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**September 19, 2009**

## A Political Gadfly Lampoons the Left via YouTube

**By [SCOTT SHANE](#)**

WASHINGTON — James E. O’Keefe III, the 25-year-old video provocateur whose hidden camera galvanized Congress this week against the advocacy group [Acorn](#), began his filmmaking career with a more modest target: Lucky Charms.

In 2004, at a buddy’s suggestion, he and a few fellow Rutgers students set out to satirize what they saw as a pious sensitivity to ethnicity on campus. [The result is still there to see on YouTube](#): Mr. O’Keefe protesting to a slightly befuddled university dining official that the leprechaun on the cereal box “appears to be an Irish-American.”

“As you can see, we’re not short and green — we have our differences of height — and we think this is stereotypical of all Irish-Americans,” Mr. O’Keefe deadpans, as the official earnestly scribbles notes.

It’s Candid Camera for the Internet age, a lethally effective political tool that Mr. O’Keefe has helped pioneer between college and graduate-school studies. He has lampooned liberals by inviting them to become pen pals of imprisoned terrorists, and, more darkly, [recorded Planned Parenthood staff members](#) agreeing that he can designate his donation exclusively to the abortion of black babies.

But never has his work had anything like the impact of [the Acorn exposé](#), conducted by Mr. O’Keefe and a friend he met through [Facebook](#), 20-year-old Hannah Giles. Their travels in the gaudy guise of pimp and prostitute through various offices of Acorn, the national community organizing group, caught its low-level employees in five cities sounding eager to assist with tax evasion, human smuggling and child prostitution.

What began as a firestorm on conservative talk shows spread across the news media and to both parties in Congress, as Mr. O’Keefe and Ms. Giles unveiled videos of more cities where Acorn workers had misbehaved. [Jon Stewart](#), whose “Daily Show” on Comedy Central leans to the left, highlighted the videos, and a House proposal to cut off all federal money to Acorn passed Thursday by a vote of 345 to 75.

In a telephone interview on Thursday night — when he was editing still more Acorn footage — Mr. O’Keefe said that when he accepted Ms. Giles’s idea that they take on Acorn, “I thought we’d get some snippets” worth posting to the Web. “I’m a skinny nerd, the least convincing pimp in the world,” he said.

Instead, a succession of Acorn workers advised the pair on how to smuggle Salvadoran girls into the country, falsify a loan application to buy a house for use as a brothel and even claim the under-age prostitutes as dependents for tax purposes.

“It was an absolute revelation,” Mr. O’Keefe said. But it was a familiar pattern in his outlandish sting operations, he said: “People say to me, ‘They’re never going to say yes,’ but they always do.” Repeatedly, his requests have been met with credulous, clueless or incriminating answers, making for a riveting few minutes on the Web.

When he called a [Planned Parenthood](#) office in Columbus, Ohio, and said he wanted to finance abortions for minorities, saying “there’s way too many black people in Ohio,” the administrative assistant on the phone laughed and agreed to his terms.

When he called an Idaho branch, a helpful development official told him he “absolutely” could restrict his donation to abortions of African-American babies, raising no objection even after he explained that his goal was to shield his son from future competition for college admission under affirmative action.

In a statement on Friday, Planned Parenthood said the “heavily edited, unsubstantiated tapes were part of a campaign to discredit Planned Parenthood with false claims.”

Acorn initially responded in a similar way but shifted its tone this week, saying it had dismissed some staff members and would improve training and supervision.

Three years ago, Mr. O’Keefe said, he read “Rules for Radicals” by the left-wing icon Saul Alinsky, the Bible for many community organizers, including those at Acorn, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. He absorbed in particular Rule 4: “Make the enemy live up to its own book of rules.”

With the Lucky Charms affair, for instance: “It’s a no-win situation for them,” Mr. O’Keefe said. “If they say yes, then they’re ridiculous — they’ve gone off the deep end. And if they say no, then they’re being racist, they’re hurting Irish-Americans.”

Gregory Walker Levitsky, a friend at Rutgers, said “what disturbed James as a student was the double standard applied to conservative groups and conservative causes.”

“He likes making waves,” Mr. Levitsky added. “But the hidden camera simply shows the truth.”

Not everyone among Mr. O’Keefe’s acquaintances agrees. Liz Farkas, a Rutgers student who called Mr. O’Keefe “a nice guy and a loyal friend,” said she grew disillusioned after he asked her to help edit the script of a Planned Parenthood sting.

“It was snippets to make the Planned Parenthood nurse look bad,” Ms. Farkas said. “I said: ‘It has no context. You’re just cherry-picking the nurse’s answers.’ He said, ‘Okay’ — and then he just ran it.”

Asked whether the left-leaning documentaries of [Michael Moore](#) do not do the same, Ms. Farkas said: “Michael Moore goes after the rich and powerful. James isn’t doing that. He goes after low-level bureaucrats and people who are trying to help low-income people.”

The son of a materials engineer and a physical therapist, Mr. O’Keefe grew up in Westwood, N.J., becoming an Eagle Scout and starring his senior year in high school in the musical “Crazy for You.” As a philosophy major at Rutgers, he founded a conservative monthly, The Centurion, that featured the Lucky Charms story and other efforts to expose what he saw as liberal absurdity or hypocrisy.

After graduating from Rutgers in 2006, he spent a year working for the Leadership Institute, a group based outside Washington that trains young conservatives on college campuses. Mr. O’Keefe was “very effective and very enthusiastic,” said Morton Blackwell, the institute’s founder.

But Mr. Blackwell said Mr. O’Keefe was asked to leave because officials felt his video work might violate [Internal Revenue Service](#) rules barring nonprofit groups from trying to influence legislation.

Mr. O’Keefe said he considers the British writer G. K. Chesterton his “intellectual backbone” and called himself a “progressive radical,” not a conservative, because he wants to change things, “not conserve them.” But his pro-market, anti-government views, as he described them, sounded like mainstream conservatism.

Would the blizzard of media coverage for his latest project make him too identifiable to go undercover again? Mr. O’Keefe scoffed at the notion.

“I’m not going to go deep into the actual logistics of what I physically plan to do with my appearance,” he said. “Frankly, I think I’m just getting started.”

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