



The Leadership Institute

Steven P. J. Wood
Building 1101 North
Highland Street
Arlington, Virginia 22201

Unfinished Business for the Conservative Movement

by Morton C. Blackwell

The philosopher George Santayana famously said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

People like you and me lost most political battles for many years until we learned the real nature of politics.

Let's start with a history lesson.

By 1972, several activists committed to conservative principles decided they had to become national leaders in the United States.

They had fought in many elections for conservative candidates. All were Goldwater activists before and during 1964. All of them had come to the Washington, D.C. area during the eight years after Sen. Goldwater's defeat. I was one of them.

Most of them had not known each other prior to moving to the national capital area, but their common participation in the Goldwater campaign credentialed them to each other. Fighting hard for an obviously losing side is strong evidence of commitment to principle.

As they began to meet together, informally but very frequently, they discussed intensely how the left had become ascendant in politics and what conservatives must do to win in the future. They studied how to win.

In those days, almost all the nationally famous conservatives acted as if they believed that education and argument decided political battles. In their hearts, they knew they were right. The then-famous conservative leadership thought their main task in politics was somehow to prove they were right.

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In contrast, the new generation of leaders discerned that our key to success is to activate in politics substantial numbers of people who are *already* conservative.

The shortage was not of conservatives but of conservative activists and skilled leaders.

“[O]ur key to success is to activate in politics substantial numbers of people who are already conservative.”

The new generation of conservative leaders created many brand new conservative organizations, greatly strengthened existing conservative groups, and earned the description of "The New Right."

They greatly increased the number and effectiveness of conservative activists. They deliberately and systematically began to grow muscular flesh on the concept of a conservative movement. And millions of people identified with them and were on many occasions led by them.

The political climate began to improve for conservatives -- election victories dramatically increased, many bad bills were defeated, some conservative legislation began to pass, some bad laws were eliminated, and more conservative judges reached the bench. New leaders arose in large numbers.

Today, after more than three decades of dedicated work by increasingly skilled conservatives, many more U.S. voters identify themselves as conservatives than as liberals and, not surprisingly, most politicians at least *describe* themselves as conservatives.

This consolidated the position of conservatives in the Republican Party and may soon change the thinking of *some* Democratic Party politicians.

We are still far, however, from implementing our conservative principles in all areas of public policy. There is much unfinished business in conservative movement building. That unfinished business is the topic of these remarks.

Ultimately, conservatives will succeed in the public policy process to the extent that we increase the number and effectiveness of conservative activists relative to those on the left.

To that end, of shifting the balance of political effectiveness to our side and against the left, I suggest here a number of specific projects which I hope to inspire you and others to take up. Probably you can add other important projects to my list.

They constitute unfinished business for movement conservatives.

One thing is certain: No one leader, no single organization, and no political party alone can achieve all the important things that must be done.

My challenge to you is for you to show initiative and decide to take up the responsibility of leadership yourself to achieve those things most important personally to you.

Our long-range strategy must focus wherever we can on building a massive infrastructure

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of identified, activated, and well-led conservatives on every important conservative issue. Only such an infrastructure can advance conservative principles over time, no matter what the fate of individual politicians or a political party.

Consider for a moment a comparison of the political strength of conservative principles in the last quarter century in the United States and in Great Britain.

In the United States, the number, effectiveness, and organization of conservative activists multiplied in the 1970s. We nominated and elected President Ronald Reagan, an articulate and principled conservative.

Voters were ready for an alternative to leftist policies. He won two national elections by big margins. After his presidency, his party won one more presidential election, followed by a Democrat administration.

George W. Bush, a good but less persuasive man, has now twice united most of the Reagan coalition. He won in 2004 because a great many conservatives who had never before worked in politics became active. And many voted for the first time.

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Many of these new political participants were activated directly by his campaign organization or by Republican Party organizations. But many more were activated by independent, non-party, conservative organizations which flexed muscles never seen before.

On the other hand, in Britain, one articulate, principled conservative, Margaret Thatcher, narrowly won the leadership of the Conservative Party.

British voters were ready for an alternative to leftist policies. She went on to win national elections repeatedly, by big margins. After the Thatcher government, her party won one more national election, followed by a string of Labor Party victories which still continues.

In America today, ambitious Republicans know they must at least appear committed generally to the conservative principles on which Ronald Reagan was elected. Continued advocacy of conservative principles, if not reliable adherence to them, has resulted in Republican control of Congress and most state governments.

But in Britain today, the Conservative Party has few, if any, clear principles. The Tory party still has some Members of Parliament who stand for conservative principles, but the party as a whole is almost content-free, reduced simply to an un-focused carping against the Labor government.

The British public has no clear idea of what the Tories stand for because the Tory party itself doesn't know anymore.

The Tories have no realistic hope of winning a British national election anytime soon.

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Why did conservative principles remain powerful in American politics after Reagan while they largely faded from the scene in Britain after Thatcher? Because of the American conservative movement and the lack of anything comparable in Britain.

In Britain, as elsewhere across the world, one can find some excellent conservative thinkers, but virtually no political activists who operate outside of political party discipline. Except in the United States.

In virtually all other democratic countries, no one outside a political party's structure has power or influence sufficient to discipline that party's leaders, even when those leaders abandon their parties' fundamental principles, even when those leaders are taking their party down paths to disaster.

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A strong movement composed of non-party conservative groups remains free of control by the top-down dynamics of centralized political party structures -- and often can influence parties decisively.

Now, I know a speaker should organize his remarks under about three major headings. But I ask you to bear with me as I discuss -- hold onto your hat -- eighteen projects. Each one will require someone or many people to do a lot of creative thinking and a lot of skilled action.

All of them are big projects. To achieve even one of them would bring a leader great satisfaction -- and be worth a lifetime of work.

1. Strengthen good, existing organizations.

I know this is counter-intuitive, but non-partisan groups which take high-profile positions on virtually every controversial issue inevitably are relatively small.

The largest and strongest organizations are those which focus on a cluster of related issues.

The leaders of such groups can bring their entire membership and base of identified supporters into political battles which relate to their groups' particular missions.

You have seen, heard, and read the leftist news media trying to come to grips with poll data showing moral values as the top concern of the massive influx of new voters who gave George W. Bush a victory margin in 2004 of three and a half million votes.

These moral-values voters were not motivated, organized, and activated primarily by the president's campaign or by Republican Party organizations, both of which certainly did a remarkable job in their own spheres.

No, only conservative religious and moral leaders had the moral authority, the non-

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partisan organizations, and the skills needed to get these voters to the polls. At least for awhile, only very stupid politicians will fail to keep the faith with conservative religious leaders and their followers who presumably can make a similar difference in future elections.

Anything any conservative can do to strengthen existing, effective conservative organizations will improve the future for conservative principles in the public policy process.

2. Create necessary and valuable new conservative organizations.

Additional conservative groups will almost always reinforce, not weaken existing ones. They bring additional activists into important political battles. By 1974, conservatives had disproved the constant-pie-size theory in the United States, the idea that new groups only reduce the strength of existing groups.

New groups always recruit at least some new people and attract new resources not available to existing groups.

Somewhat to the dismay of many conservative donors, conservative organizations began to proliferate in the 1970s. That growth in the number of conservative organizations continues today. No week goes by without the creation of some new think tank, legal defense foundation, lobby, or political action committee.

Some will quickly fade, but some will grow in size and effectiveness for a generation or more, contributing to the number and effectiveness of conservative activists and leaders.

A successful movement begins with ideas, attracts activists, organizes them, and finally produces or decisively influences elected and appointed officials.

To grow or even to remain effective requires new streams of ideas, activists, leaders, and elected or appointed officials.

Incremental gains can implement dramatic visions over time, one person, one dollar, and one organization at a time.

Please think for a moment about a recent, major battle in the Congress.

“A successful movement begins with ideas, attracts activists, organizes them, and finally produces or decisively influences elected and appointed officials.”

Our nation's biggest and most effective free-market think tanks fought a skilled, massive, but ultimately unsuccessful battle against a huge new federal entitlement program for prescription drugs for the elderly.

They lost because they fought almost entirely in the area of ideas and argument, without a powerful and effective grassroots lobby component beside them.

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In political battles, effective organization trumps logical policy arguments, brilliant intellectual papers, op-ed pieces, and TV appearances.

Conservatives have opposed all forms of socialized medicine for generations. We all know entitlement programs always grow far beyond the initial estimates of their proponents.

“In political battles, effective organization trumps logical policy arguments, brilliant intellectual papers, op-ed pieces, and TV appearances.”

And we all know that government medicine winds up absurdly costly, inefficient, and of poor quality.

Taxpayer-funded health services which appear free to all quickly create unlimited demand. The programs become wasteful.

Shortages inevitably develop. This causes rationing and opens the way for demagogues to increase government power by promising ever more of something for nothing to a dependent political constituency.

Imagine how conservatives would have fared in the recent Medicare expansion battle if we had a mass-based, politically skilled grassroots lobby against socialized medicine -- a group organized along the lines of the National Right to Work Committee, the National Right to Life Committee, or the National Rifle Association.

Such a conservative lobby on health care issues would have a mass-based membership and active donors everywhere, supporters carefully recruited over many years. These would be the people across America who most strongly favor a market-based, privately funded, competitive health care system.

These people, certainly a million or more, would recognize their organization as their leading source of information and guidance on these issues.

Their group's leaders would have ready means of communicating the dangers or merits of any bill and the ability to direct and focus intense and massive public pressure on Members of Congress and the White House -- the kinds of pressure impossible to generate by those who fight bad ideas solely on intellectual grounds.

Such a group would have skilled staff and the resources to communicate also to all the donors who had ever contributed to every targeted, elected politician. The lobby could incite many campaign contributors to write to those they had supported or contact them in other effective ways, demanding they oppose the proposed expansion of blundering government into the field of medicine.

Politicians hate to get such contacts from their donors. But the late Sen. Everett Dirksen grudgingly admitted, "When I feel the heat, I see the light."

In every important area of public policy battles, conservatives should create powerful grassroots organizations to complement our best thinkers, writers, and speakers on the subject.

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Sen. Ted Kennedy and his usual allies such as organized labor and the AARP, are far from ready to retire from their battle for socialized medicine. I see a great opportunity for an organizational entrepreneur to create a national grassroots conservative lobby in this area.

Other obvious areas: property rights; judicial nominations; national defense; national sovereignty; deregulation; and education choice. Imagine the effect new, mass-based, skilled grassroots organizations created around these and other issues would have on future political battles.

More than any other kind of public policy organization, a grassroots lobby can force politicians to recognize the relationship between their political survival and their actions on an issue. Such groups can say "Give us your vote or your seat!" and mean it.

If you consider carefully the range of public policy questions which concern conservatives, you could think of many other issue areas without a large, technologically proficient grassroots conservative lobby -- lots of lifetime opportunities for new conservative organizational entrepreneurs.

At the state or national level, in each policy area, someone, maybe you, could find and lead many previously unidentified and inactive people who already are intensely committed to the conservative side.

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We must teach more conservatives that they owe it to their philosophy to study how to win, to become activists, and to become leaders.

Educating new people and converting mistaken people are absolutely vital in the long run. We must never neglect this type of activity, particularly for the rising generation.

But it's easier to activate someone who already agrees with us than to provide the deep education necessary to form people's convictions.

We already have millions who agree with us. It takes less time, talent, and money to activate someone who already agrees with us than to provide years of philosophical formation to someone else.

I have prepared and freely distribute a booklet, "The Conservative Organizational Entrepreneur," for people who want to start their own public policy organizations. You can print it out from my writings posted on the Leadership Institute website, www.LeadershipInstitute.org.

An alternative career path could be to take an existing conservative organization already focused in one of these issue areas and build it into a larger, more effective group. From 1972 to 1979, for example, Reed Larson took the National Right to Work

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Committee from 25,000 members to 1.7 million members. That fine organization today remains one of the most effective and powerful conservative groups in America.

3. Force spending interests to compete with each other.

Create situations in which bureaucrats and the interests outside government which support those bureaucrats are forced to fight each other for slices of a shrinking pie of government spending budgets, rather than fighting for ever more money from taxpayers.

At the federal level during the Reagan Administration, conservatives made progress along these lines by passing federal laws which gave block grants to state governments to administer formerly federal programs.

The federal government appropriated, in aggregate, less money for several specific programs and stopped administering those programs.

Thus, although less federal money for those programs went into each state, for the first time the state governments could decide how much money to spend on each specific program. This forced the different spending interests to fight each other.

4. Stop government funding of non-governmental groups on the left.

Public policy groups should receive no taxpayer money to build more political power for themselves. This common practice is morally wrong and should be illegal.

Virtually all government funds which flow into political pressure groups go to leftist organizations. Conservative groups ask for and get virtually no appropriations of taxpayer money.

“Virtually all government funds which flow into political pressure groups go to leftist organizations.”

Ending any flow of government funds is seldom easy, but conservatives, who rarely get the taxpayers' money for political purposes, must stop the flow of tax money to all politically active organizations.

Conservatives should also take on a similar project of holding grant-making foundations accountable for their sometimes enormous funding of leftist pressure groups.

5. Increase conservatives in key professions.

Get more conservatives to enter professions which ultimately affect public policy, such as print and broadcast journalism, the clergy, and education.

Not surprisingly, the left is now strong in these professions. *They* have long targeted these areas.

6. Educate people in key professions.

Educate existing journalists, clergy, and educators in economics, limited government, and cultural issues. Not all of them are firmly committed to the left.

Some in these professions would see how they could benefit from the example of Rupert Murdoch. He built a now-dominant Fox News cable audience by presenting more balanced news enthusiastically accepted by conservatives who felt shut out of existing news sources.

You might persuade some journalists, clergy, and educators of the merits of conservative principles and lead them to see analogous career opportunities.

7. Develop strength in the streets.

Worldwide, the left dominates the streets in political controversies. When conservatives rally, we usually gather in stadiums and halls where the public can't see us and the major media can ignore us.

There is no reason why creative and responsible conservatives should not be able to do as well as the left in highly visible public demonstrations of support for conservative principles. But we must be careful not to act irresponsibly.

“The left can get away with misbehavior in the streets, but conservatives can't -- and shouldn't want to.”

There is a double standard. The left can get away with misbehavior in the streets, but conservatives can't -- and shouldn't want to.

8. Make education hospitable to conservative principles.

Reform the education system so more young people understand the vital importance of limited government, free enterprise, strong national defense, and traditional moral principles. The teachers unions are having considerable success in the indoctrination of a generation of Americans with leftist ideas contrary to their parents' values and principles. Non-government education is important, but only a partial solution. Government education must somehow be reformed also.

School choice is an idea whose time has come. The left can't afford to lose any battle against school choice because real school choice will quickly demonstrate its superiority over the current government school monopolies.

9. Make conservative leaders more effective.

Teach current leaders on our side more about political techniques and political dynamics so they can more efficiently allocate their time, talent, and money and avoid stupid mistakes.

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You can't *always* teach an old dog new tricks, but sometimes you can.

Teach *our* people not to waste time, talent and money on projects of little importance (like rallies with no follow up), things which have little or no effect on the outcome of battles of ideas, election results, or struggles over policy.

“[S]how conservative activists that perseverance is a necessary virtue which leads to victory over time.”

Our leaders should build a "win psychology" for our side and a "lose psychology" for the left, which will cause many on the left to stop fighting. Our leaders should teach impatient conservatives to keep fighting and not drop out. They should show conservative activists that perseverance is a necessary virtue which leads to victory over time.

And, yes, we should frighten more opportunists into cooperating with our side. Opportunists will cooperate if they believe we are going to win and when they see benefits for themselves if they work with us and not against us.

10. Get conservatives donors to be more effective.

Recruit and organize groups of top conservative donors to discuss regularly what they should look for in their funding of conservative *activism*.

11. Create new conservative stars.

That is, look for rising leaders who are philosophically sound, are becoming technologically proficient, and are movement-oriented. Do all you can to advance their public policy careers.

12. Start more conservatives up the ladder of elective office.

Get more good people to launch their political careers by running for local political office.

From them you will get better local government. And from among them, new stars will emerge.

For a race at any level which you think is winnable, pick no candidate who is entirely impractical. All of our best candidates have an ability to build a winning coalition with people who have different priorities or with others who disagree with us on *some* issues.

“Get more good people to launch their political careers by running for local political office.”

Purist candidates sometimes can write brilliant issue papers or make stirring speeches. But if they cannot delegate some important decisions or build a large campaign organization of politically effective people, they should not expect our all-out support when they become candidates.

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I have no objection if purists spend their time writing newspaper columns or appearing as interesting talking heads on television.

13. Don't let leftist candidates run unopposed.

Run conservative candidates wherever you can find men or women who would make you proud if they were elected, whether or not they seem to have a chance to win election.

Their candidacies will always recruit more conservative activists, whether or not they win.

Some of them may surprise you and win upset victories. Others will go on to win future elections.

14. Prevent primaries which split conservatives.

Avoid destructive battles between conservatives for party nominations.

In the early stages of a nomination contest, avoid the temptation to sign up to support a friend in the hope of being close to a future elected official.

Create models and procedures which can smoothly prevent good conservatives from running against each other for a party nomination for the same office.

Don't make the perfect the enemy of the good.

A good conservative who can win the general election is better than a more perfect conservative who can't beat the other party's nominee.

Avoid creating multiple candidacies which split the conservative vote and result in an unprincipled opportunist winning your party's nomination.

Conservative leaders with significant followings should strive mightily to unite behind a single candidate for contested nominations.

This would prevent mutually destructive civil wars among conservatives and direct ambitious, good people along constructive paths.

“Conservative leaders with significant followings should strive mightily to unite behind a single candidate for contested nominations.”

15. Recruit and prepare more people to lead conservative groups.

Systematically find, train, and support many good people to become conservative organizational entrepreneurs.

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Few people have all the talents necessary to build an effective public policy organization.

You may be such a person. If not, find such people and help them all you can with contributions and other support. They are essential for the success of our conservative principles.

Those who have success in building a conservative organization or program are almost forced to remain faithful to their original principles.

Success always brings temptations to newly powerful people, as we see in the large number of politicians who become arrogant, who become corrupt, or who take advantage of their positions to do immoral things.

But the head of a private organization usually must continue to produce worthwhile results if the organization is to prosper or even survive. Voluntary donors will stop giving if there are no good results. And serious scandals drive away donors and volunteers.

16. Prepare more people as conservative fundraisers.

Systematically train good people to be good fundraisers and development officers. You'll be doing them a favor, because good fundraisers seldom have to look for jobs.

The lack of enough good development officers holds back virtually every good conservative group from achieving all they could.

You can't save the world if you can't pay the rent. Conservative activities must be funded by voluntary contributions. Successful fundraising can be taught and learned.

“You can't save the world if you can't pay the rent. ... Successful fundraising can be taught and learned.”

17. Restore the power of moral indignation.

Raise the standards of public life by responding effectively to disgraceful behavior by public figures.

The lowest common denominator of acceptable character in political leaders has grown much lower in recent years.

Nobody is perfect, but brazen, shameful behavior has become more and more acceptable during our lifetimes.

Leftist domination of the mass media and the academy has created an awful double standard. Leftist politicians routinely get away with almost anything, but woe unto any conservative found in even an appearance of impropriety.

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Somehow we must restore the power of shame in our national life.

If we do that, the standards of conduct will rapidly improve in politics at every level of government.

Smart people must devote serious thought to solutions to this problem. Perhaps *you* can find feasible ways to stop this spreading decay.

Take Bill Clinton, for example.

Our country has always had some scoundrels in public office, but never before have we had a president who so obviously lacks any sense of shame. His brazen personal immorality, his perjuries, his patently illegal fundraising, his abuses of power, his lies to the American people would have been beyond the pale in any other era of our country's history.

“When it arises, moral indignation can sweep aside almost any other consideration.”

Yet he remains a popular man among far too many people.

I confess I cannot design a comprehensive plan to restore what I would consider an acceptable level of decency in American public life. Perhaps you can.

We know for certain that moral indignation is a powerful force. When it arises, moral indignation can sweep aside almost any other consideration.

How can we harness the power of moral outrage to clean up our political system?

We must figure out how to do this despite the power of the major "liberal" news media, which does not share our political philosophy or our moral values.

And we must take special care that whatever we do is wise as a serpent, but gentle as a dove.

Any solution will surely require incremental steps, with some increments larger than others.

Let me share with you a small and certainly not very effective practice I adopted long ago.

You may know that I am quite active in politics and public life in the Washington, DC area. With two exceptions, I have successfully avoided ever being in the same room with Bill Clinton.

The two exceptions were both ceremonies I felt obliged to attend which honored Ronald Reagan. One of them was President Reagan's funeral service at the National Cathedral.

When friends have asked why I declined to go to many events because Bill Clinton

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would be there, I have replied, "Because that man is literally disgraceful."

If Bill Clinton showed up suddenly and unrepentant in this room today, I believe I would leave -- and hope that you would leave too.

"Moral indignation is not only powerful, it is famously contagious if displayed."

Moral indignation is not only powerful, it is famously contagious if displayed properly. Somehow we must learn to harness the innate power of moral indignation to reduce the level of shameless behavior in American politics.

18. Assist foreigners who share your conservative principles.

My final project to suggest to you is this: Reach out to people across the world who are conservative in the American sense of the word.

Identify people in other countries who have high potential and help them realize that potential. Train them in leadership. Help them organize powerful conservative organizations and institutions in their own countries.

Anyone who believes the United States we love can survive in the long run if surrounded by a world full of socialist countries which have abandoned traditional moral values is badly mistaken.

In Latin America, for example, country after country has in recent years come under the control of leftist governments.

With a few exceptions, such as Chile and El Salvador, Latin American countries have no powerful political parties committed to economic liberty and traditional values.

Building an infrastructure sufficient to turn our country around in favor of conservative principles has taken Americans decades.

Similar transformations in other countries will take decades there, but American conservatives must devote some time, talent, and money to help good people abroad follow the path we have blazed.

Find good conservatives there and share the good news. Teach them how to implement policies which worked here and political strategies and projects which worked here to expand the leadership and activist base for conservatives.

Most of what works for conservatives in the United States will work for conservatives abroad.

You can take the lead and train them here or in their own countries. Teach them government policies which bring prosperity, the moral values necessary for a good culture, and the techniques and political dynamics necessary to build conservative movements and powerful political infrastructures in their own countries.

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Thank you for listening to my suggested projects, all of them unfinished business for our conservative movement. Food for thought and a call to action.

In the years since Barry Goldwater's crushing 1964 defeat, conservatives studied how to win and greatly increased the number and effectiveness of conservative activists and leaders.

We faced and reversed some trends the left had set in motion. On the issue of guns, for instance, liberal politicians see the handwriting on the wall and have begun to retreat.

I see signs of a similar shift on the abortion issue.

We have revived the principles of limited government and ordered liberty. We have built a strong constituency for supply-side tax cuts, in part because the record shows low tax rates increase prosperity.

But we should not for a moment rest on our laurels. The left remains well-funded, organized, and strong. They continue to undermine our culture.

We appear to be winning in politics, but certainly not by much. By hard and skilled work, we created trends which now move our way. We must keep those trends moving in the right direction.

Success inevitably brings its own problems. Unity is easier within an embattled minority than in a majority coalition.

With our nation narrowly divided, wise conservatives prepare now for major struggles ahead.

We can beat the left into a permanent, hopeless minority only through at least another generation of hard-won, incremental gains. This requires us to build on our knowledge, our growth, and our victories and to prepare as our successors a new generation of conservative leaders.

Morton C. Blackwell is the president of the Leadership Institute, a non-partisan educational foundation he founded in 1979.

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by Morton C. Blackwell

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Steven P.J. Wood Building
1101 North Highland Street
Arlington, VA 22201
(703) 247-2000
www.LeadershipInstitute.org