

The Very Foundation of Conservatism

By John J. Miller

WASHINGTON
PLEASE give me a date," William E. Simon used to ask the industrialist John M. Olin years ago, when the two men discussed Mr. Olin's desire to have his charitable foundation go out of business at some point in the future. Yet Mr. Olin always rebuffed Mr. Simon, who was president of the John M. Olin Foundation for 23 years. "You figure it out," he would reply.

The figuring out is now over: tomorrow afternoon, the board of the Olin Foundation will meet for the last time, approve a final round of grants that will empty its coffers and then disband forever. Having given away hundreds of millions of dollars over several decades, one of the great underwriters of the conservative movement will be no more.

Many liberals are no doubt pleased to see the John M. Olin Foundation go

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the way of the woolly mammoth. Others, however, are studying the foundation in order to emulate it: the new Democracy Alliance, to which some 80 affluent liberals have pledged \$1 million each, aims to do for the left what the Olin Foundation did for the right.

Why is the foundation closing, 52 years after its founding? John M. Olin, who died in 1982, feared that if it were to exist in perpetuity, it would eventually be captured by hostile forces; the example of Henry Ford II, who quit the board of the Ford Foundation in frustration over its liberal agenda, had especially impressed him.

What did the foundation do? After becoming its president in 1977, Mr. Simon called for the creation of a "counterintelligentsia" to balance what he saw as the liberal dominance of the universities, the news media, nonprofit organizations and government bureaucracies. The Olin Foundation and other right-leaning philanthropies — particularly the Bradley, Scaife and Smith Richardson Foundations — provided a pool of venture capital that helped build a network of research institutions, academic fellowships and highbrow journals for the conservative movement. If it is something of a cliché these days to suggest that conservatives are win-

ning the war of ideas, much of the credit belongs to these grant makers.

The Olin model offers many lessons for foundations that would seek to mimic its success, some of them simply mechanical: restrict the number of trustees to avoid the creation of factions (there will be only six at tomorrow's Olin meeting); hire a staff of smart generalists with diverse backgrounds from outside the foundation world; and make sure that everybody sticks to a set of clearly defined guiding principles.

Other lessons are more strategic in nature. The Olin Foundation's leaders understood that success is often unplanned, and so they focused on creating the conditions for success rather than thrusting a set of detailed agendas and goals upon grant recipients. Nobody, for example, expected that Allan Bloom's "Closing of the American Mind" would become a runaway best seller whose meaning is still debated two decades after it was published; the John M. Olin Foundation merely decided in the early 1980's that Mr. Bloom, a political theorist at the University of Chicago, was a genuine talent who deserved financial backing.

What's more, philanthropists must have Job-like patience, because in the

war of ideas there are few quick payoffs. More than five years passed between Mr. Bloom's first grant and the publication of his landmark book; and few of the foundation's successes were as obvious as his case. The idea was simply to provide a steady source of assistance to conservative thinkers, who could devote themselves to writing books and articles rather than to

Can liberals learn from right-wing philanthropies?

raising cash for next year's budget.

Finally, the decision to spend itself out of existence may seem bizarre, like an act of philanthropic suicide, yet it magnified the Olin Foundation's influence. Although it never had much more than \$100 million in assets, its refusal to hoard its endowment allowed it to spend at the rate of a much larger foundation.

So, is it possible to create a liberal version of the John M. Olin Foundation? I have my doubts. The success of

any idea certainly depends, to some extent, on whether it can muster financial support, and it may also benefit from effective marketing. But in the end, not all ideas are equal. Some are simply better than others. After all, if money were everything, then liberalism would have nothing to worry about: the Ford Foundation's coffers alone dwarf the combined resources of the conservative grant makers.

Conservatives never would have risen to prominence without their compelling critique of the welfare state, their faith in the power of free markets to create economic prosperity, and their belief that religion can play a constructive role in the public square.

The economist Thomas Sowell once joked that Hank Aaron was a lucky man, because he was always stepping up to the plate when a home run was about to be hit. Likewise, conservative ideas took flight not because wealthy philanthropists were suddenly willing to finance them, but because they identified actual problems and offered sensible solutions.

If liberals now want to create a counter-counterintelligentsia, it's going to take more than money; what they truly need is a set of really good ideas. □