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PLAYBOY

MAY 2011



Who does

James O'Keefe

think he is?

IS THE 26-YEAR-OLD
RIGHT-WING AGITATOR
WHO BROUGHT DOWN

ACORN

A RADICAL BOY WONDER
OR SCOURGE OF
MODERN POLITICS?

BY JORDAN LIEBERMAN

It may be easier if we start with who you think James Edward O'Keefe III is. My guess is this will depend on your political persuasion and media diet. If you lean to the right and keep your television tuned to Fox News, O'Keefe is the YouTube generation's pre-eminent muckraker, willing to enter the dregs of the liberal establishment, hidden camera in tow, to expose its hypocrisy and show how *The New York Times* is a mouthpiece for its socialist agenda. But if *The New York Times* happens to be your paper of choice and MSNBC your preferred news channel, O'Keefe is a combination patsy, Watergate burglar and sexual predator.

Either way, you probably know O'Keefe best as a pimp. That's how I first heard of him. A little less than two years ago, friends at Andrew Breitbart's website, Big Government, told me a couple of 20-somethings (O'Keefe and Hannah Giles, a writer for *Townhall.com*) had orchestrated a hidden-camera sting on the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), a national community-organizing group. As part of the scheme, Giles, posing as a hooker, and O'Keefe, pretending to be her law-student boyfriend, visited ACORN offices around the country, asking for guidance on how to smuggle underage prostitutes into the country so they could use the profits to underwrite O'Keefe's fictional political ambitions. Instead of

IT DEPENDS

ON WHOM YOU

ASK

turning them away, several ACORN employees instructed O'Keefe and Giles on how to account for their earnings on their income taxes. Once the footage—supplemented with a B-roll of O'Keefe dressed as a stereotypical pimp—was posted on Big Government, the public uproar helped tip ACORN into bankruptcy. "That 20-minute video ruined 40 years of good work," Sonja Merchant-Jones, former co-chair of ACORN's Maryland chapter, told *The New York Times*.

"This isn't your mother's 60 Minutes," Breitbart proclaimed at the time. "Maybe James thinks baby boomer elites like Katie Couric, Charlie Gibson and Brian Williams could care less. Their generational zeitgeist—and the knowledge that their kids are personally immune from monster deficits—is all that matters. And they look the other way while believing all organizations on the left—no matter how extreme—are working toward their goals."

In the ensuing 18 months I have personally witnessed O'Keefe's rapid rise to Tea Party superstardom and subsequent excommunication. Although I didn't meet him until after the ACORN footage went live on Big Government, I know most of the people inside our small community of political consultants. I teach political technology at the Leadership Institute, a finishing school for Karl Rove types where O'Keefe once worked. Given that O'Keefe's generational zeitgeist encompasses Johnny Knoxville, social media and rabid distrust of the establishment, I consider him an ace performance artist—political shit stirrer—jackass. He is fearless, engaging and as paranoid as Richard Nixon. (I am convinced he furtively recorded all our meetings and conversations.)

He also possesses awful judgment, which is why numerous former allies refuse to go on the record. These days they want nothing to do with O'Keefe. After ACORN, a series of embarrassing duds forced many O'Keefe advocates to distance themselves from him. In late January 2010 he attempted to tamper with Louisiana senator Mary Landrieu's phones, a high-risk, low-reward stunt that landed him in a New Orleans jail. Eight months later a ridiculous plan to seduce CNN reporter Abbie Boudreau aboard O'Keefe's sailboat unraveled at the last minute, and Breitbart cut him loose. "From what I've read, this script, though not executed, is patently gross and offensive," Breitbart scolded. "It's not his detractors to whom he owes this public airing, it's to his legion of supporters." O'Keefe claims his public banishment is bullshit and that his relationship with Breitbart has merely evolved. I'm not so sure.

Chronicling O'Keefe's life in detail is usually off-limits to anyone outside his tiny corner of political professionals and paranoid activists. "The mainstream media always has made the story about us—how much money it costs to do what we do and how other journalists perceive what we do," O'Keefe responded to my overtures for an interview. "Even in the most wildly successful case, when Congress was taking action after our videos, *The New York Times* wanted to profile me but not do a political story. My challenge is to get the media to cover the substance of what we do. Do you understand my burden and reluctance to do an interview with PLAYBOY?"

Ever since, he has sent me e-mails about how the *Times* and other mainstream media organizations are out to get him by covering his arrest on the front page but ignoring his successes. But because we inhabit the same circles, he eventually relented and let me into his world—albeit in his own uncomfortable way—so I could see if anyone really knows who he is.

WHO THOSE WHO KNEW HIM WHEN THINK HE IS

For insight into his teenage years, O'Keefe suggests I contact Lorraine Cella, a favorite teacher at Westwood High School in northeastern New Jersey. "What's he doing now?"



The highs and lows of a political prankster, from left: O'Keefe with Hannah Giles at a press conference at the National Press Club not long after their ACORN sting became public; his mug shot after attempting to mess with Senator Mary Landrieu's phones.

she responds via e-mail after my initial approach, his name long forgotten ("lots of students and lots of years gone by"). After I direct her to O'Keefe's Wikipedia entry, her memory of him becomes slightly less unmemorable. "He was quiet in my sophomore honors American literature class, but he was good with words on paper," she offers. "I have one of his poems in my student collection, *Fundamentals of War*, which he wrote as part of our war-antiwar poetry unit. And he was outstanding in [the school musical] *Crazy for You*. I remember thinking I had no idea he had performance talent. He was so introspective in my class. Frankly, I'm stunned to read about his activism." (His *Crazy for You* co-star adds, "In high school he couldn't look at you except when he was onstage. When performing, he was a completely different guy.") Later, Cella faxes me a copy of *Fundamentals of War*. In strained verse, O'Keefe is more peacenik poet than budding Young Republican: "And so the armies keep on filing and the bodies keep on piling/To find out who will be the king of this pure destructive force/When the end is coming near, we will thank the lord we're here/And we'll cease the stupid fighting that has plagued our race the most."

WHO O'KEEFE THINKS HE IS

"I want to make society more transparent and ethical," O'Keefe explains to me during our first proper interview, late last fall. "I hope someday to change the world by exposing unethical behavior." Originally we planned to gather near his parents' home in New Jersey, where he lives when he's not on the road collecting video footage or giving speeches. (It's not as pathetic as it sounds.) O'Keefe is particularly private about his living situation; he is also reluctant to discuss his family. His standard response: "I had a wonderful

I consider James O'Keefe an ace performance artist—political SHIT STIRRER—JACKASS.

upbringing, but my parents didn't have an impact on me politically." Ultimately, he provides me with just one other familial tidbit: "My father and grandfather are blue-collar workers who are good with their hands."

According to O'Keefe's friends, his dad is an engineer and his mom is a physical therapist. I believe his younger sister, his sole sibling, is an artist. They seem encouraging; his grandmother loaned him the fur coat he wore as part of his ACORN pimp plumage. "He's an extremely conscientious, hardworking young man, and we're proud of him," the elder O'Keefe told *The Star-Ledger* in September 2009, one (continued on page 108)

yet you had planned to retire after this term, at least according to some reports. Were they accurate?

FRANK: I thought of stepping down, yes.

PLAYBOY: You recently announced you'll run again. What changed your mind?

FRANK: If the Democrats had held the House, maybe I would have retired. I thought it might be a good time. But we lost, and there's too much at stake. I would have felt I was abandoning the battle when we were under siege.

PLAYBOY: After 30 years in this job, you've encountered many times when things were going well for the country and many when they were going badly. Is this just another swing of the pendulum, or are you particularly worried now?

FRANK: The threat to public policy is serious. We had a financial meltdown and were able to stop it. We put in place regulations that could prevent it from happening again. If it does happen again, we don't know if we'll be able to stop it. And yet the

Republicans are trying to reverse the regulations. They're inflaming anger rather than seeking rational solutions. We're at risk of being unable to fix the problems we need to fix—education, health care, the deficit and many others. Yes, I'm worried.

PLAYBOY: In *The New Yorker* Congressman Scott Garrett, a Republican on the Financial Services Committee, was quoted as saying about you, "Barney has a great deal of faith in government to solve people's problems. The question is whether that faith is justified." Is it?

FRANK: The truth is I don't have faith in government to solve problems. What I do have faith in is our ability to come together to solve problems. It's what's hanging in the balance now. There's no outside entity called government. It's all of us, collectively and jointly. Will we be able to solve America's problems? That's why we're elected. All I can tell you is that I'll keep trying.



Art Luban

O'Keefe

(continued from page 82)

of the few times he or O'Keefe's mother has spoken with the press.

Because misdirection is always foremost on O'Keefe's mind, our initial meeting comes with specific instructions. After arriving in the general area of the O'Keefe family home, I am to park my car and wait for him to drive me to an undisclosed location in the 1975 Triumph Spitfire roadster he bought in high school. (He has been replacing parts on the cheap ever since; his former assistant assured me it is a death trap—an especially bad thing considering how often he gets lost while driving.) Luckily, his friend's bachelor party causes the interview to be moved to Atlantic City. There, at the near-empty Red Square Bar inside the Tropicana, O'Keefe espouses political philosophy in filibuster-like volubility over the bluish glow of his laptop, which never leaves his side. (Wires abound; hence my suspicion he may be recording our discussion.) "Unless you've provided him with a computer, James isn't the guy you invite over for a beer and barbecue," says his friend Ben Wetmore.

A taste of O'Keefe unleashed: "I have nearly infinite faith in the power of free people, making their own decisions on what is best for them and their families, to create a great, lasting and moral society. I also agree with what [British polymath G.K.] Chesterton says—basically that a society should be judged by whether you can buy a house and raise a family. That is something my generation is struggling to do, because big business and big government are working together to prevent us from doing so. [British journalist] Douglas Hyde said those of us who see the danger and step back might really be the 'progressives,' possessing a new solution which was really the oldest of all."

O'Keefe found radical politics at Rutgers University. Although his professors were introducing him to such thinkers as lefty community organizer Saul Alinsky, O'Keefe took a hard right politically, aping Alinsky's methods toward a different end. (Today he classifies himself as a "progressive radical," the leader of an antiestablishment, anti-big business, anti-bureaucratic movement all his own.) His fucked-up freshman year probably also had something to do with his political identity. According to his college blog, *Feathers of Steel*, now the source of relentless ridicule among liberal bloggers at the *Daily Kos*: "To my horror, [one of my roommates] said to the all-black RAs that I called everyone on the floor 'niggers'—a complete lie. It was my word against his. I was led out of the room crying and screaming at him and my situation; no friends, no one to talk to, forced to go in front of a black dean to defend myself and explain I did not call anyone any names."

By O'Keefe's junior year, the Leadership Institute had staked him \$500—Ben Wetmore, the organization's director of student publications, hand delivered the check—to start the conservative student newspaper

The Centurion. But O'Keefe's most indelible political statement at Rutgers came via freeze-dried marshmallow horseshoes and toasted oats. At Wetmore's caustic urging, O'Keefe decided to start a campaign to remove Lucky Charms, the children's cereal with the cartoon leprechaun mascot, from the dining halls' breakfast menu. And so, with faux outrage, he and three friends requested a meeting with university administrator Carolyn Knight-Cole to describe the pain the cereal inflicted on O'Keefe and his fellow Irish Americans. "We think that Lucky Charms promotes negative stereotypes of Irish Americans," O'Keefe explains to Knight-Cole, a hidden camera behind him recording her every move. "And we don't think it's acceptable in an academic setting."

Concerned, Knight-Cole stops her diligent note taking. O'Keefe places a box of Lucky Charms on the table in front of him. Its grinning leprechaun now beams directly at Knight-Cole. "There is what appears to be an Irish American on the front cover, and he's portrayed as a little green-clad [sic] gnome, a huckster." He suppresses a laugh. "As you can see, we're not all short. We have our differences in height. We're really proud of our ancestry, but because of our history and what has happened to us, we think this undermines and it's offensive. It shouldn't belong here."

I consider it among his best work. O'Keefe clearly does too. It's such a part of his identity that he named his sailboat, among his most prized possessions, *The Lucky Charm*.

WHO THE LEFT THINKS HE IS

Choice bits from Daily Kos posts: "The BigGovernment.com [ACORN] video 'exposure' was the biggest bait and switch I've ever seen in my life. If instead of young conservative fascist 'reporters' it were police detectives conducting these 'advice' sessions, it would be the paradigm example of entrapment." "What I saw when I watched the [ACORN] video was two overprivileged kids in silly costumes using a hidden camera to pick on people who frankly had no idea what was going on." "[O'Keefe] is a D-bag. He founded a conservative monthly paper at Rutgers using Astroturf seed money. He writes 'slam poetry' about 9/11. And, oh yeah, he got kicked out of his freshman dormitory at Rutgers for calling someone the N word. He denies it, of course." "[O'Keefe's work] is sophomoric stuff, but what else fires up the 9/12ers, the birthers and the tea baggers?"

WHO THE RIGHT THINKS HE IS

After Rutgers, O'Keefe graduated to higher conservative circles, joining Wetmore at the Leadership Institute. Both O'Keefe and Wetmore made Morton Blackwell, conservative royalty and the institute's founder and president, uneasy. Wetmore, who possesses a cult leader's intellectual charisma, is especially divisive—partially loved but more often loathed among my friends. O'Keefe refers to him as a mentor-friend-genius. Others, however, classify Wetmore as dangerous and the Wetmore-O'Keefe dynamic as master-puppet. "Ben finally found someone crazy enough to implement his ideas,"

a close O'Keefe friend says. "I don't think he's risky enough." Wetmore counters by phone from New Orleans, where he attends law school. "I've seen him as a student, a vagrant and now. He's gotten to where he's at by taking risks, not shunning them. James won't achieve success doing what he does by listening to the chattering class or conventional wisdom. He'll do so by taking new calculated risks."

After about a year O'Keefe left the Leadership Institute to charge onward with a takedown of Planned Parenthood, an attack that, depending on whom you believe, sprang from Wetmore's imagination. His aim: to snare the abortion provider in a racial tempest. (Blackwell felt the sting fell outside the Leadership Institute's mandate. "We are an educational organization. We are not an activist organization," he explained to *The New York Times*. He had only nice things to say about O'Keefe to me.) O'Keefe hit pay dirt when Autumn Kersey, vice president of marketing and development at Planned Parenthood of Idaho, answered one of his phone calls, which, of course, he recorded and later posted to YouTube.

O'KEEFE: Okay, so the abortion—I can give money specifically for a black baby?

KERSEY: Absolutely. If you wanted to designate that your gift be used to help an African American in need, we would certainly make sure that the gift was earmarked for that purpose.

O'KEEFE: Great, because I really faced trouble with affirmative action, and I don't want my kids to be disadvantaged against black kids. I just had a baby; I want to put it in his name.

KERSEY: Yes, absolutely.

O'KEEFE: So that's definitely possible?

KERSEY: Always.

O'KEEFE: He's trying to get into colleges, and he's going to be applying.... He's faced troubles with affirmative action. You know, we just think that the less black kids out there the better.

KERSEY: Understandable. Excuse my hesitation; this is the first time I've had a donor call and make this kind of request. So I'm excited and want to make sure I don't leave anything out.

The call generated remarkable fallout, inspiring a blowup between Planned Parenthood and African American leaders. Impressed from afar, Hannah Giles, a 20-year-old journalism student at Florida International University, friended O'Keefe on Facebook. Soon after, she sent O'Keefe her own scheme to defrock ACORN, an organization those of us on the right believed to be seriously corrupt. "I came up with the [pimp-prostitute plot] in May 2009, after which I did a lot of research and background investigation," she writes via e-mail. "Then I called James, knowing he had the experience and ability to make it happen. We met in person the day before we went undercover."

Almost immediately everyone around me sainted Giles and O'Keefe—a designation further enforced by the media's initial impulse to investigate the duo's tactics rather than what they had discovered about ACORN. Breitbart demanded they receive a Pulitzer Prize, and Fox News treated them as the new Woodward and Bernstein. Even Morton Blackwell called to congratulate O'Keefe after Congress zeroed ACORN's funding. O'Keefe went from creative dweeb to conservative supernova overnight—sent to Earth, in conservative minds at least, to expose how ACORN, Planned Parenthood and *The New York Times* were leading a vast



left-wing conspiracy to control the news, spend us into oblivion and murder unborn babies. I will never forget the gnarly horde of 20-somethings in khakis and blue blazers (a.k.a. Republican groupies) who shadowed O'Keefe's every move at the 2010 Conservative Political Action Conference.

Yet in the space of two years, his supporters have splintered into true believers (i.e., Wetmore) and the rest of us (i.e., Blackwell, Breitbart and I). Starting with Lucky Charms and ending with ACORN, O'Keefe's stunts were a perfect bell curve of hits against liberals too lazy to watch their ass. Who knows if they were new acts of journalism, but they hanged sanctimonious leftist organizations with their own hypocrisy. What red-blooded conservative doesn't like that? I can't say the same about what came next. O'Keefe risked a prison sentence by misrepresenting himself to Senator Landrieu's Louisiana office. For what? The best-case scenario was he'd prove she was ignoring voter complaints about Obamacare. I wasn't alone in saying big fucking deal. (News flash: Elected officials may not listen to their constituents.) If anything, my crowd pulled their punches because MSNBC took such glee in his arrest, making him out to be the next G. Gordon Liddy.

He did use up a lot of goodwill, however. That's partly why the knives came out on all sides after the CNN sex-boat mess. Plus, no one I know thought the premise—another Wetmore brainstorm—was clever. It was mostly convoluted. Try to follow me: O'Keefe attempted to seduce CNN's Abbie Boudreau on camera because, O'Keefe and Wetmore thought, the only way such an attractive reporter could get interviews with reluctant sources like him was by using her powers of seduction. A jar of condoms, dildos and strawberries were to be added for comic effect, according to a written plan obtained by CNN. In the end, it proved much easier to frame O'Keefe as a misogynist than as a revolutionary political provocateur.

Therein lies his most deficient character

trait—he struggles to separate good ideas from bad ones. "One thing I noticed after I started working with him was that he began asking for and taking my advice almost immediately without knowing who I am or whether I'm trustworthy or have the credibility to lead him the right way," says another mutual friend. "Fortunately, my motives are pure. But I would find it disconcerting if he trusted everyone else as easily as he trusted me."

WHO HIS MARKS THINK HE IS

When I mention the name Sonja Merchant-Jones, the Maryland ACORN co-chair O'Keefe basically put out of business, he draws a blank. "That name sounds familiar. Can you remind me?" When I do, his reaction is minimal. I also have to remind him who Carolyn Knight-Cole, the Rutgers administrator, and Autumn Kersey, the Planned Parenthood representative, are. Such forgetfulness takes a special kind of mind. All three women definitely remember him. Knight-Cole sounds like a grandmother whose grandson has stolen from her; she now has total disdain for someone she was trained to love. Kersey refuses to speak about him at all. For her part, Merchant-Jones seems to hate ACORN more than O'Keefe. "All is fair in love and war," she tells me. "If the shoe were on the other foot, we would have done the same thing. I don't have any hard feelings about James. Well done, James O'Keefe. Well done."

WHO I THINK HE IS

Fair warning, liberals: I am positive O'Keefe can be redeemed. Already a slower, smarter comeback is under way. The newest conservative star, New Jersey governor Chris Christie, blessed a recent O'Keefe production called *Teachers Unions Gone Wild*, a mashup of drunken antics from New Jersey public schoolteachers. (In it they explain how tenure can protect them even if they blast students with racial slurs.) "If you need an example of how the teachers' union is out of touch with

the people and out of control, watch this video," Christie implored. "It's enlightening, and it's enraging." Says O'Keefe, "Someone pointed out that [the New Jersey Education Association] was holding a conference, so I organized half a dozen people to attend it. The tapes were a collaborative effort. The people in them have chosen to remain anonymous."

For his next act, he should untangle himself from the weeds. While admirable, his myopic devotion to the cause clouds his perspective. If O'Keefe were my client, I would hand him a flowchart of the positive people and the parasites in his life. Then I would take away his internet connection until he could come up with a long-term plan. And I don't mean a new hit list of liberal targets to lampoon. He needs to figure out how to leverage what he's accomplished into a paying gig that doesn't rely on the generosity of anonymous wealthy donors with an ax to grind. He can't run his movement from his parents' house forever. "So many people assume he's doing this for fame and fortune," says a friend. "But he's as poor as a church mouse. He has yet to figure out how to market himself and make some money on these crazy ventures." To his credit, before rolling out his latest punkings, against NPR and PBS, he discussed them with PR professionals and gave thought to how to use them as a fund-raising tool.

He won't tell me how much work he has stashed away, but I've heard it's substantial. My favorite alleged secret work is on a collection of resorts in which a prominent politician reportedly has an ownership stake. The resorts are said to offer a high-end call-girl service. To determine if the rumor is true, O'Keefe and a friend rented a Mercedes and posed as a couple of high rollers on vacation. They must keep what they uncovered in their vault, however, because they acquired the evidence through questionable legal means.

It's a fine line between maverick political activist and criminal.



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