

As delivered

**Remarks to Independent Sector Annual Conference
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Introduction

This has been an outstanding conference and I congratulate Diana Aviv and Independent Sector for focusing on the theme of participation and for assembling a superb, diverse, and inspiring roster of speakers and panels.

I am very pleased to join with Angela, Tim and Wade at this closing session to engage in a conversation about *mobilizing for social change*. This topic takes on even greater significance in the wake of the elections. And I think it is essential that we pause at this moment to challenge our assumptions, look deep into the fabric of our society, and ask ourselves what we in the nonprofit sector now need to do.

As a foundation president, I will focus my remarks on the role of philanthropy in mobilizing for social change.

Setting the Context: 2004 Election

Let's start with a brief look at the current context. Election post-mortems are in full swing, including the very interesting conversation that took place at the opening plenary session of this conference. However one might feel about the outcome of the

election, Tuesday did produce some encouraging news. At a conference devoted to participation, we can be pleased that a record number of Americans went to the polls, yielding the highest turnout of registered voters in 36 years. Young people participated in large numbers as did people of color and people living in marginalized communities. Many organizations in this room made unprecedented efforts to boost participation in the elections and you did a superb job.

We did not experience the electoral meltdown many of us had feared although it is clear our voting systems and procedures remain woefully anachronistic and dangerously fragile. And nobody should have to wait in line for 10 hours to exercise their right to vote.

But what did Tuesday say about the *deeper* health of our democracy? If we think of democracy largely in terms of elections, we might take a measure of comfort: the American people participated and the process produced a clear winner. But democracy is far more than free elections. It is more than representative government.

Democracy is a way of thinking and behaving in society – a way of resolving conflict and solving problems. Democracy is fundamentally a culture, a “civic faith,” to use John Dewey’s term.

Writing in last Tuesday's Financial Times, the British columnist John Kay offered an important distinction between democracy *as majoritarianism* versus democracy *as mediation*.

“Democracy *as majoritarianism*,” he wrote, “allows exclusive access to power for a coalition, which secures control of a democratic process. Democracy *as mediation* uses elections to require leaders to seek a broad consensus for their policies and their actions.”

I'm afraid there wasn't much mediation in the campaign of 2004. The election focused Americans on what divides us, not what unites us. In fact we are left feeling more divided than ever. And yet, we know there is a longing in communities all across the country for greater common ground and a faith that at some deeper level there is more that unites us as Americans than divides us.

I believe the antidote to the poisonous elements of the 2004 campaign can be found in renewed efforts to clear and plow common ground. It is not the tactical work of mobilizing for electoral success, but rather the strategic work of mobilizing for deep social change – of shaping a long-term vision for our society that inspires & unites our people.

We need to restore a sense of shared national purpose in our democratic culture so that we are better able to meet the challenges we face: poverty, inequity, unequal access to health care, inadequate education, terrorism, and so on.

Our history reveals that electoral campaigns rarely advance the process of deep social change. More often than not, politicians follow social movements – they don't lead them. Mobilizing social movements is the job of leaders and organizations of the nonprofit sector.

The Role of Philanthropy in Mobilizing for Social Change

So what is the role of philanthropy? As I see it, the primary role of philanthropy is to provide the venture capital for social innovation. Our grantees do the hard work – serving communities, generating new ideas, and mobilizing social change.

Foundations can help with strategy development, ideas, networking, convening, and moral support. But principally, we are an essential source of capital in the nonprofit economy.

This is a moment when we must pause and ask ourselves whether we foundations are doing enough, whether we are challenging ourselves enough in a time of deep divisions, complex problems, urgent needs and considerable peril.

As globalization, interdependence, and the sheer speed of change challenge the innovations of previous generations, are we in the foundation community today reexamining our assumptions and supporting the innovations needed for *our* times?

Are we too prone to funding excellent micro projects rather than broad efforts of transformation? Do we really understand that significant change takes time and that foundations need to have the faith or the stubbornness to stay the course, even when things may not look promising?

As we have watched venture capital transform private enterprise over the last decade, have we been as far-sighted as venture capitalists of social innovation?

As government lacks the resources for innovation – and the tolerance for failure – are we ready to support experimentation, to take risk? Or have we forgotten that in order to achieve new breakthroughs, we must be willing at times to fail?

And finally, are we helping to shape and enable a healing vision for our times?

I can only speak for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. I am proud of our work. But in these times, I know we must do more.

Given the challenges we face, I think foundations need to re-examine and perhaps recalibrate our risk profiles – and consider taking on higher levels of risk in three principle areas:

First, I think we should be ready to work on *controversial issues* like school vouchers, climate change, the place of religion in American life, or America's

appropriate role in the world. We should fund rigorous research and thoughtful analysis to illuminate controversy. And we should support broader efforts to educate and engage the public in meaningful discourse about complex and controversial issues.

Second, it is time to fund more *experimentation*. Foundations should foster an experimental disposition both in our own organizational cultures and among our grantees. We need to test new forms of civic engagement like deliberative polling or applications of e-democracy. We should fund bold new models of service delivery, of community building, and problem-solving.

The non-profit sector is uniquely positioned to take risks that are economically unacceptable to business and politically unacceptable to government. And philanthropy is at its best when it responds to the possibility that experimentation can produce momentous breakthroughs.

Finally, I think foundations should increase their financial and intellectual *support for advocacy*. It is through advocacy that the lessons of experimentation can transform an entire field. Advocacy multiplies the power of ideas and inspires collective action. Advocacy gives voice to those who otherwise go unheard. In sum, advocacy is essential to the process of mobilizing for social change.

Traditionally, foundations contribute to advocacy by funding the advocacy efforts of our grantees. And this remains essential. But in these times, foundations should be

advocates too, shining a spotlight on the work of our grantees and communicating the lessons learned in the experiments we fund.

In a climate of increased media and political scrutiny, some might argue that this is not the time for foundations or nonprofits to take on greater risk. But given the challenges we face, I think we must exercise courage, not caution.

Our courage must be coupled with renewed efforts to fully live up to the highest standards of ethical conduct, sound management, and transparent operations. We must be rigorous in our due diligence before taking risk and rigorous in evaluating the results. I am delighted that Independent Sector is playing such an important leadership role in the efforts to strengthen ethics and accountability in the nonprofit sector.

Conclusion

We can't know whether among us this afternoon is the person or organization who will light the spark that rekindles our democratic culture; who will invent the 21st-century medium to create real dialogues across party, religion, nationality, and race; who will lead the advocacy that finally brings quality health care within the reach of all.

We do know two things: first, that if we are not taking risks, and going beyond our comfort zone, we are simply not meeting our mandate. Failure while taking risk is instructive. Failure to take risk will be defeating.

Second, we know that major social change takes place when the innovation and passion of activists, the resources and wide-screen views of foundations, and the implementing machinery of government and the private sector come together. We in the foundation world are uniquely able to bring those forces together. That means not just offering the round table but supporting – and sometimes leading – the advocacy that convinces all sides to get to the table and get to work. And there is much work to be done to clear and plow common ground in our land.