



FUN

“Those who have concerned themselves exclusively with what seemed practicable in the existing state of opinion have constantly found that even this has rapidly become politically impossible as the result of changes in a public opinion which they have done nothing to guide.”

—F. A. Hayek



DING A MOVEMENT

By James Piereson

This past fall, shortly before the presidential election in November, some 300 friends and admirers gathered at the Plaza Hotel in New York City to pay tribute to John Kenneth Galbraith and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the two aged warhorses of 20th-century liberalism. The event, sponsored by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, was billed as a “salute to democracy.” It was also an occasion to recall an era when liberalism ran at high tide in the United States—a tough-minded doctrine that stood boldly for the working man at home and against tyranny abroad. The contrast between the past and the present must have been painful to many in attendance that night: today, the decline of the faith is mirrored in the fact that there is simply no one on the Left whose influence or stature even remotely approaches that attained so many decades ago by the evening’s two honorees.

The long descent of liberalism in recent decades has, no doubt, been not just a painful but a perplexing development for those once convinced that the future would be shaped by their ideals. The rise



of conservatism must seem doubly perplexing. Galbraith himself had remarked, in 1964, “These are without doubt the years of the liberal. Almost everyone so describes himself.” And both he and Schlesinger had dismissed conservative thought in the most derisive terms as without intellectual substance of any kind. Today, not only has conservatism risen to prominence in the electoral sphere, but conservative thought has seized the initiative in the world of ideas as well.

Of course, there have been attempts by liberals to account for this reversal of fortune; but few have been accurate, thoughtful, or constructive. A particularly sinister role is ascribed to those conservative philanthropies that have helped fund thinkers, magazines, and research institutions—on the assumption that no one would advance such self-evidently meretricious ideas unless paid to do so.

Invariably, these broadsides ignore the substance of the ideas themselves, quite as if John Stuart Mill’s famous characterization of conservatives as “the stupid party” were still the rule in the early 21st century. But the plain fact is that modern conservatives have been engaged with the world of ideas to a far greater extent than most modern liberals. The columnist David Brooks has observed that, asked to name influences on their thinking, most conservatives are able to list a number of books or authors, while liberals have difficulty identifying any. This lively engagement with a coherent body of ideas forms a crucial if much overlooked aspect of the rise of conservatism, and one in which conservative philanthropy has played a central role.

THE ROAD TO SERFDOM

The first phase of conservative philanthropy, which began in the mid-1940’s and ran well into the 70’s, was guided more by an interest in classical liberalism and libertarianism than in conservatism as it has been under-

stood more recently.

The seminal influence on these philanthropists, who had only modest sums at their disposal, was F. A. Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*, published in London in 1944 and in the United States the following year. This slender volume, an articulate call to battle against socialism, turned its author, then an obscure professor at the London School of Economics, into an enduring hero among conservatives and classical liberals on both sides of the Atlantic. No other writer at the time had made the case against collectivist ideas and policies with such audacity and clarity.

The Road to Serfdom advanced two broad themes, one negative and the other positive. The first was that socialism leads almost inevitably to tyranny and the loss of liberty in all of its forms. The second was that the antidote to socialism is to be found in the revival of classical liberalism as articulated by British Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Smith, David Hume, and Edmund Burke.

In 1947, the Volker Fund sent a group of Americans to Switzerland for the organizing meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society, founded by Hayek to promote the free market in economics and the broad ideals of classical liberalism. In conformity with Hayek’s vision, Mont Pelerin functioned as an exclusively scholarly enterprise, avoiding political debate in favor of in-depth theorizing about the foundations of a free society. A short time later, Volker underwrote Hayek’s appointment as professor of moral science—Adam Smith’s title at the University of Edinburgh—in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, and also provided funds for New York University to hire Ludwig von Mises, Hayek’s Austrian mentor and friend.

In addition to these appointments, Volker and other donors lent assistance to the “Chicago School” of economics, led by Milton Friedman and George Stigler, and to the

University of Virginia's school of political economy led by James Buchanan—all three of whom would later win the Nobel Prize in economics. They supported hundreds, perhaps thousands, of graduate students, mostly in economics but also in allied fields like government and history; many later became prominent scholars in their own right. And they subsidized a few institutions, generally libertarian in outlook, including the Foundation for Economic Education, the Institute for

These funders were more self-consciously conservative than libertarian. While sympathetic to the writings of Hayek and the ideals of classical liberalism, they adopted a broader intellectual framework encompassing fields beyond economics: preeminently religion, foreign policy, and the traditional humanities. In contrast to Hayek and his followers, they were also prepared to engage the world of politics and policy and to wage the war of ideas in a direct and aggressive style.

Today, not only has conservatism risen to prominence in the electoral sphere, but conservative thought has seized the initiative in the world of ideas as well.

Humane Studies, and the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists, which helped circulate market-oriented ideas to professors, students, and even businessmen.

It is difficult to recall today how radical the ideas of a Friedman or a Hayek appeared in the 1950's and 60's, when the future seemed already to point in the direction of central planning, socialism, and the welfare state. In this phase of things, the role of philanthropy was largely to maintain the vitality of a remnant of thought until it could be brought forth again as an alternative to doctrines that had failed. By the mid-1970's, Hayek himself had been dismissed as an extremist, even a reactionary, and the influence of the classical liberals was at a low ebb.

THE BEST OF INTENTIONS

The second phase of conservative philanthropy began to take shape in the mid-1970's.

Just as the earlier donors had looked to Hayek for guidance, these foundations looked to the neoconservatives. Writers and editors like Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Hilton Kramer, and Michael Novak had for the most part spent their formative years on the Left. Rather than by Hayek, their ideas had been influenced by George Orwell, Lionel Trilling, and Raymond Aron—intellectuals of Hayek's generation who had dwelled on the evil of totalitarianism from a moral and political standpoint. In brief, they understood the moral foundations of a free society to be prior to and more important than its economic foundations.

The neoconservatives had an added advantage: having come from the Left, they understood the thought processes of contemporary liberals and leftists. They also understood that the war of ideas had to be fought by engaging in real-world controversies, with stakes



wagered on the outcome. Through their writings, and through the advice they were able to offer, they helped to orient the conservative foundations to the ongoing contest over which set of ideas would govern the nation.

The political world that these writers saw around them in the 1970's looked much different from the one that had so troubled Hayek in London in 1944. Instead of leading us down the path to collectivism, the welfare state had produced fragmentation, group conflict, disorder, and a general loss of authority in society. In the United States, moreover, the welfare state had advanced itself not through the nationalization of industry but through incremental expansions of social programs and accretions to federal regulatory power. The contemporary problem was thus not so much collectivism or socialism as the loss of morale and self-confidence that was in some ways characteristic of all affluent societies—a problem to which classical liberalism did not promise any obvious solution.

What the neoconservatives understood was that neither the intellectuals' dislike for capitalism nor their penchant for socialism was a function of economic analysis. By the mid-1970's, the economic promise of socialism was dead; it was obvious to everyone that socialist economies could not even feed their own people. What attracted liberal intellectuals to socialism was something else: mainly, the idea of community, which they contrasted invidiously to the individualism and competition of a market society.

Thus, as Kristol and others argued, an effective defense of capitalism required a defense of the cultural assumptions on which a commercial civilization is based. It had to be shown that free societies encouraged values far superior to anything that socialism could deliver.

The conservative foundations followed this lead. Though they continued to fund programs in free-market economics, they

also made gifts in the fields of history, philosophy, government, even art and literature. They came to consider religion, morals, and marriage to be as important as economics and markets—and closely bound up with them. The foundations strove to move into every major area of debate and controversy. They allocated funds to prominent institutions, including Ivy League universities where conservative ideas were in a decided minority, and they proved ready and willing to support magazines and journals addressing a spectrum of controversial issues.

In bringing a different approach and emphasis to modern conservatism, the neoconservatives enlarged its appeal, made it more effective in the political world, and helped it to adapt to the challenges of the time. The advance of conservatism in recent decades owes much to them, and to their partnership with the conservative foundations.

WHO OWNS THE FUTURE?

The network of publications, university programs, and research centers built from the 1970's onward will continue to wield influence in the years ahead. But, this phase of conservative philanthropy has now run its course—in part because it has done its work, in part because conditions have changed, and in part because some key donors are leaving the scene. In the decades ahead, new funders, now entering the field, will shape the next chapter of conservative philanthropy.

That next phase will necessarily be different from those that have gone before. For one thing, conservative philanthropy will likely be based more on individuals than has been the case till now. The prosperity of the past few decades, along with the success of conservative groups and ideas, has created a cohort of such individuals, few with enormous wealth but many prosperous enough to make significant gifts to conservative enterprises. At the

same time, some conservative foundations—Olin preeminently among them—have spent themselves or intend to spend themselves out of business in accordance with their founders’ wishes, and others have begun to shift their priorities.

The reason for this shift has to do with the fact that conservatism has become a governing philosophy, and governance leans toward the practical. This is a natural evolution in a movement that has assumed national respon-

lectual influence.

Conservatism has accomplished this process of renewal more successfully than any of its competitors in the postwar period. This has been done not through an emphasis on policy so much as through broader arguments about where we have been, where we ought to go, and what threats and obstacles stand in our way.

“Who owns the future?” Orwell asked. It is the great question of life and the great question

The dynamism of American life forces every movement of ideas to test those ideas on a more or less continuous basis if it means to survive and flourish.

sibility, and that needs workable agenda items—school vouchers, personal retirement accounts, legal reform, elimination of the estate tax, and so forth—to propose and enact. In addition, various conservative donors have themselves become involved in promoting one or another specific policy, and see the passing of a piece of legislation, or the implementation of a reform, as the most tangible measure of their success.

Does this mean that there is no longer a great need to sustain and renew the intellectual basis of conservatism? Hardly. The dynamism of American life, and the relentless competition between the political parties and among interest groups, forces every movement of ideas to test those ideas on a more or less continuous basis if it means to survive and flourish. One need only think of last fall’s tribute to Galbraith and Schlesinger to be reminded of the precarious and temporary nature of intel-

lectual influence. Few will be persuaded to embrace conservatism only on the grounds that it promotes private social-security accounts or caps on liability awards. In the end—as we saw dramatically actualized in the national furor over the fate of a woman kept alive by a feeding tube in a Florida hospital—the fight over the future is cultural, and moral. In this sense, Hayek and the neoconservatives have had it right all along: any movement, if it is to maintain or augment its influence, will need to wage an ongoing battle of ideas. To do so, conservatives, no less than liberals, will need the help of sympathetic philanthropists.

James Piereson is the executive director of the John M. Olin Foundation. This article is excerpted from “Investing in Conservative Ideas,” which first appeared in the May 2005 edition of Commentary. Reprinted with permission from Commentary.

