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FOR PHILANTHROPY AND CIVIC RENEWAL

VISION AND PHILANTHROPY  
*A Bradley Center Symposium*

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8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.  
The Ritz-Carlton, 1150 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, N.W.

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To understand fully the conservative vision of the public interest and the key role of philanthropy in that vision, it's necessary to appreciate how conservatives view the balance between individual rights and the good of the community.

The idea of rights is as central to conservatism as it is to liberalism. In broad terms there is also a similar interpretation of the obligations of the wider society to protect rights, and to provide support for its poorer and weaker members. But there are three ways in which we conservatives see that relationship a little differently from most liberals.

First, we see assistance to the less fortunate as involving mutual obligation. It is not a one-way right and one-way obligation. To be sure, helping the poor and alleviating poverty are not so much acts of generosity or charity (in the common use of that word), but a moral imperative. Indeed the root of the biblical Hebrew word for charity—*tzedakah*—relates to justice, not generosity. Yet assistance to the poor is not a form of reparations, or necessarily a step towards a goal of material equality. Those receiving help have a corresponding obligation to use it, if they are able to do so, to improve their condition and rejoin the mainstream society. We can, and should, insist on self-improvement. This is why conservatives, unlike most liberals, are quite comfortable in conditioning welfare on work, or assistance for education on effort and results.

Second, conservatives are generally more ready to balance rights to assistance with the wider material and social interests of the community. So while rights must be respected and strengthened, they do not automatically trump the common good. This is why conservatives are so leery of the idea of the word "entitlement," whether for welfare or for Medicare, where the law requires resources to be devoted to a program's specified benefits without regard to the impact on competing community needs or desires. To conservatives, it is thus quite appropriate to weigh competing goals, such as supporting the health of the elderly or the welfare of the poor, in the balance with education for our children or national defense. A community's commitments to its members must be reviewed regularly and adjusted.

And third, conservatives see "society" or "community" as an organic body that must balance these obligations and interests. Society rests on consensus values that evolve slowly over time—even though these values may be enshrined in the principles of legal documents and perhaps religious tenets. These

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values are often hotly debated as different people with contrasting visions of the good society struggle to make their case to others. Over time, this debate and the public's reaction to experience slowly alter our social culture and goals of social policy. All conservatives see this constant debate over our values and social culture as an essential feature of a free society, just as some conservatives—but not all—feel that the debate must take place within boundaries that they consider bedrock truths or national principles. These truths and principles include such things as the inalienable right to liberty and the American commitment to tolerance.

We all recognize as well that America is a special place where freedom and diversity have fostered a wide range of smaller societies or communities, and institutions within them—the communities and institutions that have always caught the attention of visitors to our shores. The diversity and values of these smaller communities, from ethnic or religious neighborhoods to states, are part of what it is to be an American. That diversity adds to the constant debate over our national values and culture. Moreover, the institutions of these small communities—church, union, synagogue, farm bureau, family, PTA, and the like—constitute the “ground troops,” pursuing our wider social goals and helping focus and direct the efforts of individuals who seek to support social goals. Berger and Neuhaus famously described these institutions as critical “mediating structures” that act as a bridge between the individual and the larger institutions of America, such as government, and humanize these more remote institutions.

Conservatives, more than liberals, see mediating structures as essential agents of the community—the national community as well as the local. We also see them as bulwarks of our society and its culture, protecting the values and interests of the individuals comprising society. And so we feel we must resist efforts by government to weaken them or bypass them, or to change their essence as a condition of partnering with them. That is why conservatives resist government imposing employment or religious restrictions on organizations that help to achieve public policy objectives, including where the organizations accept public funds from the government.

Conservatives deeply understand that philanthropy is vital to this whole vision of change and improvement in society. Throughout history the “patron” has been critical to the political, social and cultural evolution of free societies. Like the patron, today's philanthropic foundations make it possible for new ideas and new ways of looking at the world to be developed and communicated, especially approaches that conflict with the current views of government or established elites. Government cannot fulfill that role. Philanthropic foundations actually play the same mediating structure role in a financial sense that the organizations they support do in a policy, cultural, or service sense. They provide the essential “seed capital” for many ventures in a community that enhance the public good but cannot be supported with public finance without risking their independence and uniqueness. Without philanthropic support, many a breakthrough idea or solution to a problem might literally be unknown or stay on the drawing board, and our society would be less vibrant, successful, and just.

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