

Zinke and the Russian Dolls

A mysterious \$371-million Beltway “charity” attacks Ryan Zinke from a Montana mailbox.

Words by Dave Skinner. Illustration by John Bardwell.

INTERIOR SECRETARY RYAN ZINKE MARKED OFF A “FIRST” WHEN HE JOINED THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: FIRST MONTANAN TO HOLD A CABINET POSITION. BUT NOW IT SEEMS HE’S COLLECTED ANOTHER—AN UNWANTED “HOMETOWN” TEAM OF PROFESSIONAL POLITICAL STALKERS.

SINCE ZINKE’S CONFIRMATION IN MARCH OF 2017, WHITEFISH, MONTANA-BASED WESTERN VALUES PROJECT HAS BEEN ON ZINKE LIKE STINK ON A SKUNK. EVERYTHING THE MAN DOES SEEMS TO SPUR ANOTHER DEROGATORY PRESS RELEASE, ADDED TO HUNDREDS WVP HAS PRODUCED IN ZINKE’S FIRST YEAR.

SO, WHO AND WHAT IS WESTERN VALUES PROJECT, AND WHY ARE THEY HAMMERING THE SECRETARY?

Undaunted Innuendo

Created in August 2013 with one staff member, WVP generated press releases and reports presenting a public-lands policy narrative nearly identical to the coastal/metro environmental movement, just wrapped in a fuzzy blanket of undefined “western values.”

WVP’s output generally cloned the work product of the year-older Center for Western Priorities based in Denver, which similarly pushes green “western priorities” at journalists, hoping for “free media” coverage. Coincidence? Heck no (see sidebars).

WVP’s first “name” staffer quit in late 2014, followed by Chris Saeger, formerly a communications director for both the Montana Democratic Party, the Service Employees International Union, and the Montana Department of Environmental Quality late in Gov. Brian Schweitzer’s (D) administration. He cranked out WVP content to the world from a “headquarters” in Whitefish, basically predictable, boring, and thinly covered cheerleading for the Obama administration’s Interior direction under Sally Jewell.

However, the 2016 presidential election changed everything, especially when Whitefish homeboy Ryan Zinke got the nod for Interior secretary. Now, WVP seeks to “hold policymakers and elected leaders accountable for jeopardizing the West’s outdoor heritage.” How? Through traditional, partisan political opposition research, facilitated by federal and state Freedom of Information Act and government disclosure/transparency programs. The intent, clearly, is to eventually find the

magic rope of “scandal” to hang (and politically cripple) not just Secretary Zinke, but nearly all high-ranking senior staff at Interior, none of whom are friendly to Big Green.

To help with this exciting new agenda, in May 2017 WVP hired a second staffer. Probably not coincidentally, new guy Jayson O’Neill was a policy and communications advisor to Gov. Schweitzer, minority (Democratic) chief of staff in the Montana Legislature, then assistant manager at a ski shop before joining WVP.

WVP’s new era began with a June 2017 Whitefish billboard blitz and street theater events timed to match a Zinke speech to the

Western Governors Association. Associated Press termed the blitz a “heavy investment that environmentalists are making to confront Zinke on his home turf.”

Next came howling allegations of secretarial “threats” against a sitting U.S. senator, then an August announcement of a “Department of Influence” interactive website casting aspersions on Interior’s eight top appointees.

December saw headlines in the *Washington Post* that a Zinke travel change, which WVP condemned as “sloppy and ethically deficient,” had cost taxpayers \$2,000 extra. In response, Zinke spokeswoman Heather Swift slapped WVP as “a classic dark money group which is run by current and former Democratic Party members and campaign staff.”

Just days later, WVP proved Swift’s point, announcing out of nowhere a million-dollar ad buy against western congressional Republicans who supported national monument

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reform, reduction and review. Not one of multiple news outlets seriously followed the money, but the left-wing *Montana Post* blog importantly revealed the cash passed through “Western Values Project Action,” a 501(c)(4) entity not required to reveal donors of WVP’s “heavy investment” in any form, ever—precisely the “dark money” obscurantism the “Citizens United” left pretends so loudly to hate.

Not bad for a two-man show in boonies Montana, eh? Coast-to-coast headlines, billboards, TV ads, Twitter and Facebook, millions of mystery dollars? Inquiring minds want to know!

Stalking the Stalkers

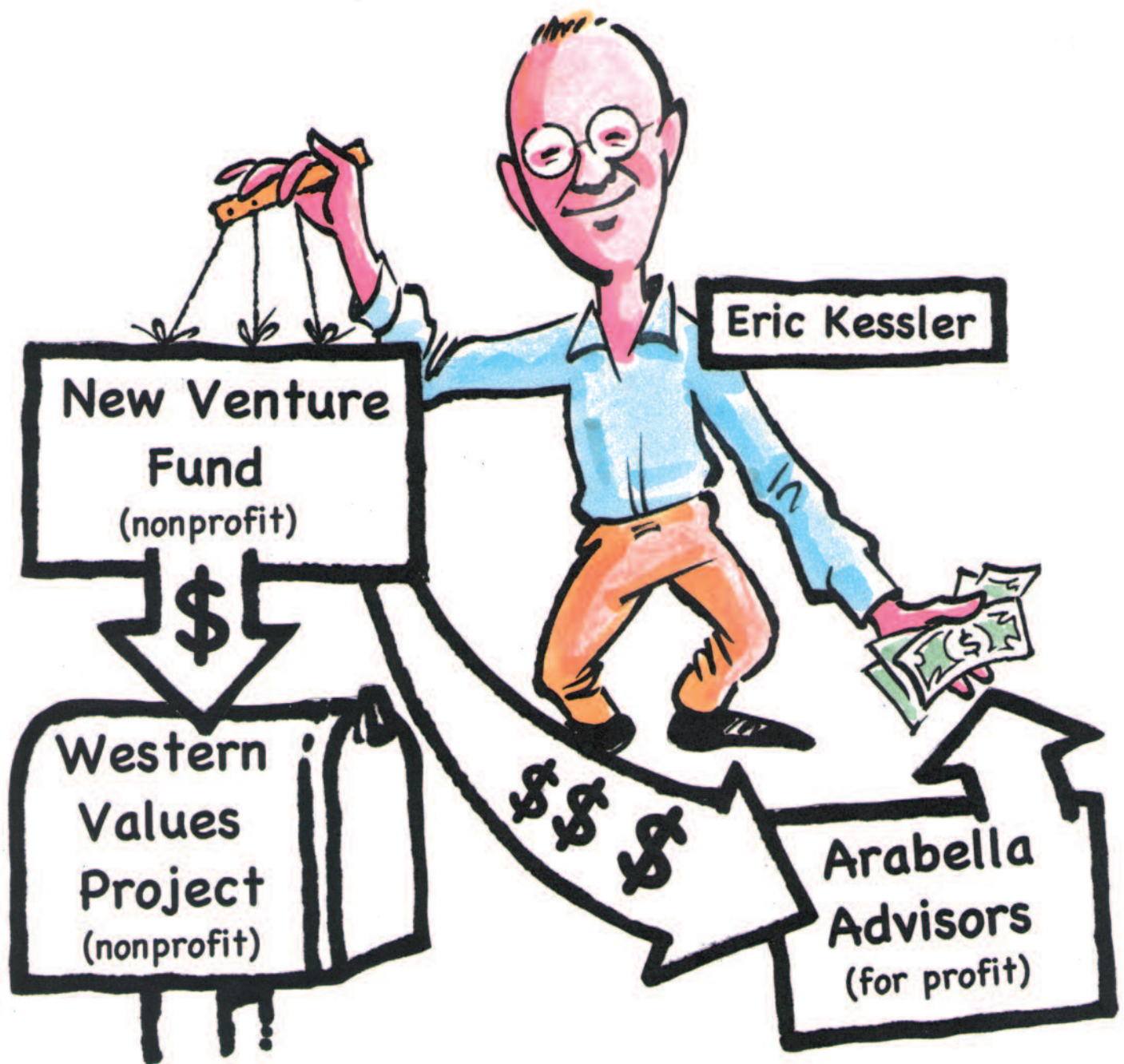
Unsurprisingly, WVP neglects to post a telephone number or street address on its public website (that’s reserved for press releases). But WVP proudly posts copies of its legal filings, which tell Uncle Sam where to mail the goodies: 704C East 13th St., Suite 568, Whitefish.

Is this a nice office, given the “heavy” investment? Um, no...Suite 568 is actually the

RYAN ZINKE FROM THE INTERNET



While Secretary Zinke can handle a horse, he’ll be wise to do so far from any political trees that might be used to hang him.



tiniest, cheapest mailbox available at the UPS Store behind the Whitefish Walgreens, much too small to hold a million bucks.

Might it be possible to discover who created and owns WVP's website? Sorry. The westernvaluesproject.org domain was registered in 2013 through third-party anonymizer Domain Protection of Denver. Darn!

How about a tax return? There is none! What about WVP Action and the million bucks? Nope. There *was* a Western Values PAC in 2011 that got \$2,000 from Honeywell and FedExPAC. Darn! Oh, here we go—multiple February 2018 job postings for WVP for “research associate” and “communications

associate.” One job is in “either Helena or Whitefish,” the other in Washington, D.C., with both listings telling applicants that WVP is “a project of New Venture Fund (NVF), a 501(c)(3) public charity that incubates new and innovative public-interest projects.”

Behind the Curtain

As a “charity,” this mysterious New Venture is required to file annual Internal Revenue Service Form 990 reports, which can usually be found on websites such as Guidestar and ProPublica. Yep, here's New Venture Fund: Total 2016 Revenue: \$371 million, over a third of a *billion* dollars, with \$30 million for

administration and fund-raising and \$247 million spent in program services! Net assets? Try \$322 million. Employees? 317.

Wow! Might *that* explain the “heavy investment” in Western Values Project? Sure, to any reporter who had bothered looking. Since 2013, all of Google reveals only six “news” articles that mention both WVP and funder New Venture. Four are “conservative” opinion stories, one is a 2013 energy blog item. Just one is “mainstream news,” by the *Oregonian's* Andrew Theen, noting that WVP was “funded by the nonprofit New Venture Fund charity group,” nothing more. On the entire World Wide Web, there are only 17

documents mentioning both, out of thousands that mention each singly—pretty pathetic, actually.

Bruce Babbitt's Wizard

To figure out New Venture's real purpose, it's worth discussing its founder and board chair, Eric Kessler, who started NVF in 2006 under another, rather odd name, Arabella Legacy Fund. An activist student at UC Boulder in 1990, Kessler met and drank with radical environmentalist "archdruid" David Brower. As the Earth Island Institute's history puts it, Kessler "hitchhiked to San Francisco the following summer to volunteer for Earth Island and was put to work organizing a contingent of scientists and conservationists to visit Lake Baikal in Siberia" and start an Earth Island subsidiary there.

An "approved" biography in the *Huffington Post* reveals Kessler returned from Russia, "worked in politics with the League of Conservation Voters," which Bruce Babbitt ran for a time, worked "as an appointee in the Clinton administration," again working with then-Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt (as con-



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A careful squint into the shadows behind this Walgreens in Whitefish, Mont., reveals the official headquarters of Western Values Project—The UPS Store! As for the real headquarters, that's 2,000 miles away in Washington, D.C.

firmed by Federal Elections Commission records of Kessler's political donations in the late 1990s).

What else? Kessler belongs to a large family that privately owned Fel-Pro Gaskets, a leading automotive gaskets firm. Convinced electric cars would doom Fel-Pro, the family sold out in 1998 (Carl Icahn owns it now!). Federal filings indicate Kessler (one of 40 shareholders) realized a lit-

tle over a million dollars, meaning he would never again need to hitchhike.

It also turns out that Kessler has a "Whitefish connection" through family. This relative also controls an oddly named "charity" (Angora Ridge). Further, he immediately preceded Ryan Zinke as Whitefish's state senator, working in the Montana Legislature with fellow Whitefish Democrat and then-Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer.

After the Clintons ceded the Executive Branch to G.W. Bush, Kessler went overseas again with the quasi-governmental National Democratic Institute. Returning to the United States, he established IRS nonprofit status for Arabella in 2006.

Arabella got off to a good start, with \$545,100 in grants, mostly from Swiss eco-billionaire Hansjörg Wyss, spending most of its early budget attacking off-road vehicle use in the West through a wickedly clever trails funding-diversion effort. By

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2008, Arabella's grants hit \$6 million.

In 2009, obviously to keep a low profile, Kessler renamed Arabella to the generic-sounding New Venture Fund. He also established another "nonprofit," the also-blandly-named Sixteen Thirty Fund, a 501(c)(4) apparently used to both anonymize, aggregate and coordinate funding for "nonpartisan" political groups like the League of Conservation Voters Education Fund (\$1.925 million in 2015), with wild variations in total funding (\$4 mil one year, zero the next, \$16 million a bit later).

Now, while "chairman" Kessler officially devotes an hour a week each to his charities and nonprofits, he also happens to be "founder, principal and senior managing director" at Arabella Advisors, a for-profit private consultancy which charges fees to run all the Kessler nonprofits. For example, New Venture paid Advisors \$13.167 million for "management services" in 2015. Not bad, especially when Change Food reports "Arabella Advisors started over a decade ago at Eric's kitchen table and now advises on several billion dollars a year across its four offices and 150 employees, supporting over 30 of the country's 40 largest foundations." Best of all, Advisors is an "entity more than 35 percent owned by Eric Kessler, president." Cha-ching! Nonprofit cha-ching!

Including Arabella, NVF reports 148

Mutts Snoozing on Astroturf

Without question, the ability and/or desire of American news media to "watchdog" or "speak truth to power" is vanishing, and not because of the Internet. Journalism's biggest problem is a widespread inability or unwillingness to produce even the simplest stories including Who, Where, What, When and Why. Below are samples from a few who pretended to cover Western Values Project in the past year, showing their closest approaches to the existence of New Venture Fund:

Barking at Nothing

KOIN TV 6, Oregon, Eileen Park: "located in Whitefish, Montana, spent \$1 million"
The Washington Post, Dino Grandoni: "Montana-based public-lands advocacy group"
The Salt Lake Tribune, Brian Maffly and editors: "National Ethics Group Calls for Investigation" (headline)
The Washington Post, Juliet Eilperin: "advocacy group"
ABC News, Stephanie Ebbs: "accountability group primarily focused on the Interior Department"
Energy & Environment, Michael Doyle: "frequent Zinke critic"

Playing Dead

CNN: "Staffers [at WVP] have ties to Democratic politics"
Politico, Elana Schor and Ben LeFebvre: "conservation group that often works with Democrats"

Smelled a Skunk, Chased a Squirrel

The Salt Lake Tribune, Matthew Piper: "backed by a Washington, D.C., nonprofit incubator"
Portland Oregonian, Andrew Theen: "a left-leaning Montana-based conservation organization...funded by the nonprofit New Venture Fund charity group"

“independent contractors” who “received more than \$100,000 from the organization.” And no, Western Values Project is not mentioned anywhere in New Venture Fund’s 160-page tax return.

Scary, isn’t it? Just one idle peek behind the hatch of a tiny UPS Store mailbox “suite” way out West in Montana leads down the wormhole to the Beltway, and an endlessly layered, Russian-doll, \$371 million “nonprofit” empire of influence. One must wonder, where else might the tentacles of this dark money octopus, spawned on a humble kitchen table less than 10 years ago, reach? Darn near everywhere, it turns out. *RANGE* will reveal more next issue. ■

When the snows hit Dave Skinner’s fortified bunker in northwest Montana, he just starts hunting other kinds of varmints.

The Octopus

Below is a preliminary list of entities known to be New Venture Fund “projects” or associates involved in advancing environmental policy objectives in the West. Many others get monies laundered through NVF in coordination with other “charities.”

Western Values Project: Two PR guys working in a mailbox. Without any help whatsoever.

Center for Western Priorities: Begun in 2012 as a New Venture “project,” in 2013 the Hewlett Foundation gave New Venture \$1 million to “continue support of the New Venture Fund’s Center for Western Priorities.” By 2015, CWP “moved,” remaining a “project,” but of the Resources Legacy Fund, a \$68-million “donor-driven enterprise” based in Sacramento, Calif.

Campaign for Accountability: Secretly funded with unknown millions by Oracle, this “project” existed first to attack rival Google, then Trump administration officials. Somehow, in its spare time, CfA also tried to beat up state and local officials sympathetic to the “transfer of public lands” concept with public-records litigation.

Hopewell Fund: A new Arabella-controlled “charity” established in 2015 using leftover Campaign for Accountability funds.