



Conservative Money Front Is Behind Princeton's "White Privilege" Guy

Adam Weinstein

May 5, 2014

In all the furor over Tal Fortgang—the privileged white Princeton freshman who wrote so passionately about how he's not a privileged white guy—no one, not even the *New York Times*, noted that his post was made possible by a conservative group that bankrolls and grooms college kids for right-wing leadership.

Fortgang became a celebrated partisan lightning rod for writing a post last month, ["Checking My Privilege,"](#) in which he characterized himself as a marginalized student, unable to contribute to hot topical debates on campus, because his peers discount him as just another white dude who can't see how his talents are accompanied by gifts that less-fortunate students don't have.

"I have checked my privilege. And I apologize for nothing," he concluded, in a right-wing "I built that," [Marine Todd](#)-style mic-drop that was republished by *Time* and heralded by conservative media as righteous manna from heaven.

Fortgang hardly seems like a made-for-TV conservative star. His socioeconomic privileges are precisely what [makes it hard for him](#)—or any [20-year-old white male first-year Ivy Leaguer](#), really—to assess the blindspots in his own reasoning. He's called Palestinians "cowards" who are [worse than Hitler](#) and complained that he'd like to punch opponents of George Zimmerman in their ["fat idiot faces."](#)

Nevertheless, his white guy manifesto was a rousing success for the conservative punditocracy. As they knew it would be, since they fund the publication where he placed it, and many other publications like it.

The Campus Right-Wing Outrage Industry

Fortgang wrote his rant for the [Princeton Tory](#), an independent campus publication that's just one of about 80 bankrolled by the Collegiate Network and its parent group, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. According to [its website](#), ISI was founded in the McCarthy era as a "fifty-year plan" to advance conservative political causes "by implanting the idea in the minds of the coming generations."

Today, ISI is a "nonpartisan" non-profit with a \$10 million annual budget that astroturfs scores of conservative campus publications across the country, funding them and grooming their staffs to become TV pundits, politicians, and political moneymen. [Praised by the likes of Ronald Reagan and Antonin Scalia](#), it started humbly in 1953 with nothing but an idea and a president: a recent graduate of Yale named William F. Buckley.

The ISI and Collegiate Network have raked in [millions of dollars from major conservative financiers](#) over the years, most of it from the coffers of Richard Mellon Scaife, a banking tycoon (yes, those Mellons) who's most famous for bankrolling the conservative witch-hunt against Bill Clinton that led to Whitewater and Monicagate. Scaife's money also helps keep the lights on at the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, ALEC, and just about every other conservative money-and-opinion laundromat you can name.

What does all that bakshish buy? Quite a lot. Since Buckley's time, the ISI and its Collegiate Network [have been responsible for molding much of the right-wing blogosphere](#). Ann Coulter got her start at the *Cornell Review*, a CN publication. Dinesh D'Souza cut his teeth writing for the CN-funded *Dartmouth Review* as an undergrad. "I learned the ins and outs of taking on the far Left as the editor of the *Virginia Advocate*," current *National Review* editor Rich Lowry says of his time running a CN-sponsored publication in college.

One of Collegiate Network's founders is John Podhoretz, the conservative scion and editor of *Commentary*, who [spent some time on Twitter](#) praising and promoting Fortgang's piece without ever acknowledging that his group had helped make its publication possible.

Another [ISI/CN beneficiary](#), Matt Continetti, once invited a younger, more libertarian me to contribute to conservative causes with him on our campus at Columbia University. (I declined.) Continetti later married the daughter of Bill Kristol, the leading neocon who founded the *Weekly Standard* and first pushed Sarah Palin as vice presidential material. Continetti went on to become a *Weekly Standard* editor and pen a fawning biography of Palin. He recently founded the Washington Free Beacon, a tabloidy blog site for millennial Beltway righties who hate liberals but love craft beer.

Continetti's favorable career arc all began, however, with an internship at *National Review*, [arranged by the Collegiate Network](#). His job was to assist Rich Lowry, the Virginia CN alumnus. The group's alumni network clearly takes care of its own.

The Pundits of Princeton

Nowhere does this tradition run deeper than at the *Princeton Tory*, the home of Fortgang's white-privilege piece. Its co-founding editors, two hardcore pro-Israel neocons, [went on to create the Shalem Center](#), a Jerusalem-based right-wing think tank to bring "the writings of Smith, Burke, or Hayek" to Hebrew-speaking Israeli students. (Shalem was financed in part with [millions from Sheldon Adelson](#), the casino billionaire who poured hundreds of millions into Republican campaigns in 2012 alone.) For a time, their staff at the *Tory* included [Teach for America founder Wendy Kopp](#).

The *Tory's* editor in the early 2000s was [an ROTC cadet and demagogue-in-training named Pete Hegseth](#) who, after a tour in Iraq, ran an astroturf GOP money group called Vets for Freedom. Its entire *raison d'etre* in the lead-up to the 2008 election was to paint Democrats as weak-kneed defeatists who couldn't be trusted with wars and foreign affairs. After Obama was elected and Osama bin Laden was killed by Navy Seals, Hegseth's group [swiftly retooled](#)—defending Don't Ask, Don't Tell, combating "creeping shariah," and assailing Democrats for spiking the bin Laden football.

Hegseth himself abandoned the group—and his six-figure salary—for an unsuccessful 2012 Senate run in Minnesota, which was hurt [when old writings in the *Tory* resurfaced](#) in which he called homosexuality "abnormal and immoral" and vowed "to defend the pillars of Western civilization against the distractions of diversity."

To be fair, the campus wars aren't all one-sided: This is a game that liberals have learned to play recently, too. The Center for American Progress, through its Campus Progress and Generation Progress programs, similarly funds left-leaning independent campus publications and grooms fellow travelers for punditing and politics. I [wrote just last week](#) about one such progressive-funded publication fighting administrators at its conservative Baptist college over the paper's pro-LGBT, theologically liberal content.

Even though conservatives got a head start of several decades, CAP has closed the gap, and its campus-publication alumni are also far and wide. But CAP also actively seeks out voices of diversity; conservative groups like the ISI and Collegiate Network still mostly fund white guys like Hegseth and Fortgang, who spend most of their time (and the ISI's money) railing against the campus dynamics that they say label them unfairly as privileged white dudes with an insufficient measure of guilt for their status.

That white guys like Hegseth and Continetti can publish critiques of privilege-checking in lavishly funded conservative outlets, earn praise from conservatives in the media mainstream, and reap the financial rewards of their advocacy, is a deep irony that's apparently lost on them.

Will Fortgang soon join this pantheon of pampered pundits? All signs point to yes. But then again, he's only a freshman. He's still got a lot to learn—about his own position of privilege, and about how to opine conservatively for maximum effect. Considering how profitable the latter has been for those who came before him, it's unlikely he'll spend much time dwelling on the former.