

Balloon Juice » Putting the “Thug” in ReThuglican

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April 26, 2011

by Anne Laurie

Two related, must-read pieces from *Mother Jones*. Andy Kroll has an excellent, link-heavy post on [The Right-Wing Network Behind the War on Unions](#):

... Behind the onslaught is a well-funded network of conservative think tanks that you've probably never heard of. Conceived by the same conservative ideologues who helped found the Heritage Foundation, the [State Policy Network](#) (SPN) is a little-known umbrella group with deep ties to the national conservative movement. Its mission is simple: to back a constellation of state-level think tanks loosely modeled after Heritage that promote free-market principles and rail against unions, regulation, and tax increases. By blasting out policy recommendations and shaping lawmakers' positions through briefings and private meetings, these think tanks cultivate cozy relationships with GOP politicians. And there's a long tradition of revolving door relationships between SPN staffers and state governments. While they bill themselves as independent think tanks, SPN's members frequently gather to swap ideas. "We're all comrades in arms," the network's board chairman told the *National Review* in 2007....

Founded in 1992 by businessman and Reagan administration insider Thomas Roe—who also served on the Heritage Foundation's board of trustees for two decades—the group has grown to include 59 “freedom centers,” or affiliated think tanks, in all 50 states. SPN's board includes officials from Heritage and right-wing charities such as the Adolph Coors and Jacqueline Hume foundations. Likewise, its deep-pocketed donors include all the usual heavy-hitting conservative benefactors: the Ruth and Lovett Peters Foundation, which funds the Cato Institute and Heritage; the Castle Rock Foundation, a charity started with money from the conservative Coors Foundation; and the Bradley Foundation, a \$540 million charity devoted to funding conservative causes. SPN uses their contributions to dole out annual grants to member groups, ranging from a few thousand dollars to \$260,000, according to 2009 records.

According to SPN's website, Roe launched the conservative network “at the urging” of President Reagan himself as a way to shape state-level policy just as Heritage has influenced federal policy. Surveying the political landscape today, Roe's and Reagan's idea couldn't have been more prescient. More than a dozen states are currently considering legislation weakening the clout of organized labor. In many of those states, SPN think tanks have been pushing for similar prescriptions for years via “research” papers, policy recommendations, and talking points that are widely distributed to lawmakers.

... SPN think tanks do more than merely pepper politicians with briefings and a barrage of policy recommendations; they also serve as a farm team for the GOP. Reps. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) and Mike Pence (R-Ind.) and former Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-Colo.) all ran SPN think tanks before entering Congress...

Yeah, that trio may not qualify for Mensa membership (even if they combined scores), but there's an old proverb about relative political power: *We all know their names but they don't know ours.*

And for more detail of the sick, twisted sociopathy behind SPN's founders, Rick Perlstein goes [“Inside the GOP's Fact-Free Nation”](#) to dissect “*how political lying became normal*.”

...Ronald Reagan explicitly built his appeal around the notion that it was time to stop challenging the powerful. A new sort of lie took over: that the villains were not those deceiving the nation, but those exposing the deceit—those, as Reagan put it in his 1980 acceptance speech, who “say that the United States has had its day in the sun, that our nation has passed its zenith.” They were just so, so negative. According to the argument Reagan consistently made, Watergate revealed nothing essential about American politicians and institutions—the conspirators “were not criminals at heart.” In 1975, upon the humiliating fall of Saigon, he paraphrased Pope Pius XII to make the point that Vietnam had in fact been a noble cause: “America has a genius for great and unselfish deeds. Into the hands of America, God has placed the destiny of an afflicted mankind.”

The Gipper’s inauguration ushered in the “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” era of political lying. But it took a deeper trend to accelerate the cultural shift away from truth-telling-as-patriotism to a full-scale epistemological implosion.

Reagan rode into office accompanied by a generation of conservative professional janissaries convinced they were defending civilization against the forces of barbarism. And like many revolutionaries, they possessed an instrumental relationship to the truth: Lies could be necessary and proper, so long as they served the right side of history...

“We ought to see clearly that the end does justify the means,” wrote evangelist C. Peter Wagner in 1981. “If the method I am using accomplishes the goal I am aiming at, it is for that reason a good method.”

Historians will no doubt mention there’s a pivot where all great empires start privileging “**civility**” over “**honesty**”... and that’s the chapter future scholars title with some variation on “decline and fall”. Never expected to watch it unravel in real time, via HD broadband, did you?



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