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Friday, August 6, 2010

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## Preserving freedom in philanthropy

By [Cory Andrews](#) | 5 Aug 2010 | 99 views



Nonprofit foundations and philanthropic organizations face a hostile economic and legal climate. Campaigns to diversify boards of directors, undermine donor intent, and increase government regulation all interfere with the good work that nonprofit organizations do for the community. To counter these harmful campaigns, [Washington Legal Foundation](#) just released the [latest edition of its "Conversations With"](#) publication format, featuring a group of nationally recognized philanthropic experts who examine the direct connection between philanthropy and freedom, and how some activists

and elected officials are threatening to sever that important link by pursuing legal policies aimed at directing more charitable donations to their "preferred" causes.

Through an informal, question-and-answer conversational format, former attorney general of the United States and Pennsylvania governor Dick Thornburgh leads a lively and informative discussion with Dr. Larry Arnn, president of Hillsdale College; Heather R. Higgins, president and director of the Randolph Foundation; and Adam Meyerson, president of the Philanthropy Roundtable.

The participants explore Americans' uniquely charitable spirit and the vital role that such widespread generosity has played in our democracy. Heather Higgins observes that "America has a rich charitable tradition, the logical complement to the idea that we as citizens are responsible for taking care of our neighbors, rather than presuming and waiting for the government to do it for us." Adam Meyerson agrees, emphasizing how the same spirit of entrepreneurialism that was so successful in making America the leader in initiative and ingenuity in the business sector can also be found in the charitable sector. "Volunteering and charitable giving have been part of the American character since the founding—they're part of our national DNA," Meyerson states.

The participants also address the growing movement to impose further government regulation on the philanthropic sector by more narrowly defining which charitable causes are "in the public interest." Governor Thornburgh notes how the view that philanthropists don't sufficiently serve the "underserved" has led to increased calls for greater government oversight of, and involvement in, the nonprofit sector. The participants are unanimous in decrying this recent trend. Dr. Larry Arnn points out that the federal government is itself a seat of privilege: "When the government identifies underprivileged classes, it has a way, as it has an interest, in turning them into castes. Because unlike charity (when it is really charity), government these days hopes to receive something back from the beneficiaries: it gets political support for them." Meyerson agrees, adding that "[o]ne thing we should be very cautious about is who gets to decide which groups are the 'right' object of charity and which aren't."

Many in the nonprofit world have comfortably assumed that because they are concerned with the public good and are not concerned in turning a profit, charitable organizations occupy a "safe space" in the legal and regulatory arena. As this illuminating conversation reveals, such assumptions are increasingly under assault.