

Ben Wattenberg—Think Tank Trailblazer

Washington, D.C.
September 19, 2008
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I am very grateful for the kind things that have been said about me and AEI this evening. And I am very grateful for Ben Wattenberg.

The first of my many debts to Ben was incurred in April 1970, long before I met him. America was preparing to celebrate its first Earth Day, and the media and Congress were awash in hysterical claims and silly ideas about overpopulation and environmental doom. Along came Wattenberg with a brilliant essay in *The New Republic* titled “The Nonsense Explosion.” It debunked the notion that America was being overrun by human beings and their wasteful ways, and that only solution was for the government to limit economic growth and restrict personal freedoms. Among Ben’s targets was the bestselling book by Stanford professor Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*.

Ben was not a think tanker at the time. He was a former LBJ speechwriter, then working with Richard Scammon on what would be their landmark political study, *The Real Majority*, and headed for Hubert Humphrey’s 1970 Senate campaign in Minnesota. Yet the essay was a quintessential think tank product. It was long—close to 5,000 words in a political opinion magazine—and filled with facts and even a table. It was lucid, judicious, and opinionated, and utterly devastating to the fallacies, contradictions, shallowness, and menacing ideologies of the population explosionists. And did I mention contrarian, controversial, and correct? (Ben loves alliteration and I’m doing my best.) *The New Republic* was deluged with angry letters. Time proved Ben right on every point.

My debt to Ben was intellectual and political. It taught me many things I had not previously understood—and just in time, as I was working on environmental issues in the Nixon White House, and it was nice to have this voice of reason from an impeccable Democratic source. But my debt was also social and romantic. I was dating a biology major at Stanford who was a student of Paul Ehrlich, and she had given me the great professor’s book. With glee I sent her the Wattenberg rebuttal and made sure it arrived in a big creamy envelope embossed by the Nixon White House, sure to attract the attention of her dorm mates on the mail table. Eventually, she was persuaded, and even agreed to marry me. Ideas do have consequences.

Later that year, Wattenberg and Ehrlich squared off on *The Johnny Carson Show*. The two were talking afterwards, and Ben said mildly that Paul had exaggerated things. And this was Ehrlich’s response: “You have to exaggerate things to get attention.” Ben Wattenberg—English major from Hobart College, former editor of the trade magazine *Rivers and Harbors*, Washington denizen, political functionary, and

* These remarks were delivered at the 2008 annual dinner of *Think Tank*, the PBS television program hosted by Ben Wattenberg that aired from 1994–2010. The dinner was billed as a tribute to Mr. DeMuth on his impending retirement as president of an actual think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, but when the honoree reached the podium he turned the tables on his host and longtime colleague.

journeyman wordsmith—would stand for knowledge and truth, while Paul Ehrlich—renowned Stanford professor of biological sciences, author of dozens of papers in the most prestigious academic journals, fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Philosophical Society—would stand for bombast and expedience.

That in a nutshell is the think tank at its best: unpedigreed but principled, *épater les dirigistes*. The best American universities are wonderful institutions, but they have their weak spots: in their isolation they can be faddish, surreal, conformist, and, well, academic when it comes to practical matters. It is equally wonderful that an intellectual corrective should come from the world of Washington politics—where “exaggerate things to get attention” is the norm.

Having inhabited both worlds, I have noticed that seminars at Washington think tanks are often less ideological and partisan than university seminars. Take a smart Democrat and a smart Republican who have served in government, and let them have at it face-to-face over social security or trade or pollution regulation, and you often get a thoroughly practical and even sympathetic discussion. Both know how constrained things are on the inside: how difficult are the demands of understanding, communication, and compromise, how narrow are the passages to progress and how treacherous the traps along the way. Not for them the magic bullet or blackboard solution or the gothic political fantasy. Their principles are in conflict, but each one knows how hard it has been for the other guy to translate his principles into practice.

The serious think tanks have taken this phenomenon to the level of organization. We try to combine academic standards and people with the practitioner’s realism and search for the means of reform. At AEI since 1978, Ben Wattenberg has done important work in demographics while writing a yeasty political column, and he has trained many young people—such as Karl Zinsmeister who spoke this evening—who are equally committed to real scholarship and have worked with distinction in administrations of both parties. His many books have ranged from the polemical, such as this year’s *Fighting Words*, to the seminal (*The Real Majority*), the inspirational (*The First Universal Nation*), the contrarian (*The Birth Dearth*), and the empirical-historical (his great original work *The First Measured Century*).

And Ben has done more than that. He has taken his thirst for facts and reasoned hard argument, and his strong dislike of bunkum and cant, into the inhospitable realm of television. *Think Tank* is the opposite of, and antidote to, the crossfired, haywired, political gong show. His typical guests are the smartest students of the subject-at-hand of the most sharply opposing views. Robert Bork and Lani Guinier on affirmative action, to take one of scores of examples. They get to speak in whole sentences and even to finish their thoughts. If they exaggerate things to get attention, the moderator reels them in with a serious question. He loves a fight but insists that it be fought with words that are true.

One of the most serious problems of the advanced society is that we are all expected to have considered views on a multitude of issues that only specialists can understand in any detail. The media responds by portraying complicated problems, from global warming to the financial collapse, in romantic and sentimental terms—as simple dramas with stark

heroes and villains. For fourteen years Ben Wattenberg has waged a one-man resistance. He has taught millions of people that it is possible to learn a sufficient amount about a complex problem if one is willing to sit still for thirty minutes.

The task of the political speechwriter is to convey complicated ideas in terms that are simple and popular. The task of the think tank is to convey complicated ideas in terms that are clear even if not simple and true even if unpopular. Ben has led the way across that pass. In doing so, he has been our teacher, too, and deserves our gratitude and admiration.