



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 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, N.W.

**Scott McConnell**  
*Executive Editor, The American Conservative*

My view of what constitutes a coherent vision of the public interest has changed quite a bit over the past 15 years. Consequently, so has the way I would frame an answer to this question. I think conservative foundations may have been a little too successful and their vision of the good America a little too coherent for the country's own good.

I am not sure where the failure lies. Not, I don't think, in conservatism as an ideology. The classic conservative tradition remains as valid as ever: a certain predilection for the familiar; a recognition of man's innate flaws, or fallen nature as some might put it; and a consequent skepticism about vast schemes for social amelioration, whether that be spreading a Jacobin revolution throughout Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a war on poverty in the 20<sup>th</sup>, or a war to end evil in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

But this core of the conservative sensibility seems to have been forgotten or abandoned in the American conservative foundation world. I'm not exactly sure how that happened, but I don't think it's necessarily the fault of the foundations themselves. Foundation executives—I have been, at quite a low level, one myself—can be swept along by the tides of popular sentiment and elite cultural opinion. Perhaps the fault arises from the energy and sheer brainpower of the much talked about neoconservatives, whose global hubris marks a sharp departure from conservative tradition. (Almost any generalization about the neocons needs to be qualified: measured skepticism about big government and various forms of 1960s liberationism were the essence of neoconservative thought during the decade after *The Public Interest* was founded.)

Something unfortunate has happened to conservatism: as it has grown in influence, it has become less attractive, less skeptical, and less conservative—and the big foundations have something to do with this.

I wonder whether the undoubted success of conservative foundations in subsidizing both individual intellectuals and a certain body of thought has led, eventually, to those intellectuals becoming more constrained and less free-thinking than they would be had they followed more normal, pre-conservative-foundation career paths—in academia, for instance. At risk of heresy, I would say that foundation-funded thinkers are now more predictable and less nuanced than university thinkers—and I claim this despite the kind of political correctness that reigns in the academy, so well illustrated by the Larry Summers incident.

HUDSON INSTITUTE

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

202.223.7770  
202.223.8595 Fax  
pcr.hudson.org

How this happened is puzzling, but my own sense of the intellectual world of conservatives—I'm speaking of people I know personally: writers, foundation executives, newspaper people, Bush administration appointees—is much more diverse, fuller of questioning and dissent than is apparent from the product they now put before the country.

Let me give an example, less interesting because I will shield the identity of the main subject, a friend whom I will call writer X. Writer X is a much admired conservative, author of many good books and articles. I happen to know that Writer X is also an opponent of the Iraq War and a serious skeptic of Bush foreign policy. When I was talking with X's significant other—suggesting that the magazine that I edit could really use a piece from Writer X—I was told, well, so and so—naming a prominent individual in the conservative publishing and foundation world (and evidently a big supporter of Bush's foreign policy)—pays Writer X's mortgage. 'Nuff said. This is the kind of power the foundation world now holds over conservative debate in America. Such a piece will likely never be written by Writer X.

In another era, someone like Writer X would have been teaching at a major university and thus would be perfectly free to express opinions that contravened that of the Bush administration, perfectly free to change his or her mind. I wonder if we have now developed a calcified establishment in which conservative intellectuals, increasingly dependent on grants to maintain a middle-class standard of living, have sold themselves into a kind of gilded bondage, where they are less able to speak out or, more importantly, to change their minds.

On the surface, everything is hunky dory—polemical conservative works are on the bestseller lists, and the GOP dominates every level of government. But I don't see the kind of questioning and dissident spirit that was so much a part of conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s. It won't be published and it won't be funded.

I realize that I haven't quite addressed the question posed for the forum—instead, more sideswiped it. My sense of the public interest is that America should be a normal Western country, democratic at home, not belligerent abroad. Our own freedom would be better safeguarded by eschewing messianic visions and is especially endangered by two of these which are, of course, related. One is the immigrationist multicultural vision—America as the first universal nation—which holds that unlimited numbers of people can come here and the country will only gain in the process. This is ahistorical and unconservative. The second is a wildly ambitious foreign policy vision, expressed so well in George W. Bush's second inaugural address, which holds that America can only be secure in a democratic world—and so we must challenge much of the world, even threaten to invade it.

Conservative foundations ought to be at the forefront of challenging these ideas and fighting against them. But quite clearly they are not. That, I think, is a great misfortune for the country.

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