



THE BRADLEY CENTER
FOR PHILANTHROPY AND CIVIC RENEWAL

VISION AND PHILANTHROPY
A Bradley Center Symposium

Wednesday, February 16, 2005
8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.
The Ritz-Carlton, 1150 22nd Street, N.W.

Barbara J. Elliott
Founder and President, Center for Renewal

The truths that have emerged and withstood the jagged shoals of time's shores are the essence of the conservative credo. Russell Kirk, one of the distinguished fathers of the conservative intellectual movement in America, and the author of *The Conservative Mind*, shows us the immutable power of ideas in governing human affairs. He writes in *The American Cause*:

The success or failure of any human society depends upon how sound and true its ideas are. That a nation has prospered a great while—that it has been orderly and free and just and wealthy—is one very good proof that its ideas have been sound and true. Three groups of ideas, or bodies of principle, invisibly control any people. . . . The first, and most important, of these bodies of principle is the set of moral convictions which a people hold: their ideas about the relationship of God and man, about virtue and vice, honesty and dishonesty, honor and dishonor. The second of these bodies of principle is the set of political convictions which a people hold: their ideas about justice and injustice, freedom and tyranny, personal rights and power, and the whole complex problem of living together peaceably. The third of these bodies of principle is the set of economic convictions which a people hold: their ideas about wealth and property, public and private responsibilities in the affair of making a living, and the distribution of goods and services.¹

These three bodies of principles build on each other, and are intertwined. The political order we enjoy presupposes a set of moral convictions held in the hearts of its citizens. The success of the economic order depends directly on the political order for its framework. In America, we enjoy the remarkable freedom and prosperity we do because of the fruits of faith and character which have been harvested here. A democracy and a market economy are in one sense hollow vessels. They do not themselves possess the qualities that make them flourish, but are conduits producing results only as good as the citizens whose lives and convictions are poured into them.

The conservative renaissance of recent years has achieved some major public policy victories. Foundations have played a significant role in fostering this work by nurturing the thought leaders and the seeds of their ideas, by providing the soil and water for them in research institutions, then cultivating their application with the tools of intermediaries. The ideas were strewn across the country, pollinating in the shape of articles, books, and broadcasts. Where these ideas on political and economic order took root,

¹ Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* (Chicago: Regnery and Company, 1957).

HUDSON INSTITUTE

1015 18th Street, N.W.
Suite 300
Washington, DC 20036

202.223.7770
202.223.8595 Fax
pcr.hudson.org

they produced a harvest of public opinion that over time was reaped into public policy. Part of the success of the modern conservative movement in America is due to its intentionality in moving ideas along this path—from the seminal thinkers to the populizers of ideas, out to the grassroots where the ideas were planted, then to the harvest of national political implementation. The result has transformed most of a generation of political and economic reality, rolling back the welfare state.

But before we are too self-congratulatory, recall the words of Samuel Johnson, who reminds us “How small, of all that human hearts endure, that part which laws or kings can cause or cure.” Public policy, by its very nature, cannot penetrate the depth of the human soul. But the private sector is being asked to take on the care of those who have been weaned from public support. In caring for one another voluntarily, we learn the habits of the heart that foster character. Public policy cannot make men and women desire that which is good, nor can it instill virtue. It cannot create community. And yet it is precisely at the level of community that each individual lives and seeks fulfillment. It is here that convictions and relationships are formed, and that civilization breathes and is transmitted. The soil of civil society is the seedbed of personal virtue. Our deepest fulfillment is realized not only in goals for ourselves, but in other-relatedness. And yet so little is done to actively foster the growth of civil society, where the human heart is formed.

The character of America’s citizens—faith, virtue, and valor—makes possible the fruitful use of free political and economic institutions. It is a curious paradox that our form of government depends on the quality of the hearts and minds that are poured into a democracy and a market economy, but the government itself is incapable of fostering the traits of virtue and character it depends on for its survival. These virtues are fostered in the private realm, in civil society, in the home and at the hearth, in our houses of worship, and among neighbors and friends. Public order depends on private virtue.

So much time, money, and energy is expended in the debate on determining public policy. And while it is indeed important, it is not *the* most important issue. If Russell Kirk was right—and I believe he was—the most important body of principles rests on the right relationship of God and man. These are private matters, indeed, but they have public consequences. In a free society, the fruits of the spirit determine whether we live in order or anarchy, freedom or tyranny, because, as Edmund Burke reminds us, what is not governed from within must be governed from without. It is not the government’s rightful place to foster faith. That must be done in the private sector. But the failure to privately foster the fruits of faith will topple both the public and private order we still enjoy. Freedom cannot be sustained without virtue, and virtue cannot be sustained without faith in God.

The little seedbeds for fostering growth of the human spirit are all around us, in the scores of faith-based organizations that are quietly at work throughout America. These street saints are knitting up the tattered fabric of civil society as they foster generous habits of the heart. These groups are often marginalized by the philanthropic community—sometimes because they are small, or because they are so difficult to organize into a grand strategy. But make no mistake: the people of faith on the street are doing crucial work for the health of the nation. The philanthropic community should foster their growth and help them bloom in the deep places that policy can never reach. The soul of the nation depends on the spiritual fruit they produce.

The views expressed here are solely the views of the author and do not reflect the views of Hudson Institute, its staff, members, or contracted agencies.