

The 'Right' Books and Big Ideas The Nation November 22, 1999
by ERIC ALTERMAN

Abigail Thernstrom, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, and her husband, Harvard professor Stephan Thernstrom, would like to thank the John M. Olin Foundation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, the Earhart Foundation and the Carthage Foundation for help in funding their anti-affirmative action tome *America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible*. Tamar Jacoby, also a Manhattan Institute denizen, is indebted to the John M. Olin Foundation, the Joyce Foundation and the Smith Richardson Foundation for the financial help they gave her in writing her critical look at integration, Someone Else's House: America's Unfulfilled Struggle for Integration. Dinesh D'Souza acknowledges the John M. Olin Foundation's funding of his bestselling books Illiberal Education, The End of Racism and Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader while he was in residence at the American Enterprise Institute, to which he is also grateful. So too, Charles Murray, author of Losing Ground and The Bell Curve, whose immense gratitude to the Manhattan Institute has now been transferred to the American Enterprise Institute, considered a more congenial place for pseudoscholarly tomes devoted to making racism respectable. And Marvin Olasky cannot say enough in thanks to the Bradley and Heritage foundations, "not only [for] the financial support" for The Tragedy of American Compassion but also for the "stimulating research and writing environment" they provided.

Take a tour of our nation's cultural landscape as the century turns, and you find that ideas once considered ideologically revanchist are in full bloom, funded by right-wing donors. While many of the most promising intellectual talents on the left have eschewed the "real" world of public discourse for the cloistered confines of narrow academic concerns, the right has been taking its message to "the people" in the form of bestselling book after bestselling book. Authors like the late Allan Bloom, Jude Wanniski, Charles Murray, Marvin Olasky, Bill Bennett, Dinesh D'Souza, Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington, to pick just a few, have all written books in the past two decades that have transformed our political and cultural discourse on issues that are central to the way we organize ourselves as a society. Yes, they had the advantage of a powerful echo chamber within the punditocracy and the world of conservative opinion media. Yes, many of the books played into a few prejudices that many Americans may have already held but did not consider respectable to utter in polite company. But most important, these people wrote books directed at a mass audience and received funding and support from conservative sources that understood the fundamental importance of the battle of ideas.

The Bradley Foundation, for instance, recently compiled a list of more than 400 books it has supported during the past fourteen years. Its president, Michael Joyce, explains, "We have the conviction that most of the other media are derivative from books. Books are the way that authors put forth more substantial, more coherent arguments. It follows that if you want to have an influence on the world of ideas, books are where you want to put your money. It is what we are most proud of, of all the things we've done here." Indeed, Bradley recently invested \$3.5 million to start up its own publishing arm, to be called Encounter Books, named after the defunct journal of neoconservative ideas. Its

editor in chief, Peter Collier, explains that the decision was inspired by the perception that "the Gutenberg galaxy is imploding." Says Collier, "The reason for this operation is that it is perceived by certain people in the middle part of the country that serious nonfiction publishing is an endangered species. A lot of important books don't get done not because of the left but because of the market."

Joyce and Collier are not concerning themselves with questionable tabloid tell-alls, like Gary Aldrich's *Unlimited Access*, or with incompetent attempts to cash in on the scandal of the moment, like Ann Coulter's impeachment rant. These are best left to the old, reliable Regnery, which has been a far-right mouthpiece for decades. While Regnery books occasionally sell well, they do so only to members of the conservative movement. Neither Aldrich's flimsily sourced exposé nor Coulter's legal hysterics made much of a dent in the public discourse. Rather, the focus of *Encounter* will be on "questions involving history, culture and public affairs." Paying relatively meager advances--none more than \$30,000 so far, he says--Collier has signed up Sol Stern, a *City Journal* contributing editor and Manhattan Institute senior fellow, to write a book on the strengths of urban Catholic schools, and Wes Smith, a former Nader attorney, "on how the right to die becomes the duty to die." The plan is to skimp on advances but spend mightily on publicity. If a book takes off, then the profits are split, with a high royalty rate for the author and more investment funds for the publishing house. (Hmm, sounds almost socialist...)

Liberal foundations would do well to take a hard look at the model being employed by the right here. The left's current predicament mirrors that of the right between two and three decades ago. While it could still win national elections (witness Richard Nixon), the right felt shut out from the larger cultural discourse. Conservative thinkers were forced to fight their battles on a liberal playing field. Today the opposite is true. "The weakness of the left," Columbia political scientist Ira Katznelson has noted, "forecloses meaningful political choice, flattens political debate and leaves unattended vast human needs and distortions of power."

More than anyone alive, perhaps, Irving Kristol can take the credit for reversing the direction of American political culture. Before he began his career as an ideological godfather of the right, Kristol spent a brief period as an editor at Basic Books, where he found himself "exasperated" by the built-in vagaries of the business. But sometime during the seventies, Kristol apparently changed his mind about the value of book-length arguments. A regular contributor to the *Wall Street Journal* and a close comrade of its editor, Robert Bartley, he was introduced to the page's self-described "wild man," Jude Wanniski. Despite the fact that Wanniski had no formal training in economics, he believed (and still believes) that in the now infamous "Laffer Curve," whereby lower taxes on the rich allegedly lead to higher government revenues, he had found the key to all human happiness. Wanniski needed money and a place to write and think while he composed a supply-side manifesto based on the Laffer theory.

By then, the intellectual impresario Kristol was deeply involved in shaping the grant-giving agendas of the Olin Foundation and the Institute for Educational Affairs, which he co-founded.

He also helped "grow" the American Enterprise Institute to its current status. He continued to oversee the neoconservative domestic-policy journal Public Interest, which he founded in 1965 with Daniel Bell (twenty years later he added to his burgeoning empire the neoconservative foreign-policy journal The National Interest, which he started with \$750,000 from the Olin Foundation).

According to Wanniski, Kristol convinced the folks at Smith Richardson to give Wanniski \$40,000 to write a book, of which \$10,000 went to AEI to house him. His manifesto, The Way the World Works (1978), proved to be the bible of a movement that transformed fiscal policy and economic debate. Basic Books, which published the original version, printed 4,000 copies, expecting them to take years to sell out. Embraced first by Jack Kemp and then by Ronald Reagan, Wanniski's supply-side gambit became the "riverboat gamble" (in then-Senate majority leader Howard Baker's words) upon which our government's finances were recklessly bet. The Way the World Works was augmented in 1981 by George Gilder's no less airy tome, Wealth and Poverty, which was funded by the Smith Richardson Foundation and helped lead to the creation of the International Center for Economic Policy Studies--later renamed the Manhattan Institute.

It is an ironic fact that in a society as culturally debased as ours, books can have a significant political and ideological impact precisely because they are not read. Book reviews and Op-Eds based on the reviews become the currency through which big ideas are traded in the ideological marketplace. Reviews, let it be remembered, are frequently written by people with considerably fewer qualifications than the writers themselves. In Wanniski's case, his magic potion of pain-free prosperity was sold and resold on the Wall Street Journal editorial page and in the columns of Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. Few economists paid much attention to Wanniski's work or the theory itself when it first appeared. The only scholarly journal to publish an article on the subject before the eighties was Kristol's Public Interest. Nevertheless, the book provided a prop for Kemp, Reagan and their allies to wave at voters, demonstrating that the theory upon which they were basing their policies was somehow intellectually legitimate.

The creation of the largest peacetime deficit in human history once supply-side was finally implemented demonstrates just how little its predictions corresponded to reality. Reagan budget director David Stockman all but admitted that the entire intellectual edifice was a carefully constructed hoax by conservatives to defund the welfare state. No matter. The right had seen the future of public discourse, and it worked.

The great book of the New Right's assault on traditional forms of knowledge was Charles Murray's antiwelfare tract Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980 (1984). Two years before his book became the handbook on handling welfare, Murray was living in obscurity in Iowa, having written nothing more than a few pamphlets. According to Michael Joyce, Murray sent an article to Kristol at Public Interest, whereupon Kristol immediately called Joyce, who was then running the Olin Foundation, and scared up the money necessary for Murray to turn his article into a book. William Hammett, then president of the Manhattan Institute, agreed to house

Murray and soon decided that this horse had legs. As he explained in a memo to himself at the time: "Every generation produces a handful of books whose impact is

lasting; books that change basic assumptions about the way the world works (or ought to work...). Charles Murray's Losing Ground could become such a book. And if it does it will alter the terms of debate over what is perhaps the most compelling political issue of our time: the modern welfare state."

The Manhattan Institute inaugurated an extraordinary campaign to sell Murray to the public. Once the book was published, Hammett sent 700 copies to journalists, politicians and academics and hired a PR expert to turn the unknown author into a media celebrity. He paid journalists \$500 to \$1,500 each to participate in a seminar on Murray and his thought. In addition, Hammett wrote, "any discretionary funds at our disposal for the next few months will go toward financing Murray's outreach activities." Once again the model worked flawlessly. The book itself proved to be the prototype of The Bell Curve: Murrayite ideology mixed with pseudoscience and killer public relations. Sociologist Christopher Jencks and economists like Robert Greenstein, Jared Bernstein and Nobel laureate James Tobin, who took the time to examine Murray's data, found the book contradictory, solipsistic, intentionally misleading and often wrong. Never mind that, said the larger culture. Welfare causes poor (read "black") people to breed like bunnies, and "we" would be doing everyone a favor if we just stopped encouraging "them." "We tried to provide more for the poor, and we created more poor instead," as Murray argued.

Murray's book proved an effective spearhead. It was not the only book written during a time when Americans were reassessing their feelings about federal welfare policy. But it was the first and the boldest and the one that gave the most generous permission to voice resentments that had hitherto been unspoken in polite society. The net result, following a decade of arguments and Clintonite compromises, was a "welfare reform" policy based on many of the false assumptions that Murray laid out in Losing Ground. A decade later, Murray would undertake an even grander mission on behalf of his sponsors. It would be to make racism scientifically respectable.

Murray's research was considered so controversial that this time the Manhattan Institute refused to have anything to do with him, and he was shunted off to the American Enterprise Institute, where Kristol ruled the roost.

The AEI had already invested in respectable racism when it funded D'Souza during the writing of his apologia, The End of Racism, in which the author attributed racism, which he believed was vestigial, to a "civilization gap" between blacks and whites rather than to the fact that many powerful and influential white people think black people are inferior. These two arguments--that welfare caused laziness and black overbreeding, and that the blacks who were doing all the breeding were genetically inferior and, hence, hard-wired to rip you off, either through welfare payments, armed robbery or both--formed the unspoken foundation of the 1995-96 welfare debate. Perhaps the ultimate expression of Murray's influence can be found in the words of Gordon Lee Baum, chief executive of the Council of Conservative Citizens, which has hosted as guest speakers the likes of Trent Lott and Bob Barr. "My personal belief is that the overwhelming, almost unanimous belief of the professionals, the academia, if you will, in the field, say that is the case that there's a difference between black and white intelligence," says Baum.

"My personal inclination is to believe that The Bell Curve is not too far off the mark." Should George W. Bush win the presidency, the next new thing in conservative ounseling is likely to be Marvin Olasky's The Tragedy of American Compassion, an attack on

government social-welfare policies. Published with Bradley and Heritage support in 1992, the book was quickly dismissed by many. One critic described it as the ravings of a "utopian crank," while other reviewers preferred to call it "romantic," "bizarre" and "shallow." Indeed, Olasky's background--a fanatical atheist/Communist Jew turned fanatical Christian conservative--did little to inspire faith among the skeptics. Picking up where Murray's Losing Ground left off, Olasky's call to dismantle the entire welfare system nevertheless caught fire on the Republican right. William Bennett termed it "the most important book on welfare and social policy in a decade." William Kristol used the word "thunderbolt." Then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich thought it was so terrific that he had it delivered to the entire freshman class of Republicans, going so far as to speak of Olasky in the same breath as Alexis de Tocqueville. Now George W. Bush has apparently fallen under Olasky's spell as well, and the Texas Governor invites the onetime Brezhnevite down to Austin for frequent chats. If you want to know the meaning of "compassionate conservatism," including the source of Bush's enthusiasm for "faith-based" social-welfare programs, then do what Bush's aides do when they have a question: "Talk to Marvin" (or read his book).

Although few investments have paid off as handsomely as the Bradley-Heritage bet on the unknowns Murray and Olasky, similar stories can be told in a host of policy areas. To understand how liberals grew so defensive on affirmative action, look into Terry Eastland's Ending Affirmative Action: The Case for Colorblind Justice (1994), funded by Olin and Bradley; Frederick Lynch's The Diversity Machine: The Drive to Change the "White Male Workplace" (1997), also funded by Olin, and Invisible Victims: White Males and the Crisis of Affirmative Action (1989); and the Thernstroms' previously mentioned tome. At the now Murray-less Manhattan Institute, Peter Huber's Liability (1988) and Galileo's Revenge (1993) and Walter Olson's The Litigation Explosion (1991) helped spark the national debate on civil justice, the use of social science in the courts and the nationwide attack on trial lawyers commonly known as "tort reform."

The right has funded far more than attacks on traditional liberal policies. It has used its financial power to underwrite books that portray liberals and liberalism itself as illegitimate and corruptive.

To understand how alien leftist beings have kidnapped your college-age children, see Roger Kimball's Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education (1988) and Charles J. Sykes's Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education (1988). Also quite popular among funders has been a full-frontal attack on the "culture of the sixties." David Horowitz, the beneficiary of millions of Olin, Bradley and Scaife dollars, is convinced that the publishing industry is controlled by "political comrades" of Cornel West and Edward Said. Horowitz has declared that "the conservative agenda should broadly be seen as the conservative counter-revolution against the 1960s. It was a national tragedy that we gave up our cultural institutions to the left, and now we need to take them back." With that in mind, we have read the Manhattan Institute's Myron Magnet, whose The Dream and the Nightmare (1993) blamed the sixties counterculture for the creation of the urban underclass; John DiIulio's Olin-funded jihad, in an endless series of journal articles, against a "permissive" penal code; Allan Bloom's bestselling

jeremiad against modernity, The Closing of the American Mind; and a seemingly endless series of scoldings about our moral failings by the likes of Robert Bork, William Bennett and Michael Novak. Each one of them is generously supported by one or more of the foundations mentioned above. Each has played a seminal role in moving the political discourse to the right. During the House impeachment vote, for instance, ABC News chose Bennett and NBC chose Bork as guest commentators, despite the fact that their positions were deeply outside the mainstream of popular opinion on the subject. No liberals were similarly deployed.

In matters of foreign policy, conservative big ideas have had even greater success in determining the intellectual foundations of public discourse. Ever since the end of the Soviet Union, the foreign-policy establishment has been casting about desperately for a political paradigm to replace George Kennan's "containment" as the organizing principle of foreign and military policy. So far, three contenders have emerged. In 1989, former State Department official Francis Fukuyama argued in his essay "The End of History?" that no great challenges to Western-style liberal capitalism were likely to arise, and so, ideologically speaking, history had ended. The article was funded by Olin and published in *The National Interest*, which then promoted it and printed a series of responses from the Olin-funded Allan Bloom, Samuel Huntington and Irving Kristol, among others. Later it was expanded into a well-received Free Press book. Critics found Fukuyama's thesis provocative but difficult to apply to the real world, and recently even Fukuyama has articulated reservations in light of Russia's backsliding toward the possibility of a state-controlled economy.

Next up was Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, who offered a thesis based on the notion of a global "clash of civilizations." Huntington divided the globe largely into Western nations and the Muslim world, which "threatened Western domination" with "kin-country rallying" and "the threat of broader escalation." Despite generating some initial excitement, his rigid division also failed to cohere as an agreed-on new paradigm. Huntington's Institute for Strategic Studies received more than \$3.4 million in Olin funds between 1993 and 1999.

The most recent contender is Fareed Zakaria, managing editor of *Foreign Affairs* and a former protégé of Huntington's at his Harvard-based Olin Center. Zakaria argued in his essay "Illiberal Democracy" that the United States and the West should show more patience toward semi-democratic nations with one-party systems or elected authoritarian rulers as long as they "accord their citizens a widening sphere of economic, civil, religious and limited political rights." The essay will soon become a book, with some help from the Olin Foundation.

In addition to the fancy conferences, the cushy offices and the occasional consulting trip to the Governor's mansion in Austin, being a conservative intellectual, it should be noted, appears to be a pretty decent way to make a living. According to the July 1997 report of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, approximately \$10 million was spent by conservative foundations between 1992 and 1994 to finance fellowships for authors at their favored think tanks. Dinesh D'Souza enjoyed \$483,023 at AEI; Irving Kristol, \$380,600, also at AEI; Robert Bork managed to scare up \$459,777 for his office at Heritage; and William Bennett, also at Heritage, garnered \$275,000 in addition to his considerable book earnings. Fellowships at the left's much smaller institutes do not, to put it mildly, compare. Small progressive "angels" like the

Schumann Foundation, which generously funded my 1998 book Who Speaks for America? Why Democracy Matters in Foreign Policy through the good offices of the World Policy Institute, are in no position to make the researching of a book quite so comfortable or profitable.

AEI notes in its 1998 report that "the most significant areas of expense growth were in the economics studies area and in efforts toward broader dissemination of our research." Thirteen percent of its more than \$14 million 1997 budget went to publications and another 14 percent to "marketing and management." Those two figures together are more than most liberal foundations spend on their entire operations, including the gas and electric bills.

The publishing world, while consolidating itself to a disturbing degree, remains open to fresh ideas that it believes will likely capture the public imagination. Unlike much of the rest of the media, it lacks a discernible ideological viewpoint. Public-minded ventures like the New Press, Norton and the Perseus Books Group would love to expand their ability to reach serious readers with foundation-funded books that are also fun to read. What is needed is for liberal funders to recognize the value that books have in shaping the overarching direction of American political discourse and to fund not only the books but also the efforts required to make certain they receive a fair hearing. A progressive funder once told me that he never bankrolled books because if he took away a grant from a human rights or Third World poverty organization, "people would die." Yes, I said, but they will continue to die in greater numbers so long as the right has a lock on the foundations of public discourse. The outcome of any contest is a foregone conclusion when one side plays only defense.

Eric Alterman's most recent books are It Ain't No Sin to Be Glad You're Alive: The Promise of Bruce Springsteen (Little, Brown) and Sound and Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy, second edition (Cornell). Research assistance was provided by Loren Brody, a former Nation intern.