



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.

David A. Keene
Chairman, American Conservative Union

In the century since Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller established their mega-foundations, thousands of foundations both big and small have come and gone. Many have bettered the lives of individuals and their families while others, for better or worse, have had an enduring impact on the very shape of the society in which we live.

Today there are more than 65,000 grant making foundations in this country with combined assets of something like half a trillion dollars, but while many of these foundations do “good” in the traditional sense, only a handful have leveraged their assets to advance a larger vision; to transform the very society in which they operate and in which we live.

Until a few decades ago, few of these could be described as “conservative” in the sense that we use the term here, though most may have been playing a conservative role in providing essentially private sector charitable assistance within the framework of a free society.

Indeed, those foundations with a vision invariably pushed public policy in a leftward direction, regardless of whether those whose wealth was used to endow them would have agreed.

The Carnegie Corporation, for example, provided the seed money that launched what became the Brookings Institution, one of the earliest effective public policy “think tanks” and gave Ralph Nader his start after earlier underwriting Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 book *An American Dilemma*, which shaped the debate over race in this country in the decades that followed. Carnegie and other foundations funded studies that led to the creation of such things as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the creation by Congress of programs that have channeled billions of dollars to higher education.

Whether these efforts reflected the desires of the foundation’s founders or the non-profit managerial class that came to dominate the foundation world by the sixties and seventies is arguable. However, there is no question that even before the advent of the advocacy-oriented foundations that exist today, they had a huge impact on the direction and content of public policy in this country.

As a cohesive intellectual conservative movement began to develop in the late fifties and early sixties, it was perhaps only a matter of time before foundations were launched reflecting this “new” vision (that is,

HUDSON INSTITUTE

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

202.223.7770
202.223.8595 Fax
pcr.hudson.org

new to the foundation world). These foundations and the “think tanks,” publications, and scholars they promoted began to develop a body of thought, literature, and expertise that would ultimately have far more impact than anyone could have predicted twenty or thirty years ago.

Their success is remarkable when one considers that their combined assets are miniscule when compared to those of the bigger establishment and liberal institutions that came to the “game” far earlier. It has to be attributed to the power of their vision, the strength of their ideas, and the fact that most of them didn’t just drift into the business of working for a different kind of society, but came into being with a world-changing vision and mission at their core.

They have proven, as Richard Weaver observed so famously, that ideas do indeed have consequences and have given conservatives the means to develop policies that deal with public problems in ways consistent with the modern conservative vision of a free society—in which markets, individuals, voluntary organizations, and communities, rather than centralized government bureaus, make the crucial decisions.

The vitality of this vision seems commonplace today, but the intellectual energy it unleashed as it took hold and was nurtured within the intellectual and political worlds gave those who shared it and funded the development of the public policy proposals that flowed from it an impact far greater than could have been predicted by simply measuring the funds at their disposal.

The challenge today is to retain that energy and find ways to creatively build on what has come before. Political and ideological movements have a tendency to lose their edge as they succeed and attract new adherents. As a movement grows, those who join tend to be less grounded in the basic values that give it strength than those who came before.

The challenge of a maturing movement and those who have nurtured it to maturity is to create a new generation of leaders, writers, and thinkers with the energy, imagination, and grounding of those who brought it this far.

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.