

Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities
6th Annual Conference, Albuquerque, N.M.
March 7, 2005
Hodding Carter III

Bowling Alone – or Playing to Win?

Let me begin with an admission. The concept of Smart Growth, the very phrase itself, does not come readily to my mind or lips. It is , after all, a concept alien to an older Southerner who grew up in a time and place marked by poverty, limitless land and all but non-existent jobs, roads or economic progress. Our concern was not that growth had unintended consequences; our concern was that we would never experience growth of any kind.

At my daily newspaper in Greenville, Mississippi, we avidly promoted each and every hint of development, no matter how small the prospect. We enthusiastically trumpeted the virtues of regularly extending our city limits, of meeting each demand for special favors from each newly solicited industry.

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Environmentalists were cranky annoyances, elitist, blue stocking birders who wouldn't know what making a living was all about. They agonized about clean air and safe water. We worried about dollars in the pocket, clothes on the back, food on the table. With more than 60 inches of rainfall on average per year, and the limitless Mississippi rolling southward behind the levees at our doorstep, who had to think about the water supply? With only a limited number of smokestack industries---notably US Gypsum and Chicago Mill and Lumber---it was hard for us to worry about air pollution. If someone remarked about the smell, a dozen would reply, "It smells like money to me."

Growth? Bring it on. Ours was a frontier; America was eternally a frontier. The problem was not too much but too little.

As for those vast farmlands and disappearing forests, bulldozed aside for still more acres of cotton and beans and rice, those were signs of progress.

3)

Agricultural efficiency and productivity were prizes of infinite value. William Faulkner's big thicket in our part of the Delta all but disappeared, and we cheered each lost acre of forest and canebrake as a gain for row crops. Pesticides and herbicides were science's gifts to beleaguered growers; sterile lakes and imperiled babies and endangered species were still in the future.

I offer this bit of personal and regional history for two reasons. First, because it speaks to the early experience and shaping ethos of far more people than those inspired by Earth Day. The great quest for a better economic life was and remains the norm in far more places than are fear and loathing of over-development and sprawl.

To paraphrase: "It looks like money to me."

If 10 acres and a mule was the government's promise to the newly freed slave 140 years ago, a quarter acre and a tract house was the post-World War II economy's promise to millions of formerly property-less renters.

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Second, I make note of the past because it is the attitudinal base upon which the opponents of rational development rest their case and skillfully exploit. Wishing it away or denigrating its believers is counter-productive and idiotic.

Smart growth advocates must not only position ourselves as promoters and believers in American mobility and American economic progress---that's the sizzle---we have to believe it---that's the steak. Otherwise, we're politically dead no matter how slick our communications strategy.

Most Americans have never had a ladder to kick away after reaching the top, or an island of idyllic splendor to protect. A decent place to live with a decent job, these are what most Americans seek, and even a hint of a sneer in the face of that immemorial drive is suicidal.

So that is the personal as well as the historic perspective I bring to our conversation today.

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Happily, of course, most people do not spend their days and nights obsessing about the supposedly elitist smart growth advocates who would snatch jobs and homes from their yearning grasp.

Day in and day out, they do not fear there is a horde of smart growth Frankensteins poised to take it all away. For better or worse, Smart Growth's policy agenda does not rise to the level of recognition, let alone familiarity, for most Americans.

That is both good news and bad news when the crunch comes, when messages collide. Mostly, Smart Growth is a blank slate. That can be bad news when others begin to write unflattering messages on it, when they are allowed to define you.

It can be good news if you write clearly and quickly enough---and first. But at the very least you do not automatically begin in the garbage can of unfavorable perception. For most Americans, you don't exist at all.

6)

Shift the prism. I was invited to talk about communications. It was an invitation arising from the dubious premise that I am an expert in the field.

(The invitation came from a fellow Princetonian, your maximum leader, Ben Starrett. Princetonians, my wife frequently avers, are a class of people taught to parrot one earnest phrase on every subject without actually understanding much of anything about any subject. That is because she has heard me go on about science.)

I am not an expert.

A self-taught journalist, a self-taught flack, my record of achievement in these two fields was spotty to mediocre when it came to persuading others of the righteousness of my cause.

Literally. (Jimmy Carter, Hamilton Jordan and how they won in 1976. The Kiss of Death.)

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Mention a frame to me, that latter term of advertising and communications art, and, until the day before yesterday, I immediately filled in the blank with “up,” thanks to a lifetime of reading trashy detective novels. Alternatively, rows of paintings danced before my eyes.

Even if I were a semi-expert, the fine work already produced for you by ActionMedia, by Dick Brooks and Michael Goldberg, tells you virtually everything you need to know about applying communications jujitsu to your dumb growth adversaries.

What ActionMedia offers should be memorized and implemented, no later than tomorrow. It is necessary because the other side is very smart, very focused and the beneficiary of the public mindsets I outlined earlier.

Since these experts have already plowed and seeded this ground so deeply and so expertly, however, I want to talk about something else. It is not just that we must grow more expert at hand-to-hand combat---more adroit with our tactics.

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It is that we must accept as a fundamental premise that we are not in a series of discrete, separate battles, but in an all-out war in which one side believes everything is a zero sum exercise, in which they are to win and their opponents are to be destroyed.

In this war, one side (not ours) currently thinks strategically, stresses a common front across factional interests and can rely on deep pockets to pay for its expensive machinations.

The money comes as much from those motivated by blind greed as by ideology, but whatever the source, it is hitched to a coherent set of convictions, a conclusion. That conclusion, hermetically sealed, is this:

The free market is the finest ***and final*** possible-expression of economic efficiency and progress. Uninhibited, it is the once and future guarantor of individual liberty. Hampered in any significant way, liberty and progress wither.

9)

For a religious believer like me, what they embrace is akin to blasphemy. All hail the great and unanswerable God, the Market. And their corollary is that government is the enemy of this infallible God and therefore of the American dream.

This is the new 11th Commandment, a redefining of the Golden Rule. Like all unchallengeable articles of belief, it is a mighty force for unity.

Where once the right fought vicious internal wars over the slightest deviation on a host of orthodoxies, today they move in phalanxes of common purpose. They scratch each others' backs rather than each others eyes.

That their position is Marxist in its blind ahistorical nature is unacknowledged. Like the communists and fascists of another era, they are True Believers and energized by their faith.

And the other side---our side---is...what?

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Fighting it out in slit trenches and silos. Protecting turf rather than defining general principles. Jealous about recognition and hungry for funding scraps. Almost pathologically resistant to making common cause, building coalitions, forming fire brigades to deal collectively with what is a collective assault. Debating what orthodoxies are required before one can be accepted as a progressive.

Smart Growth...community development...social welfare and the safety net (anyone remember that one?)...public education...

Each and many others is under sustained attack by a Common Front foe---and each is usually left to fight it out alone.

You want to do a smart job of communicating so that Smart Growth is not marginalized? Communicate that you understand you are in a sinking boat in a high sea with a lot of other causes and people and start trying to bail and row together.

11)

In my old business---the news business---it was always amazing to me that its leaders did not routinely understand that an attack on free speech of any kind was implicitly an attack on a free press. It was baffling to me that they did not make instant and vociferous common cause with lone pamphleteers and prophets of supposedly freaky new ideas like women's rights or old ones like peace and racial and social justice when they came under attack by legislatures, mobs, courts or religious zealots.

And so it is baffling to me today that those who understand that our nation at its best has always stood for the common good and the common man are so frequently disorganized and so eerily silent about any cause larger than their own narrow self interest.

The words of Pastor Niemoller, the great Protestant opponent of the Nazis wrote as he approached his last days in 1930s

Germany have metaphorical reference:

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First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.

The enemies of Smart Growth are not engaged in a single campaign. You are a primarily a target of opportunity. Their goal is much larger---the obliteration of the notion that the state owes anything to anyone except to get out of the way and let those who can, make as much money as possible. And to repeat, some within their coalition even offer their ideology in the name of God and Christ and/or the Judeo/Christian tradition, ignoring everything from the first two great commandments to the Sermon on the Mount.

What is unfolding took 40 years to build, beginning with the Goldwater debacle and the lasting death of the GOP in 1964 (anyone here old enough to remember that bit of prophecy?).

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In fits and starts but with implacable determination, the reactionaries or counter-revolutionaries first consolidated their control of the Republican Party apparatus. Then they built an extraordinary range of think tanks and foundation auxiliaries, using both to create an agenda and a tactical tool kit to implement their strategic vision. They took the long view.

But most of all, they learned to work together, to assist one another when they could and to lead cheers for each others' efforts when that was all they could offer. Read the conservative columnists and see this at work, week in and week out.

They spent almost four decades in the wilderness, from 1933 to 1969, then fought their way to dominance over the next three decades. Their openly avowed aim is aim to restore the status quo ante New Deal, to bring back Social Darwinism with a vengeance.

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Today they have more money, they fight smarter, they fight tougher and they fight for the long haul. They are a great American political success story, and are to be admired for it.

As long as we, beneficiaries of the ethos that created the New Deal, continue to act as though divine intervention will save us---or as though separate accommodations can be made with our foes in order to save our particular slice of the salami---as though today's wilderness is only a passing phase subject to a quick fix like the election of a Democratic president---smart tactics and good communications will not only *not be enough*, stressing them as a panacea will be a fatal diversion from our vital long-term task.

What is that task? To refashion a national consensus about common purposes served by the public treasury on behalf of the commonweal. To reassert the primacy of what many of us remember as the Social Gospel and its insistence that we were put on this earth to serve rather than exploit one another.

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To reconnect the actual Golden Rule to everyday political life. To reacquaint the American people with the meaning of our founding documents and our history's long march toward the creation of a more just society for all its people.

Whoa, Nellie, you say? That's not why we're here. We're here to discuss Smart Growth, livable communities, equitable development, green spaces and good transportation, intelligent land use and economic development that will benefit the maximum number of our people. We're here to be specific, not join a crusade.

That's what a lot of foundations that support your work and that of others seeking to create a more equitable society tend to say. It's called putting one foot in front of the other on a path that, if you don't look up soon enough, will take you over the cliff.

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Virtually everything that the Knight Foundation has decided over the past few years to support in the areas of youth and families, community development, the arts, early childhood development, civic education---virtually all of that will be shortly made irrelevant by public budgets forged in the fire of the newly ascendant ideology. Cash in all of every American foundations' chips, all of our assets, and we would not be able to make up for the slashes planned in basic social services and education and health care and the like in the federal budgets which face us in the next four years. All of our assets---all \$435 billion of them---would not even cover the deliberately created federal deficit of 2004---a deficit invoked to justify still further slashes.

And in the face of all this, foundation boards agonize as to whether it is smart or even advisable to make common cause with those we fund---to help them advocate for those things our grants proclaim we believe in.

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We blink when asked to step up to the microphone and demand that tax moneys go to places which most need them, despite the fact that those are where we put our own dollars and staff energy.

Some wonderful things were written for and said at a convening of social entrepreneurs up in New York state last month. Knight sponsored the meeting, but regrettably bad health kept me away. It was called *A Gathering of Leaders: Social Entrepreneurs and Scale in the 21st Century* and convened under the aegis of New Profit. What I have heard from those who were there and what I have read in the commissioned articles have significantly affected my thinking on the one hand and reconfirmed old conclusions on the other.

The first, offered by that eternal pro, David Gergen, is that we have to understand that while we rush around trying to plug individual holes in the dike, the entire structure is crumbling. The water is cresting furiously on the other side.

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The second is that the federal budget is a text of bedrock purpose, and studying its clear messages and designs is a necessity. If you will but read the fine print, what you see is what it is intended you will get. All the rest is puffery and spin.

The third is that to the extent that those who are concerned about the budget are content merely to try to save themselves or their pet programs, they play the Judas Goat---disaggregating what should be a united front speaking in a shared language about a shared threat.

The fourth is that you cannot protect what you cannot defend with a clearly articulated philosophy. Special interest pleading is perceived by the public as just that, unless yoked to a much larger pleading for a much larger and overriding objective.

So, to repeat. Sustained, purposeful networking among folk with a common enemy and a common commitment to the most basic of American values is the best strategy of all. All else is tactics.

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Talking in terms that speak to where people are rather than where you think they ought to be is imperative. Building solidarity across causes while allowing no single cause to become THE CAUSE is the essence of coalition building. Allowing no one cause to have a veto on who gets into the coalition and who doesn't is the only way to sustain and grow a coalition.

What we should be about is widening the circle, not drawing the wagons into a circle.

Here is what you already are about:

Trying to insure that that a rising tide not only lifts all boats, it doesn't flood those in the lowlands.

And here is what we know:

Americans have always thrived in, of and as community. Indeed, it was only through community-building that the new nation could arise and prosper. There was nothing to inherit.

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And here is what we must never forget:

America has always been at its best when it has maintained a dynamic tension between the drive for individual gain---a drive that has helped create an economy that remains the wonder of the world---and the demands of a social compact based on respect for the worth of each and every individual within its bounds---a social and political system that has been the light of the world.

You want dynamic growth without a human face or dimension? Try China.

You want to put the rights of money above the needs of community, try any squalid third world plutocracy you care to mention, complete with golden palaces and teeming slums.

We want to win? We must develop our cause so that it speaks with and from that broad array of hopes and aspirations that have sparked American progress from the nation's earliest days.

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As I come close to the end, let me offer a shameless steal of some words that touched this father of seven and grandfather of 12 more deeply than I can adequately express. They came from a piece titled *Realizing The American Dream*, by Eric Schwarz, president and co-founder of Citizens Schools. He concluded:

We need to keep asking ourselves a simple question. When we're sitting by the fireplace with a grandchild on one knee, do we want to say we helped put the American Dream back on track? Or do we want to say we were the first generation in American history not to leave the country in better shape than it was left to us?

The simple truth is that the country in creation today is one whose benefits are increasingly reserved for its very richest inhabitants. Those that argue otherwise use averages to obscure that reality. If Bill Gates were to walk into this room right now, our average individual annual income would jump to roughly \$200 million per person, give or take a few tens of millions. But for all

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of us except Bill Gates, that figure would be both meaningless and irrelevant...like many that pretend the obscene concentration of wealth at the very top of a very pointed pyramid is somehow all Americans' wealth.

Smart Growth's objectives are clear and good and necessary. But Smart Growth's objectives will become so many of the wisps if the new society a-borning takes permanent shape.

Our overarching goal must be the restoration of the Social Compact. Here words from our early history remain relevant. At the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin remarked:

“We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” True then, true now. Get to it.