McDonald's playgrounds. The mock version featured bloody plastic animals, gory stickers and a gruesome Ronald McDonald cut-out carrying a knife and dressed in a bloody clown costume.

PETA managed to distribute about 500 Unhappy Meals before McDonalds became the first fast-food corporation to establish national animal welfare guidelines. Among the changes, the company told suppliers to end the practice of cutting off chicken beaks and to double the size of chicken cages. The PETA campaign then went after Burger King and Wendy's. By 2002, all three burger chains had guidelines on how to raise, house, transport and slaughter cattle, pigs and poultry.

Was PETA taking advantage of ongoing changes in company policies? McDonald's executive Bob Langert says animal rights groups had nothing to do with its animal welfare guidelines: "Come on. McDonald's has been studying animal welfare issues for years." Langert says PETA tactics are ineffective and "tend to provide only misinformation that doesn't help the cause." But many industry executives suspect PETA pressure hit McDonald's "at just the right time."

PETA's tactics may be opportunistic but they work. PETA went after Calvin Klein for promoting fur sales, and the company stopped. It targeted General Motors and Gillette for using animals in safety tests, and they stopped. Last year, it began a campaign to pressure Nordstrom, L.L. Bean, Nike, Gucci, Eddie Bauer, and other clothing retailers to end contracts with Chinese and Indian leather suppliers. Many have done so. Last May, the Safeway grocery chain adjusted its practices sufficiently to earn restrained praise from PETA vegan campaign coordinator Bruce Friedrich. He commended the supermarket giant for "recognizing that farmed animals have a capacity for suffering and for pledging to improve farmed animal welfare."

Despite its outrageous claims and its unethical tactics against corporations and individuals, the effectiveness of the animal rights movement cannot be denied. Whether or not PETA gets all the credit, the animal rights movement can document its accomplishments. PETA plausibly claims it forced cosmetics companies to end animal testing and auto manufacturers to stop using animals for auto crash tests.

The PETA website also makes claims like these:

- It used video footage to document "appalling treatment of primates" at the University of Pennsylvania, which resulted in government fines and "the end of primate use there."

- It was able to pressure airlines and restaurants to drop foie gras from their menus after "undercover photographs and videotapes showing ducks being violently

force-fed" on a farm in New York.

- It convinced NASA to abandon plans for its "Bion experiment, in which straitjacketed monkeys were to be launched into space implanted with electrodes."

Terrorist Ties

Many PETA hi-jinks can be dismissed as comical or chalked up to zealotry gone awry, but PETA's ties to terrorist organizations cannot be justified. For instance, PETA's IRS form 990 lists a \$1,500 contribution to the North American Earth Liberation Front (ELF) to assist in the free speech defense of an activist. But ELF has taken credit for numerous acts of violence, vandalism, and property destruction. So notorious are its activities that the U.S. government has designated it a terrorist organization. In the words of one senior FBI official: "Make no mistake about it, by any sense or any definition, [the Earth Liberation Front] is a true domestic-terrorism group."

PETA also frequently crosses paths with ELF's sister group, the Animal Liberation Front. With no claimed members, officers or revenue, ALF has come to rely on PETA to publicize its cause. In March of 2002 the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise filed an IRS complaint against PETA, asking that its nonprofit status be revoked for "violations of tax laws and connections to unlawful activity," including its support for the Animal and Earth liberation fronts. According to FBI estimates, the ALF and ELF have committed more than 600 criminal acts since 1996 and caused more than \$43 million in damage.

Lest some think PETA's links to ALF and ELF are coincidental, consider the comments made by PETA spokesman Bruce Friedrich at an "Animal Rights 2001" conference on July 3, 2001. They are testimony to the road PETA has traveled since 1981:

"If these animals do have the same right to be free from pain and suffering at our hands, then, of course, we're going to be, as a movement, blowing stuff up and smashing windows. For the record, I don't

do this stuff but I do advocate it. I think it's a great way to bring about animal liberation. And considering the level of the atrocity and the level of the suffering, I think it would be a great thing if all of these fast-food outlets, and these slaughterhouses, and these laboratories, and the banks that fund them exploded tomorrow." (Applause) "I think it's perfectly appropriate for people to take bricks and toss them through the windows. And, you know, everything else along the line. Hallelujah to the people who are willing to do it."

Brian Tubbs is a freelance writer based in northern, Virginia.

Briefly Noted

On November 26 the **AARP (the American Association of Retired Persons)** endorsed the Republican prescription drug plan for seniors. "I think it's important news that there is one party that can essentially control the outcome here," said Chris Hansen, AARP director of advocacy. "In terms of getting to a final conclusion, I think having one-party control, whichever party, it is probably a good thing. I think Republicans are serious about making this (affordable prescription drugs) a priority." The GOP proposals emphasize coverage for the uninsured, and most variants provide \$300 billion in benefits over 10 years. AARP supports a more sweeping universal drug coverage plan but will endorse the Republican approach that would cover the 11 million seniors on Medicare who have no prescription coverage.

Retiring Georgia Rep. Bob Barr (R-GA) announced in November that he will go to work for the **American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)**. Barr will work on information and data privacy issues. (Texas Congressman Dick Armey is also considering consulting work with the ACLU). While in Congress, Barr and other conservatives worked with the ACLU against government intrusions into privacy. Barr and the ACLU opposed a national ID, the Justice Department's "Carnivore" internet snooping system, and the controversial TIPS citizen spy program that was legislated out of existence in November. The Republicans disagree with the ACLU on the death penalty and other issues. Said Barr, "We decided to focus on those cases on which we agree, and that is to place reasonable limits on government power."

Wade Henderson, executive director of the **Leadership Conference on Civil Rights** warned newly-elected Hispanic officeholders that the next U.S. Supreme Court nominee may be the Hispanic version of Clarence Thomas and could "represent a threat to your future." Speaking to the **National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials**, Henderson urged Hispanics to join blacks in a new coalition to realize "new political realities."

The **NAACP** plans to open a branch office in Havana, Cuba. Hilary Shelton, director of the NAACP's Washington office says, "Cuba likes the idea of a NAACP chapter there, and we are very open to it." In November Shelton joined NAACP executive director Kweisi Mfume and several members of the National Black Farmers Association on a visit to Cuba. The delegation met with Fidel Castro. Said Mfume, "President Fidel Castro promised to establish trade links with black farmers, and it appears he has kept his word." Although trade and visits to Cuba are restricted, provisions of U.S. law permit religious groups to establish churches in the nation. The NAACP is expected to use these provisions. Castro foes are skeptical. "The NAACP, if it is really doing civil rights work there, is needed," says Oscar Lopez, director of the Human Rights Project with the **Cuban American National Foundation**. "I have never heard of Kweisi Mfume trying to improve the lives of blacks under the Castro regime."

On December 6, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that **Public Citizen**, the **Environmental Law Foundation** and the **Teamsters Union** will have 30 days to show that Mexican trucks should be prohibited from traveling virtually anywhere in the U.S.. The groups contend that the vehicles do not meet U.S. environmental laws and will have a negative impact on air quality. Currently, Mexican trucks are restricted to a 20-mile zone along the border. Said Jonathan Weissglass, a lawyer for the plaintiffs, "It ensures that nothing is going to happen immediately, which is what we were concerned about."

Ralph Nader, the founder of Public Citizen and numerous other consumer activist groups, announced that he will wait to make a decision about whether to run as the presidential candidate on the Green Party ticket in 2004. Many Democrats claim that Nader's 2000 Green Party candidacy cost Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore the election.