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When Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis penned these words, our country was embroiled in a backlash against the cruel inhumanity that was a byproduct of the industrial revolution. By the time of his death in 1939, America was well on its way to becoming a progressive state, and the relevance of his comments might have appeared to be diminished in import. But, following nearly five decades of steady advances in the progressive agenda, the Reagan revolution in 1980 begat an increase in the concentration of wealth that has approached historical proportions, and which brings the urgency and the prescience of Brandeis' comments into sharp relief.

Brandeis grew up in an era of robber barons of unspeakable wealth and corporate trusts with unimaginable reach; a world where child labor was common, worker safety irrelevant, women's rights non-existent, racism was prevalent, and the idea of consumerism was in its infancy. Following the onset of the Great Depression and the implementation of the New Deal, progressives finally found a seat at the table of power. Over the next five decades, a progressive agenda led to the institutionalization of unions, the racial integration of the military, the broad extension of women's rights, the explosive growth of the middle class, the creation of Social Security and Medicare safety nets, and, at the zenith of the progressive movement, the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Had Brandeis lived to see the implementation of the "Great Society," he might have thought the agenda he championed most of his life had prevailed. But the economic turmoil of the 1970's, the excesses of union power, and high taxes required to maintain our government created an environment ripe for the election of small-government proponent Ronald Reagan and his embrace of "trickle down" economics.

The economic policies of Reagan, mimicked by every president since, have shifted nearly all of the growth in wealth created over the last generation to those at the top of the economic mountain. In 1976, the top one percent of Americans controlled 20 percent of its wealth. In 2007, that percentage had risen to 34 percent. During the boom times of the mid-1990's to late 2000's, the result of this shift was invisible to most Americans, whose real wages simply remained stagnant. But with the onset of the recession of 2008, this income inequality became painfully obvious to millions of Americans.

In addition to the increased economic might of the top one percent, the result of the "Citizen's United" decision has created an environment where the influence of the wealthy has never been greater. Not since the onset of the Great Depression have the words of Brandeis been more relevant. Unless changes are made to both the distribution of wealth and the influence of the wealthy on our political process, our democracy is indeed in serious peril.