

PRA: "An early warning system"

PRAccess interviews incoming executive director Tarso Luís Ramos and board chair Supriya Pillai about PRA's role in a new day.

PRAccess: Tarso, you officially joined Political Research Associates in May 2006, but you were involved with PRA before then. What initially drew you to PRA?

TLR: My family came to the U.S. fleeing Brazil's military dictatorship when I was very young, so let's say I was raised with a healthy concern about right-wing social and political movements. As it turned out, I came of age during this country's dramatic drift to the Right: Reagan's first term came during the year I began high school.

I became aware of PRA in 1991, during the first Gulf War. While editing the *Portland Alliance* newspaper, I learned that right-wing groups were recruiting from the anti-war movement. A colleague handed me a white paper on the topic published by an organization that turned out to be PRA. I interviewed its author, Chip Berlet, for my story. A few years later I was running a research project on anti-environmental front groups and got a call from some guy who wanted to compliment us on a report we'd done—that was Chip again.

As the anti-gay backlash heated up in the early '90s, I got invited to a national strategy session PRA convened together with Loretta Ross and Suzanne Pharr. I think it was at this meeting that I really came to appreciate PRA's importance as a resource for social justice organizing. Like many of my colleagues in the Northwest, working to defend civil rights and counter the rise of the

Christian Right, I came to rely on Political Research Associates as an unsailable source of information and analysis. We collaborated in various ways over the years: Jean Hardisty came out to meet with community groups in the Northwest; I contributed to a reader (*Eyes Right!*), edited by PRA, and so forth. When, after a time living outside the U.S., fortune brought me to Boston, PRA offered me a job as research director. Years later, I learned they weren't confident they had the money to pay my salary!

PRAccess: And now you'll be the executive director. The board must feel pretty confident about this choice. Supriya, what played into the decision to go with Tarso?

SP: Absolutely—total confidence. There was no question in our minds. If anything, we were really waiting on Tarso to say yes.

PRAccess: How did you approach him?

SP: I called him up and asked him! I said, "We would really love it if you would consider this. We could go through a national search, but the board recognizes that we have the right person within the organization."

At first Tarso wasn't sure it was the right role for him. I think he might have been influenced by the fact that it wasn't just me, or even just the board—folks outside of our circle, folks we respect in the field, thought that this would be a perfect fit.



Tarso Luís Ramos

PRAccess: What do you think of the transition?

TLR: It comes at a good moment in PRA's organizational life cycle. We've developed a multidimensional research program and a great staff. Despite the global financial crisis, the organi-

zation is stable. Katherine Ragsdale has put PRA on a sound footing and I'm very fortunate to inherit that. We all stand on the shoulders of those who did the work before us. I'm particularly lucky that those who preceded me *continue* to do the work and continue to be associated with PRA. Katherine has joined the advisory committee of one of our projects. PRA's founder, Jean Hardisty, continues to work with PRA. Just last year we published two special reports by Jean on Bush administration marriage promotion policies.

SP: The entire board has recognized Katherine's tremendous work bringing the organization to a place of growth and strength. She grew the funding base, as well as financial commitments to the organization. There was great strengthening of PRA's infrastructure—it's at a place structurally where it can really grow.

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PRAccess: Is there anything you're looking forward to in particular?

TLR: I hope to expand and strengthen PRA's research program, and to develop strategic alliances that will make PRA ever more useful to progressive organizing and advocacy on a broad range of issues. PRA was once an innovator in the use of communications technology, but we've not really kept pace with the enormous changes in the Web and other social media over the last few years.

PRAccess: What do you anticipate PRA's role will be in the midst of all the political and economic change progressives are facing?

SP: There's tremendous opportunity in light of a new Administration and beyond. There is a tidal shift that's happening. PRA could really strategically place itself there and enhance its movement-building work. Tarso puts it this way, too. PRA can strengthen its strategic alliances, and in doing so support and increase movement building that can blossom in this new era.

Katherine's said this before: even though we're in this new "sunshiny" place, we need to be aware that it's at such times that the Right does its "best" and hardest work. It's a crucial time for PRA as an organization to be vigilant.

TLR: PRA has learned, over its 28-year history of studying and resisting right-wing and antidemocratic movements, that when they are out of power, various sectors of the Right regroup, strategize, and experiment with how they'll hit the ground running when opportunities present themselves. When Reagan was elected, the Heritage Foundation was ready with a policy handbook. After 9/11, the Project for a New American Century was already in place with plans for a unilateral military expression of American power throughout world. But the Right is not monolithic. Some sectors become more aggressive, even violent, during periods when they are shut out of the policy-making arena, particularly at the federal level. During the Clinton years we saw a spike in clinic violence, and the Oklahoma City bombing.

Just as it would be disastrous for progressives to demobilize out of a sense of hope that the current administration will do the right thing in all policy areas, PRA hasn't the luxury of sitting back and reveling in the apparent disarray of the Right. Rather, our challenge is larger and more urgent than ever. We must simultaneously support social justice groups to make the most of the historic opportunities suddenly before us, defend against the Right's counterattacks, and serve as an early warning system for new and different right-wing strategies that may be implemented several years down the road.

PRAccess: It's been said that, with the election of President Obama, the United States is now "post-racial." Given your interest in "colorblind" ideology, Tarso, what do you make of this claim?

TLR: Those most eager to declare the U.S. a post-racial society generally have been consistently opposed to civil rights enforcement and racial justice initiatives of any kind. For this set, Obama's election is a valuable propaganda opportunity to declare, yet again, "the end of racism." There's clearly been progress, and we should celebrate our victories.

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Thom Cincotta keeps an eye on justice

PRA is pleased to welcome new project director **Thomas Cincotta**, in charge of the organization's newest initiative—a nationwide investigation of America's domestic security structure.

As a criminal defense attorney, Thom led the Denver chapter of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) [www.nlg.org] in support of peace groups, as well as others, during the 2008 Democratic National Convention.

It was in helping to provide legal support and advice surrounding the DNC that Thom gained a firsthand appreciation of the chilling effect of government surveillance.

"People became more cautious. There was suspicion and paranoia—a lot more fingerpointing was going on behind the scenes and between rival groups," says Thom. "It was a distraction from the issues and the organizing. Second-guessing whether someone was a government agent, or whether agents were in our midst, wasted time and fueled suspicion and distrust."

Thom is quick to note that surveillance is a way to control people's actions. "When a hall monitor or teacher watches over recess, it has an effect on a kid's behavior. Likewise, when the government is known to be surveilling through informants, when people know the government is watching them, it chills their freedom of association and speech."

The civil liberties project focuses on the structure of this type of surveillance, to see how resources are mobilized across the national, regional, and local levels in ways that repress the activities of immigrants, Muslims, and Arabs, as well as people from the Middle East and South Asia.

The project will deploy investigative researchers in Boston, the Detroit and Dearborn, Michigan, areas, Los Angeles, Miami, and Phoenix. These on-the-ground investigators will be able to glean new and fresh insights into what's really going on. All sites will be operational this summer. As project director, Thom will synthesize PRA's new findings with existing information to provide local and national advocates with tools to combat repression through surveillance.

PRA's history of attention to domestic repression was a major draw for Thom. "PRA looks at civil liberties through a broader understanding of how the state can act as a repressive force," he explains. "Especially against movements for change."



Thomas Cincotta

"When people know the government is watching them, it chills their freedoms of association and speech."

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But one need only glance at the racial dimensions of unemployment, incarceration, educational attainment, health care, the immigration backlash, or the foreclosure crisis to appreciate that declaring the end of racism is an avoidance strategy that may have horrendous consequences. The Obama Administration's resistance to characterize policy goals or his ascendancy to the White House in racial justice terms makes the task of defeating colorblind racial ideology even more difficult.

PRAccess: Given Tarso's background as a researcher, Supriya, what do you think he will bring to the role of executive director that might be unexpected?

SP: His background lends itself to strategic thinking for the organization. He is extremely thoughtful, very sharp in his political analysis, and his racial justice lens really lends itself to the direction the organization is taking. He's a team player and works well with staff. Also, the board has been struck by his humility.

PRA RELEASES A NEW STUDY

TOXIC TO DEMOCRACY

Conspiracy Theories, Demonization, & Scapegoating

Senior Analyst Chip Berlet says conspiracism's "Tools of Fear" build structures of violence.

"Right-wing pundits demonize scapegoated groups and individuals in our society, implying that it is urgent to stop them from wrecking the nation. Some angry people in the audience already believe conspiracy theories in which the same scapegoats are portrayed as subversive, destructive, or evil. Add in aggressive apocalyptic ideas that suggest time is running out and quick action mandatory and you have a perfect storm of mobilized resentment threatening to rain bigotry and violence across the United States."

—Chip Berlet, *Toxic to Democracy*

Toxic to Democracy is available in PDF format from PRA at www.publiceye.org/toxic2democracy/

PRAccess: What can we expect from you next month?

TLR: Expect that I'll be recruiting for a new research director at PRA! It will be hard to give up the intimate involvement I've had in PRA's research projects, but I'm excited at the opportunity to bring more talent into the organization. In the months ahead, look for new PRA reports on a broad range of important issues.

—Interviewer Maria Planansky is a communications assistant for PRA.

Twice, while preparing this issue of PRAccess, we were forced to "stop press" for updates on right-wing violence: first for the murder of abortion provider Dr. George Tiller at his church in Wichita, Kansas, then for a shooting at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. by a White supremacist, resulting in the death of security guard Stephen Tyrone Johns. PRA staff received numerous media calls for comment and analysis. There is no better indicator of the urgent need for PRA's work-tracking and analyzing threats to democracy than these tragic events. **Please, support PRA today!**
—Editor

Staff in Action

Political Research Associates joined the Boston community in a vigil commemorating Dr. George Tiller, an abortion provider, who was shot and killed Sunday, May 30, while serving as an usher at his church in Wichita, Kansas. Former executive director Katherine Hancock Ragsdale led the crowd of 500 in prayer and song at The Cathedral of St. Paul (Episcopal) the following Monday.

On May 1, *Public Eye* editor Abby Scher participated in a plenary discussion on "The Right in These Times: A Conversation Between Academic and Non-Academic Thinkers and Researchers" at the Second Annual Conference on Rightist Movements. The conference, entitled *The Right in These Times: Understanding and Combating Contemporary Shifts to the Right*, was held at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City.

Incoming executive director Tarso Luís Ramos was a panelist for the Applied Research Center's April 28 *100-Day Race in Review Compact Forum Call*. The call was moderated by Tammy Johnson; Tarso joined Angela Glover Blackwell and Deepa Iya in discussion. Listen to the call at: racewire.org/mp3/raceinreview-24kbps.mp3.

Three staff members participated and provided analysis at the *Left Forum*, the largest gathering in North America of the U.S. and international Left, in mid-April. Senior researcher Pam Chamberlain participated in a panel concerning queer politics, class, and the Right. Pam and Abby both joined in on the discussion "Right-Wing Women and the Struggle to Remake Conservatism" with author Kathryn Joyce. Abby also chaired "To Quell and Expel," a panel on challenging the police state in which Civil Liberties project director Thomas Cincotta was a participant.

Senior analyst Chip Berlet served on a total of eight panels during the University of Colorado at Boulder's *61st Annual Conference on World Affairs* from April 6-10. Additionally, Chip made a radio appearance on KGNU 88.5 FM/1390 AM for the conference. The topic of discussion was "Political Messaging: Story vs. Substance"; it included guests Terrence McNally and James A. Trengrove and was moderated by Kathy Partridge.

The first weekend in April Pam Chamberlain and Chip Berlet headed to Hampshire College's *Civil Liberties and Public Policy Program and Population Development Program* conference on abortion rights. There, the two sat on panel discussions and conducted workshops on reproductive justice tactics and policies.

PRA in the News

Publications across the country and around the Internet are citing PRA's work to understand everything from inauguration oath flubbing to the economics of antigay campaigns.

Senior Analyst Chip Berlet and *Public Eye* magazine contributor Fred Clarkson discussed the murder of Dr. George Tiller on Democracy Now! with Amy Goodman on May 28. Watch or listen at www.democracynow.org/2009/6/3/anti_abortion_movements.

Outgoing executive director Katherine Hancock Ragsdale was featured as a local celebrity in the *Boston Globe*. See “Preaching God’s word with an eye on national politics: Pepperell vicar also leads liberal think tank.”

Katherine was also mentioned on the *American Spectator* site. Mark Tooley, recently appointed president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, took notice (and exception) of Katherine’s commitment to reproductive justice. Read his comments on our very

own “High Priestess of Abortion.”

Public Eye editor Abby Scher discussed highlights from February’s Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, D.C. with John Grebe on the radio program “Sounds of Dissent.”

Chip’s interview with Fox News Boston shed light on the whys and hows of White Supremacist groups and their recruiting strategies. Chip was also mentioned in a *Bilderberger* article, in which he traced that particular conspiracy theory to activist Phyllis Schlafly. Chip was called on, again, to comment on the surge of conspiracy theories circulating around President Obama. See Salon.com’s article “Why the stories about Obama’s birth certificate will never die.”

Senior Researcher Pam Chamberlain was sought out for her thoughts on Focus on the Family and similar organizations. Pam discussed how money affects these groups’ campaign efforts and is quoted in *Bay Windows*, a New England LGBTQ paper.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear friends of PRA:

It is with mixed emotions that I write to tell you goodbye. Although the next chapter in my life—as president and dean of Episcopal Divinity School—promises to be challenging, exciting, and fun, I will miss PRA—its work, its staff, and its friends and supporters.

This organization that Jean built is quite extraordinary. It does first-rate work, daring to critique our allies as well as our adversaries—believing, in fact, that not only integrity, but true collegiality, require nothing less. The small but dynamic staff has grown over the last few years. Interesting projects abound. The organization is fiscally stable and programmatically thriving. None of this would have been possible without your help, and we all thank you.

My departure is made easier for all of us by knowing in what fine hands I leave this place. Research director Tarso Ramos will, by the time you read this, have stepped into the office of executive director. Tarso has been with us several years and we have come to know and respect his great skill and dedication. I know those of you who know Tarso have no worries about PRA with him at the helm. Those of you who have not yet had the chance to meet Tarso or see his work are in for a treat. I trust all of you will give him the support he needs to help this fine organization continue to thrive.

It has been an honor and a privilege to work with you all. Thank you.

— The Rev. Dr. Katherine Hancock Ragsdale

Staff Changes

PRA welcomes back **Cindy Savage-King** as our business manager. Cindy has returned to the north after a jaunt in Florida, and we’re glad to have her back!

Charles Ocitti (finance director) has a strong background in accounting and financial management services for nonprofit organizations. Before coming to PRA, he was a senior project manager and team leader at Boston Medical Center. He also spent two years as a consultant for Accounting Management Solutions, specializing in nonprofit organizations. He has worked for Jumpstart for Young Children and Year Up, Inc.

Also joining the team is new Director of Communication and Development **Jan Nunley**. An ordained Episcopal priest, Jan comes to us with 20 years experience as a television and radio news anchor. Most recently she served on the staff of the Episcopal Church Center in New York as deputy for communication and executive editor of *Episcopal Life Media*.

Right Web, PRA’s online effort to track militarists’ efforts in influencing U.S. foreign policy, has a new consulting editor, **Becca Wilson**. Becca has a background in alternative journalism, and in recent years has specialized in strategic communications, editing, and desktop publishing for progressive nonprofits, including public employee unions, and environmental organizations. Becca has written and edited articles, reports, and proposals for numerous other organizations, including a U.N. agency and nonprofits serving low-income people.



Charles Ocitti



Jan Nunley

Coming up in the Fall *Public Eye!*

Pam Chamberlain explores the career of Janice Crouse, the brains behind Christian Right group Concerned Women for America

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Rhetoric, Rage, and the Right

Statement From Political Research Associates

June, 2009

The election of Barack Obama traumatized whole sections of the U.S. Right. Right-wing media demagogues have been quick to exploit this angry constituency by using rhetoric that demonizes not just Obama and the Democrats but liberal ideology itself. Using the rhetoric of Right-Wing populism, opportunistic pundits and politicians portray liberal government programs as picking the pockets of hard-working taxpayers to help undeserving poor people, lazy parasites, and unlawful immigrants.

By using the tools of fear, irresponsible public figures are cultivating an aggressive constituency comprised of people who feel that militant action is justified, because in their view the Obama administration has shut them out of the political process.

“The current political environment is awash with seemingly absurd but nonetheless influential conspiracy theories, hyperbolic claims, and demonized targets,” explains Chip Berlet, senior analyst at PRA, “and this creates a milieu where violence is a likely outcome.”

Periods of right-wing populism in the United States often emerge during times of political, economic, or social stress, generating movements in which White men who feel displaced and ignored blame their sense of loss on targeted scapegoats. “This frequently happens when elections favor the Political Left and the society is seen as moving towards greater social equality or away from traditional societal hierarchies,” says Berlet. “In this scenario it is easier for right-wing demagogues to successfully demonize liberals as abandoning morality and crafting a tyrannical New World Order.

“Today targeted scapegoats include not only liberals but also immigrants, Muslims, gay people, and abortion rights activists,” says Berlet, co-author of the award-winning book *Right-Wing Populism in America*. In the 1990s, there was a significant overlap between the Patriot Movement and the anti-abortion movement

“This is not the time to undermine free speech or civil liberties,” says Tarso Ramos, executive director of Political Research Associates. “Yet we must hold accountable the media pundits and political actors who through campaigns of exaggeration and deceit have created an atmosphere where some among the many anxious and angry people are bound to conclude there is no option available but to turn to violence. Likewise, we must hold accountable those civic leaders and media companies who stand by silently as this environment grows ever more toxic to democracy.”

***Right Web* at Political Research Associates has just launched its new website!**

If you go to ***Right Web***, you'll see a dramatic change. The streamlined, user-friendly site is the beginning of an organization-wide redevelopment of its underlying web architecture. *Right Web's* site inauguration is a preview of PRA's commitment to utilizing cutting edge technology. The new site, along with new *Right Web* consulting editor Becca Wilson, reaffirms PRA's ongoing allegiance to track militarists' efforts to influence U.S. foreign policy.

INTERN CORNER

PRA has hosted four interns this winter. **Mohamed Brahimi**, a political science Masters student at Suffolk University, is working with Thom Cincotta on our civil liberties project. Mohamed is active in the Boston Moroccan activist community. **Karen Rodriguez** is a journalism Masters student at Emerson University where she is studying emerging forms for communicating the news. She works with Abby and Pam on web and print editorial functions. **Kris Coombs**, a political science and peace and justice studies senior at Tufts University, somehow finds time away from his myriad activist leadership obligations on campus to help us with the development of a major bibliography as well as reviewing reports for the *Public Eye*. **Padini Nirmal**, a graduate student in International Development and Social Change at Clark University, assists Tarso in identifying potential funding sources for our special projects.

PRAccess

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