



Doers of the Word

Bradley Foundation Seminar on the State of Conservatism

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Scholar Michael Novak, in his book The Fire of Invention: Civil Society and the Future of the Corporation, provides a compelling summary of the challenge America faces as it confronts its future. The challenge: how to prevail against internal forces that try to move the nation toward socialism. Novak writes "After the collapse of the world's leading example of actual socialism, the USSR, socialists (and in America, just plain "progressives") without ever admitting their errors or correcting their way of thinking, still want to socialize the corporations. But now they want to do it through movements such as environmentalism, the philosophy of "stakeholders," children's rights, and some forms of feminism and gay rights."

The target today, however, goes far beyond just the corporations. It goes to all of America. And to Novak's list, one could add the civil rights movement and anti-poverty initiatives. Using all of those causes and more, the left has sought to exploit one of the fundamental moral underpinnings of America. That is, "As ye do it unto the least of these, so shall ye do it also to me." A shadow of this sentiment is enshrined on our nation's Statue of Liberty, which says "Give me your wretched, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

Until the 1930s the care of the least among us was in the hands of our ethnic and religious groups and the local institutions they controlled. The government was careful to keep its hands off families and the networks that supported them. But the stock market crash and resulting economic failure of the Great Depression exhausted neighborhood support systems across the nation, and for the first time the government intervened in the economy on a large scale. Even when the programs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that started as ambulance services morphed into transportation systems, American culture stayed intact.

In the 1960s the welfare state was enlarged into the "War on Poverty". Lyndon Baines Johnson dramatically increased the amount of money spent addressing poverty. In the '30s federal money went to the individual. In the '60s the money went to "services." This was a major paradigm shift. From it arose the poverty-industrial complex—an entire industry revolving around pathology. For every malady there was a Master's degree.

Rather than seeking to reform society, the left sought to attack the foundations of American culture by using its imperfections (slave owning Founding Fathers, the apparent inequities of capitalism) as prima facie evidence of its inherent wickedness. The left used poor people to solidify their case that American social values were the cause of the afflictions of poor people. The noble civil rights movement degenerated into a race grievance industry that substituted equal opportunity for a guarantee of

results. As the racial and sexual revolutions merged with the rising welfare state, they formed a perfect storm that continues to demolish family structures. All of the resulting pathologies were laid at the feet of allegedly outmoded American social values. This tactical debasing of American culture has been enormously successful, to the point where those of us who hold onto traditional American ethics and Judeo-Christian values are now the counter-culture.

To paraphrase what Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote in her seminal book, One Nation, Two Cultures, for many blacks the benefits of the civil rights movement were partially negated by the culture revolution that denigrated precisely those virtues that are conducive to economic improvement and social mobility. The Great Society, which intended to open the doors to opportunity, all too often drew minorities into the closed society of chronic dependency.

The question is how do we fight back? The answer is to take legitimate issues the left employs as battering rams against America and use them to provide compelling examples of how our values produce better people and by extension a better country. The mistake the right makes is by answering the claims of the left solely with data and intellectual debate. When Ralph Nader wanted to regulate automobile safety he didn't only make his case with dry statistics. He showed up on television and before the press with a crying mother and a bloody fender. Conservative foundations have to be willing to fund more than counter arguments.

To create the examples that will prove their values, funders need to redefine themselves as venture philanthropists, looking for social entrepreneurs among low-income people and applying management assistance as well as capital. An outstanding example of this principle was carried out in San Antonio, Texas, recently, when some wealthy businessmen got together to help Victory Fellowship founder Pastor Freddie Garcia to create a new residence and training center. Not only did they provide resources, they helped negotiate real estate deals, provided legal and finance experts to help with the details, and experts in construction to oversee the creation of the center. The result is a haven where individuals who were lost are transformed into citizens of value and character.

Conservative principles should be applied to the question of who should be funded. It is ironic that while the great fortunes that endowed many foundations were created by entrepreneurs who were risk takers, those who dispense with these resources do not apply conservative values in making their choices. We should be applying market principles to the social economy. We should judge programs by their outcomes. Results, not professional credentials or academic degrees, should be the measure of what programs get funded.

It is among these grassroots groups like Victory Fellowship—that take the people that the poverty industry would say are throwaways-- that I have found the highest degree of patriotism, the greatest defense of marriage, and support for abstinence and other "conservative" values.

People armed with experience will always prevail over people armed with only an argument. By funding conservative principles and working with people of faith to produce transformed people and communities, conservative foundations can demonstrate a culture that is worth maintaining and resurrecting. The Weinberg Foundation, the Marcus Foundation, and the Bradley Foundation have demonstrated the value of this approach. Not only have they given financial support to programs

that provide examples of the success of conservative values, they validate them and hold them up to the larger world.

The left derives its moral authority by talking about what it is "doing" for the poor and disenfranchised. Conservatives first must "do." They must join and support those institutions that help the least of God's children. When they have done that, they will have the examples, the friends, and the right to speak for them.