



THE BRADLEY CENTER
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 22nd Street, N.W.

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Insofar as the term “vision” too often bespeaks imaginary worlds shaped by ideology and the will to power, “conservative vision” may be an oxymoron. All the various strains of conservatism—from the spontaneous and dynamic order that arises from free and open markets to the inherited wisdom passed along through tradition and custom—are united by one common thread: a principled skepticism that political action can achieve mastery of social conditions.

For the last two generations this has meant, as a practical matter, being primarily an opposition movement. It has meant deploying intellectual and political resources to turn back the pretensions of progressive liberalism. We have had to do this with our own institutions, a “counter-establishment,” as an adversary once put it. There have been notable policy successes (welfare reform, crime, de-regulation) and notable frustrations (public education/school choice, affirmative action, re-regulation). The conservative movement now seems better positioned than at any time in history to move many of its policy ideas, such as Social Security, legal, and tax reform. Conservative philanthropy deserves major credit for nurturing the institutions and intellectual seriousness that made this possible.

Our side of the larger argument has benefited from a central, powerful fact: liberalism’s view of social reality is not in accord with human nature. Whether regulating markets or regulating social behavior, the same principles from which we derive the axioms of limited government also suggest the limits of social and economic policy. In a common-sense way, more and more citizens have come to understand this, which is why bureaucracy is reviled and “social engineering” carries pejorative deadweight.

However, one must immediately take note of the cognitive dissonance in public opinion. However impressive our intellectual and political victories over the last generation, liberalism or statism still commands a residue of legitimacy in American opinion. (For example, too many Americans tell pollsters that there should be a right to health care.) Hence liberalism retains some momentum behind bad policy initiatives and the strength to block our sensible reform ideas. [The next step in challenging liberalism requires attacking directly at the source of its remaining legitimacy.](#)

Liberalism as a programmatic ideology derives much of its energy and legitimacy with the public by assuming to be the prime force of human progress. In practical terms “progress” means the continual—and in principle unlimited—expansion of government. This is why more and more spheres of economic

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and social life end up being politicized despite our best efforts, and is also why today's liberals slide naturally into calling themselves "progressives" to avoid the unpopularity associated with the "liberal" label. Public opinion remains vulnerable to liberal/progressive appeals, which is why narrow cost/benefit analysis and similar approaches are not sufficient to turn back liberalism. Right now the conservative movement does not explicitly contest the Left over the terms of how human progress is understood.

As a historical matter, it was during the "Progressive Era" 100 years ago that both the intellectual foundations of modern liberalism, and the corruption of American constitutionalism, were set in place. The ideas spawned during the Progressive Era established the foundations of both the welfare state and the regulatory state. Progressive liberalism began as a broad-based intellectual movement, comprising economists, lawyers, political scientists, historians, journalists, and practical politicians. In the space of a generation this movement reshaped our understanding of our political system. It requires an equally vigorous and broad-based intellectual movement to reverse this.

In other words, we should seek to roll back the Progressive Era. This is less daunting and far-fetched than it may seem on the surface. Liberals today are largely unreflective about their own premises. Therefore, what is necessary is a sustained program to force liberalism to engage in arguments they avoid, or to examine its unstated premises. Such a debate can be started with the usual means: books, conferences, placed media, journals, and research programs. The main prerequisite for a sustained program is a cadre of intellectuals, ongoing programs, and institutional capacity. All of the various strains of conservative thought have a narrative of what constitutes the nature of real human progress, and therefore have the wherewithal to engage such a competition.

An initial program to do this would comprise five practical aspects:

Leverage Existing Institutions and Programs

It is not necessary to found new institutions or generate a large number of new intellectuals for this program. What is needed is to bolster and knit together existing scholars, programs, and institutions in a coherent fashion so as to "train their guns," so to speak, more directly on the main target.

Identify and Recruit a Core Group

There are numerous individual scholars and writers who understand the problem but who lack a program or institutional framework for deploying their knowledge effectively. Some kind of "steering committee," or ad hoc organization similar to Midge Decter's successful "Committee for the Free World" back in the 1970s and 1980s, might be established.

Promote Revisionist History

Liberalism derives much of its moral authority and legitimacy from its historical narrative of the supposed abuses of market capitalism. Debunking this narrative goes a long way toward kicking out the props underneath modern liberalism. Although recent scholarship has refuted most of the frothy liberal narrative, it is still the popular perception of the public.

Publications

It would be useful to have several sympathetic academic and intellectual publications participating actively in this effort, such as *The Public Interest*, *Journal of Law and Economics*, *City Journal*, and the *Claremont Review of Books*.

Academic Programs

The importance of academic programs should not be underestimated, even though their effect on public policy is indirect.

Of course, a sustained, results-oriented program would require much more thought about organization, project evaluation, and many other matters. My purpose here is simply to sketch a general strategy for consideration. “Rolling back the Progressive Era” may seem grandiose or pie-in-the-sky, but much the same thing was said about rolling back Communism. Yet today it is gone. We should take encouragement from that fact.

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