

The Glue that Binds the Movement

By Michael Flynn | September 9, 2005

They are the glue that binds American conservatism—in all its flavors: neoconservative, libertarian, evangelical, triumphalist—into an effective political conglomeration. They fund the right’s magazines, the think tanks, the policy institutes, the writers, and the advocacy groups. They help spearhead public policy campaigns as well as idea networks. And they seem to never take their eye off the ball. They are the conservative foundations—the expansive trough of cash that nourishes much of the right-wing’s political infrastructure.

They are also the envy of liberals and Democrats. “The right has done a marvelous job,” says Rob Stein, a former Clinton administration official who heads up the liberal Democracy Alliance. “They are strategic, coordinated, disciplined, and well financed. And they are well within their rights in a democracy to have done what they’ve done.” (New York Times, May 29, 2005)

The conservative foundations have been so successful, in fact, that one of their most important members, the John M. Olin Foundation, announced in May that it was closing down, claiming that most of its goals had been achieved. “I guess I would say, looking back on this period, that it’s worked out a lot better than we had any right to expect when we started,” James Piereson, Olin’s executive director, told the New York Observer. “I’m sure some stuff failed or didn’t go anywhere, but not a lot of it.”

Not that Olin’s conservative brethren are resting on their laurels. Just the opposite: Having tasted victory on everything from the nation’s response to terrorism to the effort to push faith-centered enterprises, the foundations are aiding efforts to push through a slate of rightist social policies, including abstinence-only programs, anti-tax initiatives, and campaigns to block stem-cell research and same-sex marriage. The culture wars, it would seem, are as hot as ever.

The latest battle in this war is the burgeoning debate over the teaching of evolution. Headquarters of the effort to push so-called Intelligent Design (ID) is the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based public-policy institute—and former branch of the Hudson Institute—which uses the largesse from an impressive list of conservative donors to lead what one observer calls “the modern right’s war on science.” Taking its cue from the right’s tried-and-true method of waging a “war of ideas” to impact the direction of government and public opinion, the Discovery Institute, writes Chris Mooney in a recent article for the American Prospect, is leading “a specifically intellectual attack on evolution ...

[that] epitomizes how today’s political right has developed a powerful infrastructure for battling against scientific conclusions that anger core constituencies in industry and on the Christian right.”

According to Stephen Meyer, director of Discovery’s Center for Science and Culture—“the ideological and strategic backbone behind the eruption of skirmishes over science,” according to the New York Times—the institute aims to “have an effect on the dominant view of our culture.” “We are in the very initial stages of a scientific revolution,” Meyer told the Times in August.

Discovery’s strategy: Don’t fight the teaching of evolution; just get public schools to adapt their curriculum to highlight “controversies” in Darwin’s theories. It is an idea that has taken hold, as evidenced by President Bush’s recent announcement that “both sides out to be properly taught.” As Mooney puts it: “ID hawkers have crisscrossed the United States arguing that public schools should ‘teach the controversy’ over evolution—a controversy they themselves have manufactured.”

According to the so-called Wedge Document, a widely cited 1999 strategy memo produced by Discovery, ID is supposed to “function as a ‘wedge’” that can “split the trunk” of what it terms “scientific materialism.” ID “promises to reverse the stifling dominance of the materialist worldview, and to replace it with a science consonant with Christian and theistic convictions.”

Behind this campaign is money—lots of it. According to the New York Times, Discovery “has provided an institutional home for ... dissident thinkers, pumping \$3.6 million in fellowships of \$5,000 to \$60,000 per year to 50 researchers since the science center’s founding in 1996.” Some 40 percent of the \$9.3 million spent by the science center has gone to strict research, which includes paying universities to allow professors to devote time to ID studies,



financing laboratories, and undertaking “field research” in biology, paleontology, biophysics, and a host of other academic disciplines in both the sciences and the humanities.

When the Times queried Discovery’s president, Bruce Chapman, about the institute’s funders, Chapman demurred, arguing that he did not want to give details “because [supporters] get harassed.” But an analysis of the institute’s tax documents, according to the Times, reveals that it received a total of \$4.1 million in 2003 from more than 20 foundations, “at least two-thirds of them with explicitly religious missions.” Among its backers are the Anschutz, Ahmanson, and Scaife Foundations. It also receives \$1 million a year from the Gates Foundation, although a Gates’ officer was quick to note in a Times interview that its donations are “exclusive to the Cascadia project,” a Discovery initiative on regional transportation issues.

Another Microsoft executive, Mark Ryland, also funds the institute through his AMDG Foundation, the initials of which stand for “Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam,” Latin for “To the Greater Glory of God.” And the Stewardship Foundation, which according to its web site “provides resources to Christ-centered organizations whose mission is to share their faith in Jesus Christ with people throughout the world,” has provided more than \$1 million.

All the attention, however, is causing some mainstream funders to distance themselves from the institute. Denis Hayes of the Bullitt Foundation, which provided money in 2001 for the institute’s transportation project, wrote in an email to the Times that Discovery was “the institutional love child of Ayn Rand and Jerry Falwell. ... I can think of no circumstances in which the Bullitt Foundation would fund anything at Discovery today.” The Templeton Foundation, which funds efforts to find “new insights between theology and science,” has also stopped providing

support. Templeton’s Charles Harper said that Discovery had become too political. Although they “always claimed to be focused on science, what I see is much more focused on public policy, on public persuasion, on educational advocacy, and so forth.”

The growing controversy seems to have spurred Discovery to distance itself from the campaign to have ID taught in schools, focusing instead on refining its arguments about purported controversies in evolution, promoting what one observer calls “creationism light.” They have also tried to put room between themselves and their supporters on the Christian right. Says John Calvert, head of the Kansas-based Intelligent Design Network, “They want to avoid the discussion of religion because that detracts from the focus on the science.”

But whatever its intentions, Discovery seems to have turned ID into a crusade with its own momentum. As Thomas McCallie, executive director of the MacLellan Foundation, which donated nearly \$500,000 to Discovery, said: “We give for religious purposes. This is not about science, and Darwin was not about science. Darwin was about a metaphysical view of the world.”

Michael Flynn is a freelance writer and an IRC research associate.

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