

The Foundation of Change

By Nan Aron

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The national economic crisis and election of Barack Obama create opportunities for progress not seen in decades--but will advocacy groups and foundations seize the moment?

President-elect Obama's election can lead to bold new approaches that put the public interest first. From what we can see in Washington and beyond the Beltway, advocates from all corners of our nation are moving quickly to address concerns that have mounted during the past eight years. The progress they seek, however, will happen only if an engaged base of committed nonprofits and philanthropists push now and pressure decision-makers from the outside.

Already, corporate special interests are spending exorbitant amounts to influence lawmakers and protect their bottom lines. Ultraconservative groups are raising millions of dollars to block progressive goals. Some lawmakers have vowed to filibuster progressive nominees to the executive and judicial branches.

Building grassroots pressure to overcome this opposition will take a strong partnership between nonprofits, foundations and individual donors based on a few key principles:

§ *Think big.* Many of us have internalized the limits imposed by eight years of unrestrained attacks on social progress. We can't be satisfied with pushing for the same policies that were all we could imagine winning under Bush. Our agenda must be rooted in real, lasting solutions to the problems most Americans face, from fundamental healthcare reform to green jobs to education policy that really does leave no child behind. In a previous time of opportunity--the 1960s--the civil rights movement, aided by several foundations, inspired a new generation and transformed the nation by asking not for baby steps but for bold legislation on voting rights and discrimination.

§ *Coordinate.* Most of our major problems are interrelated, and so are the solutions. For example, restoring workers' freedom to choose to have a union can help put more money in families' pockets and address the pay gap and other forms of discrimination. Recognizing its broad impact, a coalition of nonprofit organizations from across the sectors has come together to champion passage of the Employee Free Choice Act. Similarly, to ensure confirmation of judges who share our core constitutional values, organizations from a vast spectrum of interest areas--civil and women's rights, environmental protection and labor--must work together. Nonprofits and foundations cannot focus just on their own issues without coordinating with and supporting a larger movement.

§ *Invest now.* Foundations, individual donors and nonprofits have been hit by the economic crisis--but that just means we have to be smart and strategic about how our resources are used. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that requires us to marshal every resource we have and hold nothing back. We can't afford to look back four or eight years from now and say that maybe we could have accomplished more if only we hadn't been so cautious. Foundations ordinarily give about 5 percent a year. As their endowments shrink, their payouts will also decrease. Given this time of crisis and opportunity, it is crucial that they raise the level of funding to at least the amounts given last year.

§ *Involve advocates with hands-on experience.* Foundations that want to know what advocates need and the strategies that work best in practice should hire people who have walked in those shoes. The more knowledgeable and sophisticated a foundation is about advocacy, the more effective its grantmaking will be.

§ *Make unrestricted, general support grants.* Advocacy opportunities and needs arise at all times and often without warning. Groups on the ground know best how to respond. Donors should support, not hamstring, them.

Some donors argue that their limited dollars need to fund local direct services in order to help the growing numbers of Americans facing hardships caused by the recession, and certainly that kind of assistance is worthy. However, if we don't fight for systemic change and prevent further government cutbacks in vital services, the crisis will only get worse for those living at the margins. Groups that empower working people and the poor will be critical to building lasting strength that won't vanish at the first sign of defeat.

A group of reformers met with Franklin Roosevelt shortly after his first inauguration. They outlined some reforms they wanted. Roosevelt said, "I agree with you. I want to do it. Now make me do it."

I have that quote on my desk. It reminds me that it's not enough to have a good idea. The best glue in the world needs pressure to make it stick. So do ideas about policy. In the first 100 days of the new administration, nonprofits and foundations must move with a new sense of urgency and partnership. This is our time, as Barack Obama often said during the campaign--but only if we act boldly to make it so.