

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#589 - 'Pave Our Farm Lands!'

March 11, 1998

On our office bulletin board we display a favorite political cartoon, by Philadelphia cartoonist John Jonik. It depicts a political rally. Two average-looking guys are standing at a podium with microphones. We know their politics because each is wearing an arm band adorned with a simple dollar sign. The viewpoint is from behind them, looking over their shoulders, so that we can see the faces of the enthusiastic crowd they are addressing.

In the air above the crowd we can read words that are obviously being shouted to the men at the podium: "We want dirtier air and water so CEOs can make more money!" "Send Our Jobs Overseas!" "Stop giving us benefits from our tax money!" and "Give Our Forests to the Timber Companies Now!" Individuals in the crowd are holding up placards and signs. From left to right, they read: "YES to costly health care." And: "Please tap our computer messages." And: "The U.S. Constitution is utopian." The last three in the row read, "Pave Our Farm Lands!," "No laws for industry!," and, "Don't tell us what's in our food!"

The caption of the cartoon, written in bold letters below the image, is, "The American People Have Spoken."

This cartoon highlights the absurdity of the huge gap between what most people want their elected officials to be doing and what their elected officials are actually doing. It is not a cartoon about Republicans vs. Democrats because, on the issues depicted in the cartoon, Republicans and Democrats pretty much agree.

Both Republicans and Democrats have abandoned any idea of saving farmlands, family farms, or the rural areas they once supported. Instead, both Republicans and Democrats are paving the way for control of our food supply by a small number of absentee agribusiness corporations. It's what the market demands, they say.

Both Republicans and Democrats favor auctioning our legacy national forests to the timber corporations, spending taxpayer dollars to cut roads for trucks with chainsaws to remove the last stands of ancient trees --a part of our national legacy that won't grow back. (Tree farms aren't forests.) It's the most efficient way, they say.

Both Republicans and Democrats now favor policies promoting "globalization" of the economy --a euphemism for domination of all the world's economies by a few hundred footloose transnational corporations, many of which are larger than most nations. This "globalization" plan requires American workers to compete directly with sweatshop labor from Mexico to China, thus providing constant pressure to reduce U.S. wages, benefits, safety rules and environmental standards. American workers and their families and communities must make this sacrifice because free markets require it, they say.

No, this cartoon isn't about Republicans vs. Democrats because the differences between the two parties on these issues are just not very significant.

How did the differences between the two parties disappear over the past 20 years? How did the national political climate come to favor the policies ridiculed by John Jonik? The humor of Jonik's cartoon lies in the obvious absurdity of saying that these policy ideas represent the will of the people. But if they didn't derive from the will of the people, where did they come from?

In her new report, MOVING A PUBLIC POLICY AGENDA: THE STRATEGIC PHILANTHROPY OF CONSERVATIVE FOUNDATIONS, Sally Covington traces the origins of the modern political climate to a dozen philanthropic foundations, which for 20 years have pursued a coherent, strategic approach to philanthropy.[1]

Covington defines "conservatives" as those holding two core values: favoring the smallest possible government and maintaining faith in

the free market to solve all our problems. She traces the many ways in which these core ideas have spread throughout our society in the last 20 years, underpinning such diverse efforts as cutting housing programs for the elderly and disabled; claiming that enforcing environmental laws is a "taking" of a polluter's property rights; scholarship purporting to show that blacks aren't victims of historical racism, they're just not as smart as whites; school vouchers, which would undermine support for public schools; and much more...

Covington examines in detail the funding philosophies and activities of 12 conservative foundations during the years 1992-1994.[2] During the period, these foundations gave away \$300 million, targeting \$210 million of it to support 16 national think tanks and advocacy organizations; 9 media groups; 9 law reform groups; 5 state and regional think tanks and advocacy groups; 3 religion reform groups; and 2 philanthropic institutions and networks. Together these grantees represent an impressively coherent nationwide network linking conservatives in academia, Congress, the media, law firms, think tanks, and churches. Between them, they create and maintain an unrelenting rightward pressure on colleges and universities, newspapers, magazines, and TV stations, state legislatures, the Congress, the federal judiciary, and on philanthropy itself. They not only influence public debate; in many instances they define it.

A small nucleus of 18 conservative organizations received 75% of the \$210 million. Many of their names are familiar to anyone who reads a newspaper: the Heritage Foundation (which helped produce Newt Gingrich's Contract With America); the American Enterprise Institute; and the Cato Institute. But many of them are less well-known though still very effective:

** George Mason University's Law and Economics Center has as its mission to teach federal judges that the goal of the law should be to maximize the wealth of society by promoting the efficient use of scarce resources. Thus conceived, the law is no longer about the Constitution, or about ethics or justice. In this view, courts become an appendage of the market, promoting efficiency, not equity. By 1991, the Law and Economics Center had provided such training to 40% of all federal judges by offering them all-expense-paid seminars held at resort locations. Teaching 40% of all federal judges to see the world your way --now THAT'S effective advocacy.

** The American Studies Center coordinates Radio America --a network of 2000 radio stations promoting small government and free-market solutions. (See www.radioamerica.org.)

** The Free Congress Research and Education Foundation created National Empowerment Television, a nationwide, interactive 24-hour TV network described in 1992 by political commentator David Gergen as "the creation of a new politics in America" for its ability to mobilize and interact with core constituencies on issues ranging from immigration to tax policy to welfare reform.

** The American Enterprise Institute hires ghost writers for op-ed opinion pieces which are then signed by scholars and are sent to 101 "cooperating" newspapers across the country --3 articles every 2 weeks.

** The Reason Foundation serves as a clearinghouse on privatization and aggressively markets its ideas to the media, resulting in 359 TV and radio appearances, and over 1500 citations in national newspapers and magazines in 1995 alone.

** The Center for the Study of Popular Culture launched the Media Integrity Project in 1987 to attack National Public Radio for "left-wing bias." Soon the Accuracy in Media Project escalated the attack with its accusation that NPR was broadcasting "blatantly pro-Communist propaganda." Twelve years later, NPR's public funding has been drastically cut and, to survive, it has been forced

to air commercial messages for major corporations --thus applying a subtle but unmistakable corporate discipline to the news.

** The Heartland Institute publishes PolicyFax free for elected officials and journalists. This fax-on-demand service puts hundreds of short policy documents from leading conservative think-tanks into the hands of those who need a conservative spin on an issue. Environment- and-health titles include these: THE ENVIRONMENTAL CANCER EPIDEMIC THAT NEVER WAS; SILICONE BREAST IMPLANTS: WHY HAS SCIENCE BEEN IGNORED?; OZONE DEPLETION --WHAT YOU NEVER HEAR ABOUT THE OZONE LAYER; FOUR STEPS TO REFORMING SUPERFUND; and so on. (See www.heartland.org.)

** The 30-member staff of American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) provides technical assistance to the conservative policy movement at the state level, including development of model legislation and conferences. More than 26,000 state legislators --more than 1/3 of all the state legislators in the country --have joined ALEC.

** Capital Research Center (CRC) publishes FOUNDATION WATCH to critique the "liberal" funding initiatives of major foundations. A recent issue attacked the Catholic Church's Campaign for Human Development (CHD) for funding poor people's organizations and other social-action community groups.

In 20 short years, these 12 foundations have significantly altered every major institution in our society --universities, Congress, state legislatures, the judiciary, the media, and philanthropic foundations. What is the secret of their success? Here is what Sally Covington says:

** Conservative grants are overtly and unabashedly political. Conservative grantees are rewarded for their shared political vision, and public policy activism. They are heavily supported to market policy ideas, cultivate public leadership, lobby policy makers, and build their base of constituents. In contrast, liberal grantees are often pressed to demonstrate their uniqueness to funders, and to downplay their ideology and public policy advocacy.

** Conservative funders work to build strong institutions by providing general operating support, rather than project-specific funding. This unrestricted money gives grantees considerable flexibility to attract, train and keep talented people, launch special projects, and build their databases and skills.

** Conservatives emphasize marketing and communications techniques, funding grantees to flood the media and political marketplace with conservative policy ideas, and to communicate with and mobilize their constituency base.

** They have made long-term funding commitments, providing large grants over a multi-year, and, in some cases, a multi-decade period. Long-term funding has anchored conservative institutions, allowing them to take the offensive on key social, economic, and regulatory policy issues.

** Conservatives support conservative scholarship, rapid-fire research and advocacy, lobbying, strategic litigation, leadership development, and constituency mobilization --all the important components of an effective policy movement.

** Conservatives emphasize networking with other groups around a common reform agenda.

** They invest in recruitment, training, placement, and media visibility of conservative public intellectuals and policy leadership.

Through clarity of vision and steadiness of purpose, these 12

foundations have now created a new phenomenon that Sally Covington calls "a supply-side version of American politics in which policy ideas with enough money behind them will find a niche in the political marketplace regardless of existing citizen demand." No laws for industry! Don't tell us what's in our food! Pave our farm lands!

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] Sally Covington, MOVING A PUBLIC POLICY AGENDA: THE STRATEGIC PHILANTHROPY OF CONSERVATIVE FOUNDATIONS (Washington, D.C.: National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 1998). 52 pages. Available for \$25 from: National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy, 2001 S Street, N.W., #620, Washington, D.C. 20009; phone: (202) 387-9177; fax: (202) 332-5084. And see: Sally Covington, "How Conservative Philanthropies and Think Tanks Transform US Policy," COVERT ACTION QUARTERLY No. 63 (Winter 1998), pgs. 6-16.

[2] The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation; the Carthage Foundation; the Earhart Foundation; the Charles G. Koch, David H. Koch, and Claude R. Lambe charitable foundations; the Phillip M. McKenna Foundation; the J.M. Foundation; the John M. Olin Foundation; the Henry Salvatori Foundation; the Sarah Scaife Foundation; and the Smith Richardson Foundation.

Descriptor terms: republican party; democratic party; john jonik; jonik; cartoons; free trade; timber industry; logging; farm land loss; loss of farm land; agriculture; farming; rural policy; conservatives; philanthropy; takings; race; racism; school vouchers; media; law reform; free markets; academia; heritage foundation; cato institute; american enterprise institute; george mason university; law and economics center; american studies center; radio america; free congress research and education foundation; reason foundation; center for study of popular culture; npr; national public radio; accuracy in media; heartland institute; policyfax; american legislative exchange council; alec; capital research center; catholic church; campaign for human development; sally covington; covington, sally; lynde and harry bradley foundation; carthage foundation; earhart foundation; charles g. koch foundation; david h. koch foundation; claude r. lambe foundation; phillip m. mckenna foundation; j.m. foundation; john m. olin foundation; henry salvatori foundation; sarah scaife foundation; smith richardson foundation; national empowerment television; tv; radio; backlash; right wing;