

Bradley Prize Remarks

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I am deeply grateful to the Bradley prize committee and trustees for this wonderful award. I have spent much of my career at think tanks—five years now at Hudson Institute, twenty-five years at the American Enterprise Institute. My remarks will focus first on AEI, then on think tanks in general, and then move inexorably to today’s political problems, which my current research has solved.

AEI’s resurgence when I was its president was a victory with many fathers—including the Bradley Foundation. When I arrived in 1986, the Institute was in a financial crisis. My first weeks were spent cutting our research staff by half, negotiating with sullen bankers and creditors, and informing endowment donors that their funds had been spent off and would take years to replenish. Then the Bradley Foundation announced a \$1 million grant for a new program in defense and foreign policy. That was the moment we shifted from downsizing to rebuilding. Bradley had declared that AEI was worth saving and the time had come to get on board. Many others were then to follow its lead.

I could not possibly thank all the scholars, staff, trustees, and donors who were indispensable to AEI’s success and who made my time there such a happy and rewarding one. But please let me recognize a select group of my backstage collaborators. These are people who made huge, risky investments in AEI—often in the face of firm advice that they not do so—and who have since passed away, never having received an award for what they did. Thank you: Bill Butcher, Dave Packard, Randy Richardson, Mike Joyce, Dan Searle, Charles Wohlstetter, Elizabeth Lurie, Red Blount, Bill Simon Sr., Dick Scaife, George Rowe.

Four think tank chieftains have now received the Bradley Prize: I am joining Ed Feulner of the Heritage Foundation, Darcy Olsen of the Goldwater Institute, and Mitch Daniels of the supreme Hudson Institute, now under the brilliant leadership of Ken Weinstein. A fifth went to the founders and leaders of the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies. Of the 57 Bradley Prizes to date, more than half have gone to think tank denizens—19 to resident scholars and another 12 to university scholars with substantial involvements. There is admittedly a certain political valence here—think tankers are not so well represented among the MacArthur geniuses. Yet RAND claims more than 30 Nobel Laureates, and Brookings’s achievements are manifold. The significance of these institutions goes beyond the conservative movement.

Policy research institutes first appeared just 70 years ago—there were essentially none before the late 1940s. Most proceed from a settled philosophical disposition; some are forthrightly

attached to a political movement or creed. All aim to move the world: they address themselves not only to other academics but also to government officials and the general public; they pay careful attention to the crafts of writing, speaking, and marketing; they write pamphlets. They also, as Milton Friedman first taught and practiced, incubate and stockpile reform ideas, often for long periods—until the practical world is ready for them, often in response to a crisis.

Yet all think tanks subscribe to, and the best adhere to, the intellectual virtues of reasoned inquiry and debate, openness to diverse views, and high standards of evidence, argument, and civility. Walk in the door, ask about global warming or tax reform or Taiwan, and you will get a polished, highly-informed position—but one intended to advance discussion, not shut it down.

Think tanks have risen to prominence and influence at a time when two much older institutions—the ones they are closest to—have been in decline. Universities and colleges have succumbed to demands to embrace orthodoxy and suppress open inquiry and dissent. Government and politics have succumbed to demands to regiment every aspect of society and commerce and ameliorate every difficulty of private life.

Universities and government command vast resources, are eagerly sought after, and are productive in many respects. Yet both have lost touch with their ancient and essential purposes. For higher education, these are to promote the scientific spirit, critical thinking, and the examined life in a world fraught with distractions. For government and politics: to mediate social conflict, enact laws through representation and compromise, and provide the framework for freedom and prosperity.

Our troubles in education and government have many deep causes. But they take the form of institutional troubles, such as the growth of bureaucracies. In universities, armies of diversity deans, teacher-sensitivity trainers, and student-contentment counsellors are displacing faculty—whose tenured positions are supposed to carry responsibility for upholding academic standards. In government, fleets of specialized agencies are displacing elected legislators—whose constitutional positions are supposed to carry responsibility for deliberation and collective choice.

Bureaucracies are useful and necessary, but not when they are pursuing their own agendas, free of direction from a recognized authority or establishment. They have acquired autonomy in what Robert Nisbet called the twilight of authority. Modern culture and affluence, coupled with powerful communications technologies, have generated ever-narrower and more numerous interest groups, and networks of self-reinforcing aspiration and aggravation. Bonds of society and citizenship have attenuated. Institutions of self-government, from parties to legislatures, have been disestablished by atomized, entrepreneurial politics.

To counter these forces, I advocate antidisestablishmentarianism. I have been looking for an opportunity to use that word in a sentence since fifth grade. Here is what I mean.

Intellectuals argue over right policies and norms of conduct, and over ideals of justice, identity, dignity, liberty, happiness, and consent. But all of these desirables are, in practice, products of living institutions—from the “little platoons” of family, faith, and locality to the extended institutions of government and education, and of commerce and the professions. It is in and through these institutions that norms and ideals are formed, acquired, transmitted, tested against rival conceptions, and put to practical use. Institutions are being disestablished by the forces of modernity, but we should not despair that they are irretrievably in decay. The modern world is still the place to be. The success of the think tanks tells us that institutional innovation is as possible today as technological innovation.

The think tank impresarios wanted to advance a set of policy ideas and political norms, often conservative and libertarian ones that had fallen out of favor. To do so, they had to devise a new form of organization—more hierarchal and purposive and less bureaucratic than the university, with a division of labor between management and scholarship and an irrevocable commitment to competition in ideas. These have been effective, even disruptive innovations. At the campuses, vows of reform seem to come after a strange visitor from a think tank, bearing facts and arguments students have been carefully shielded from, has been mobbed into silence or peremptorily disinvited.

In government, long-suppressed sentiments of popular sovereignty and national self-determination have made a rowdy, raucous reappearance. The atrophied institutions of the nation-state have been rudely awakened, and are now being put to the test. After last year’s elections, a friend who is a recent immigrant and enthusiastic new citizen said to me, “Your founders—excuse me, *our* founders—really were geniuses: they arranged things so we could have a revolution in every generation.” That, as President Trump would say, is so true. But the founders also taught us that the hardest work comes in the aftermath—in forging institutions to vindicate, and perpetuate, the revolution’s ideals.

One of President Trump’s top advisers has described his task as “deconstructing the administrative state.” That will require constructing something in its place. I think the building manifest includes a Congress with a real power structure, a revival of the legislative arts, and new mechanisms of checks and balances between Congress and Executive. It doesn’t help that those who lost in the recent elections have retreated to the hills to wage guerrilla politics against the very legitimacy of the struggling new order—but there are ways and means of dealing with this, also.

In any event, our decades of work in advancing better policy ideas have now brought us to a new journey, that of reconstituting our political institutions. It will be a perilous journey: let us apply ourselves to making it equally successful.

Thank you, one and all.