



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.

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The conservative vision embraces two goals: liberty for individuals and a society in which those individuals freely make the choice not to abuse the freedoms they enjoy. Libertarian conservatives place more emphasis on the former, while social conservatives emphasize the latter, but both are important. Although much has been written about the uneasy relationship between these two branches of the modern American conservative movement, they are indispensable to each other. For there to be less government control and interference in the lives of the people, the people themselves must be capable of controlling their own worst instincts.

Liberty is the central idea contained in our Founding documents, from the Declaration of Independence to the Bill of Rights, but the Founders understood that true liberty could only exist among a people capable of self-control and adherence to a moral order. Individuals should have a great deal of freedom in leading their lives—political, economic, and religious—but conservatives also want a society in which people choose voluntarily not to abuse their freedom. The two are interconnected, since an upstanding, hardworking people can be afforded more freedom than a bloodthirsty, lazy rabble. Conservatives want to keep government small but also want to encourage the “little platoons” that do so much to build community and morality. Most conservatives, it is safe to say, also believe that morality is difficult, if not impossible, without religion—that without God, everything is permitted, a theme repeated often in Dostoevsky’s work.

So who should nurture the little platoons that are so vital to maintaining our liberties? Obviously, conservatives don’t believe government is the answer—though most conservatives would argue that government should not be the stumbling block either. This nurturing role falls to the philanthropic community—to individuals and foundations.

Although the premise of the question we were asked to address assumes that “conservative foundations have been particularly successful at influencing American public policy,” I would not be so quick to claim victory. Yes, political conservatism seems safely the dominant political philosophy for American voters, with Republicans controlling both the White House and the Congress. But the zeal to roll back the size and reach of government has waned from the heady days of the Reagan revolution. And the conservative vision—especially with respect to moral issues—is virtually missing from the popular culture. Conservatives seem impotent to affect the culture in any meaningful way—it has become coarser

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and more destructive with each passing year. And even in other areas, conservatives seem to be losing the battle. Multiculturalism and racial preferences, both of which masquerade as “diversity,” dominate our schools and universities and have been embraced by the corporate world, not to mention government. Yet conservative foundations have devoted scant resources to trying to counter these trends.

No doubt part of the problem is that conservative philanthropy is less well-endowed than liberal philanthropy. Most conservative foundations simply cannot match the behemoths like the Ford Foundation or the Bill and Linda Gates Foundation. But having more limited resources makes it imperative for foundations that share a conservative vision to better coordinate their giving, to share ideas, to create synergy so that they can become more effective, not just in changing public policy but in fostering a society that reflects conservative values.

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