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THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

OPINION

From the issue dated May 26, 2005

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Philanthropy and Blogs Can Be a Dangerous Mix

To the Editor:

In Los Angeles, where I live, everyone wants to be a star, but all the buzz from a group of bloggers attacking me for my role as a foundation officer funding campaign finance-reform initiatives would make even Britney Spears's publicist green with envy. In the May 12 issue, William A. Schambra of the conservative Hudson Institute calls these bloggers news journalists (Opinion, "[In a World of Bloggers, Foundations Can Expect More Scrutiny](#)"). He praises them for covering a story that in his opinion the mainstream liberal media declined to cover due to their support for campaign reform.

I have a different view. As a first-hand witness to the events that unfolded on the blogs, I believe the bloggers at issue are not news journalists. To the contrary, they are nothing more than partisans engaged in an effort to discredit the campaign-finance movement.

By way of background, it is helpful to summarize the accusations made on the blogs at issue, something Mr. Schambra refers to as mere rhetorical excesses: As an executive at the Pew Charitable Trusts, I led a hidden liberal conspiracy that duped Congress, the President, and the Supreme Court into passing and upholding the constitutionality of campaign-finance reform. The conspiracy consisted of a group of eight of the nation's largest and most prestigious foundations, included all of the mainstream media who were silent co-conspirators, and was accomplished through hidden foundation grants to phony groups and organizations. As the story goes, I then delivered a secret speech (that just happened to be taped and that was later uncovered by a blogger) in which I describe the details of the conspiracy.

Suffice it to say the allegations are fiction, not even loosely based on reality. There was no conspiracy, there was no effort to hide anything by anyone at any foundation, the mainstream media did not silently cover up foundation funding of campaign finance-reform initiatives, there is no secret tape, I made no admission, and Congress, the President, and the Supreme Court were not duped. The well-documented facts belie such claims: The American public demanded that the broken campaign-finance system be cleaned up and wisely, out of a sense of duty (and probably fearing for their own jobs), Congress listened.

Notwithstanding the weight of the evidence, the bloggers continue to assert that foundations funded a fake political movement that fooled Congress into passing reform. They are wrong. Foundations had

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virtually nothing to do with the politics of the reform debate. Public disgust with money in politics blossomed in the early 1990s in the wake of the Clinton White House soft-money scandals.

Next, Senator John McCain's presidential campaign provided the movement with a unifying national voice. Finally, the Enron debacle followed by a host of crippling accounting scandals in the corporate sector whetted the public appetite for reform. Some may quibble with the details of my summary but generally I believe it represents a brief but accurate overview of the political forces driving campaign-finance reform.

If the bloggers took the time to do a little investigative reporting they would find that while foundations had virtually nothing to do with the politics of reform, the evidence suggests that once the issue ripened and policy makers in Washington placed reform on the policy agenda, the philanthropic sector had a great deal of impact in informing the substance of the debate. Which is the key point I was attempting to make in the speech I made: Foundations had an impact on the substance of a highly visible and important policy debate.

They did so by funding a large body of research conducted by a broad cross-section of scholars and organizations that figured prominently in the debate on the Hill and was cited extensively by the Supreme Court upholding the law in the landmark decision of *McConnell v. Federal Election Commission*. That is the story the bloggers missed.

Some of the blogs touch on a separate but related issue. The criticism from those quarters leveled at the foundations carries the persistent undercurrent that large philanthropic organizations should not be involved in funding efforts to inform the dialogue about the pressing issues of our times.

At the same time, these very foundations are routinely criticized by the mainstream media, leaders in the private sector, and others due to the pervasive perception that foundation executives are nothing more than out of touch do-gooders spending millions of philanthropic dollars to fund a whole lot of reports that end up gathering dust on the back shelf of some out-of-the-way library.

Within this backdrop, large foundations finally step up, take the lead, and can claim at least some of the credit for having impact on an issue central to the functioning of democracy-funding research documenting the effects of money in political campaigns under a broken campaign-finance system -- and they are criticized for, as one blogger describes it, "imposing their views on the American people." I cannot escape the idea that these foundations are damned if they do and damned if they don't.

Congress wrote the tax laws establishing charitable organizations to foster any number of traditional nonprofit activities such as ministering to the poor, searching for cures to fatal diseases, promoting religious programs, educating the less fortunate, etc.

Along with all that, Congress intended foundations to be in the

business of informing the great social debates of our time through research and public-education efforts.

Small conservative philanthropies and nonprofit organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, for example, recognized the positive social value of informing the substance of policy debates with top-notch scholarly research decades ago. Heritage and a group of small conservative foundations have long claimed credit for informing the transformational debates about tax cuts in the 1980s, welfare reform, and the so-called right-to-life movement in the 1990s, the faith-based initiatives early in this decade, and presently the movement to privatize Social Security. Whether or not you agree with conservative thinking on these topics, conservative philanthropy has fueled and informed the debates through research and public-education campaigns and in my opinion the quality of democratic dialogue is improved because of their efforts.

Recently I watched the full tape of the speech I made that has been skillfully edited and taken out of context by some bloggers. It is fair to say that reasonable minds could interpret my remarks in any number of ways. I sincerely apologize that my remarks led anyone to believe that Pew (or any other foundation) undertook a campaign to hide, deceive, or mislead.

For the record let me state as plainly and as clearly as possible: Pew did not attempt to hide its involvement in campaign finance, did not fund phony groups, and did not try to skirt the law as the bloggers contend.

Those who interpret my remarks as such are incorrect. The confusion came about because I was trying to explain two key funding practices (commonly referred to in the nonprofit sector as strategic philanthropy and capacity building) to a large group of reporters unfamiliar with the language and practices of philanthropy. Obviously, during the taped journalism training seminar that anyone can access for free online, my attempts to translate foundation norms into laymen's terms fell short.

Some will continue to argue that the bloggers promoting the theories of conspiracy and cover-up are journalists. In my opinion they are not. They remind me of the lonely misanthropic men I see on the beach where I live each morning with metal detectors and headphones combing for hidden treasure buried just beneath the surface of the sand. Occasionally they raise their voice to interact with civilized society by shaking around a bag full of dented old cans and worthless rusted slugs claiming in some incoherent manner that they found treasure that no one else was crafty enough to locate. Of course, we all know the bag is filled with garbage. Just like the noise being made by some bloggers about my remarks.

The frightening aspect of all this is Mr. Schambra's warning that these tactics represent the new wave of journalism practiced by some bloggers. In his defense, he does not know about the phone call I received from the blogger who is promoting the conspiracy theory.

When the blogger presented me with his theory of conspiracy and cover-up, I explained to him that he was misinterpreting the meaning

of what I said. In the course of my conversation with him I learned that he had not bothered to watch my entire presentation (someone later took credit for e-mailing him the handful of clips he based his story on); he had not spoken to anyone else in the nonprofit sector to confirm his theory; he questioned no reporters who covered the issue at the time to see if foundation activities were hidden; he spoke with no grantees who worked on the issue; and he had reviewed no grantee Web sites, materials, reports, statements, etc., on which the names of the foundations are displayed prominently.

As it turned out he had not talked to anyone and had not even bothered to conduct any basic research to fact-check and confirm. When I expressed surprise that he was about to write a news story based on some out-of-context clips someone had e-mailed him, he said, "It's not a news story, it's an opinion." I then asked if he wanted his "opinion" to be based on the truth. His response, and I quote, "I don't have time for all that, I'm going with my story."

I do not know if knowledge of the conversation described above would influence Mr. Schambra's views about these bloggers. Sadly, I still believe we should listen closely to his warning and think long and hard about its implications. He is correct in his assertion that blogs represent a new style of journalism that is a different species from anything we have seen before.

The bloggers discussed in his article practice a form of journalism in which facts that stand in the way of ideology are brushed aside as inconvenient and inconsequential; propaganda is truth; and they subscribe to the belief that "you are either with us or you are against us." Let the nonprofit sector beware: This new brand of journalism takes no prisoners.

Sean Treglia
Los Angeles

Mr. Treglia was a program officer at the Pew Charitable Trusts for seven years.



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