



The Fall of the Heritage Foundation and the Death of Republican Ideas

How the Heritage Foundation went from the intellectual backbone of the conservative movement to the GOP's bane -- and how it's hurting the party's hopes for a turnaround

By: [Molly Ball](#) - September 25, 2013

During the 1980 election, an up-and-coming Washington think tank called the Heritage Foundation undertook a massive task: to examine the federal government from top to bottom and produce a detailed, practical conservative policy vision.

The result, called *Mandate for Leadership*, epitomized the intellectual ambition of the then-rising conservative movement. Its 20 volumes, totaling more than 3,000 pages, included such proposals as income-tax cuts, inner-city "enterprise zones," a presidential line-item veto, and a new Air Force bomber.

Despite the publication's academic prose and mind-boggling level of detail, it caused a sensation. A condensed version -- still more than 1,000 pages -- became a paperback bestseller in Washington. The newly elected Ronald Reagan passed out copies at his first Cabinet meeting, and it quickly became his administration's blueprint. By the end of Reagan's first year in office, 60 percent of the *Mandate's* 2,000 ideas were being implemented, and the Republican Party's status as a hotbed of intellectual energy was ratified. It was a Democrat, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who would declare in 1981, "Of a sudden, the GOP has become a party of ideas."

The story of the conservative movement that has come to dominate the Republican Party over the last four decades is inextricably intertwined with the story of the Heritage Foundation. In that time, it became more than just another think tank. It came to occupy a place of special privilege -- a quasi-official arm of GOP administrations and Congresses; a sponsor of scholarship and supplier of legislation; a policy base for the party when out of power. Heritage has shaped American public policy in major ways, from Reagan's missile-defense initiative to Clinton's welfare reform: Both originated as Heritage proposals. So, too, did the idea of a universal health-care system based on a [mandate that individuals buy insurance](#). Though Heritage subsequently abandoned it, the individual mandate famously became the basis of health-care reforms proposed by Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama.

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These days, Heritage has a different crusade. The foundation's president, the confrontational former Senator Jim DeMint, spent the last month touring the country, drawing cheering crowds as he demanded that Republican politicians insist that Obamacare be defunded -- and denouncing those who wouldn't go along. "Republicans are afraid," DeMint [told NPR](#). "And if they are, they need to be replaced." The foundation's three-year-old activism arm, Heritage Action, spent half a million dollars on online ads targeting 100 Republican House members who didn't sign on to the defund crusade ("Tell Representative Tom Cole to Stop Funding Obamacare").

The push from Heritage helped the defund scheme [gather momentum](#), forcing Republican leaders to pull their proposed funding bill and replace it with one the Senate has committed to block. The resulting confrontation may force a government shutdown. Republicans who once worked out legislative language with the help of Heritage's distinguished Ph.D.s felt whiplash seeing the group cheerlead for collapse. Heritage was supposed to be above politics, they grumbled. Heritage was supposed to be about serious ideas, not tactical fights. White papers, not political campaigns -- and certainly not campaigns against *Republicans*.

Mickey Edwards, one of three founding trustees of the Heritage Foundation when it began in 1973, was one of those disturbed by Heritage's turn, which, he told me, "makes it look like just another hack Tea Party kind of group."

A former eight-term Republican congressman from Oklahoma, Edwards now serves as vice president of the Aspen Institute. "They're destroying the reputation and credibility of the Heritage Foundation," he added. "I think the respect for their [policy] work has been greatly diminished as a result."

The defund push is only the latest in a series of recent political battles Heritage has undertaken -- crusades against Republican politicians that have led to a rash of complaints. Representative Renee Ellmers [called them](#) "bullies." Representative Lynn Westmoreland [said the think tank](#) had "lost credibility with the people that were most supportive of them." Senator Tom Coburn [accused](#) Heritage Action of "destroying the Republican Party."

Behind the scenes, GOP staffers complained that the organization they once looked to for intellectual ammunition had become a thorn in their side. Brian Walsh's first Washington internship was with Heritage in 1996. He rose in Republican politics to serve as communications director of the National Republican Senatorial Committee. In a [scathing op-ed](#) for *U.S. News* headlined "Conservatives Eat Their Own for Profit," Walsh accused Heritage of taking extreme stands to generate fundraising dollars. "In our great democracy, you affect public policy by offering a vision, influencing a majority of public opinion and winning elections, not by burning down the House, attacking your allies, and falling on your sword," he wrote.

Heritage officials dismiss these gripes as the eternal price of disruptive thinking. "Exposing folks, it certainly makes them angry," DeMint [observed to Politico](#). "Heritage and Heritage Action has gotten in the way of business as usual. And it's made people mad."

But there is more at stake in Heritage's transformation from august policy shop to political hit squad than the reputation of a D.C. think tank or even the careers of a few squishy GOP politicians. It is the intellectual project of the conservative movement itself. Without Heritage, the GOP's intellectual backbone is severely weakened, and the party's chance to retake its place as a substantive voice in American policy is in jeopardy.

Today, prominent Republicans [publicly worry](#) they're becoming the "stupid party." In its prime, Heritage rose to rival the power and capacity of the liberal academic establishment, giving conservatives a reputation as serious thinkers. "There was a time when leftist intellectuals dismissed conservatives as the party without intellect. Heritage undid that," Edwards said. "The Republican Party for a while had the high ground. Everyone said that's where the ideas are, that's where the intellectual ferment is. When your intellectual ferment is nothing more than a political platform, that [reputation] is undercut. That hurts the conservative movement in general."

After the triumph of the original *Mandate for Leadership*, Heritage built on its success. *Mandate II* was issued in 1984, *Mandate III* in 1988. Subsequent editions were published in 1996 and 2000. In 2005, Heritage released a much slimmed-down *Mandate VI*. But this version, *National Review* observed, no longer "bore an uncanny resemblance to a telephone book." At 156 pages, the conservative publication wrote, "this year's version looks more like Cliff's Notes."

The "Cliff's Notes" would be the final iteration of the document that once served as the grand blueprint for conservative governance and showed Ronald Reagan how to govern the country. Eight years later, there has been no *Mandate VII*.

Outsourcing Policymaking

With imposing buildings flanking the Capitol on both sides and a budget of more than \$80 million, Heritage looms large in the Washington professional right. More than just another nonprofit peddling legislative ideas, it has become the de facto policy arm of the congressional conservative caucus. "The Heritage Foundation is where policy agendas are set and tactics are developed hand-in-hand with Hill staff," a rival researcher [wrote last year](#), describing Republicans in Congress as essentially "outsourcing" their policy work to the foundation.

Unique among nongovernmental organizations, Heritage's Center for Data Analysis has the number-crunching capacity to compete with the White House's Office of Management and Budget and the Congressional Budget Office in using sophisticated modeling to assess legislation's impact on the economy. When Representative Paul Ryan drafted his conservative budget proposal in 2011, he submitted it to Heritage as well as to the CBO to be "scored." (Heritage scored it more favorably.)

Nothing better symbolizes Heritage's integration with Republican policymaking than its longtime partnership with the Republican Study Committee, a conservative caucus in the House that, at 172 members, now [claims the majority](#) of the House GOP. Heritage and the committee were both founded in 1973 with the involvement of Ed Feulner, then a Republican congressional staffer. After leaving the Hill, Feulner served as Heritage's president until DeMint took the reins this year.

Heritage sponsors the RSC's annual retreat, paying for members and their spouses to spend three days at a lavish hotel proximate to D.C. And House Republicans who belong to the RSC meet every Wednesday over lunch to talk policy, plot legislative strategy, and seek out cosponsors for legislation. Each member of Congress may bring only one staffer to the large conference room in the basement of the Capitol where the meetings are held. Outside groups are barred -- except Heritage. The foundation's lobbyists are a fixture at the meetings, which Heritage also has historically catered with sandwiches from Chick-fil-A.

But this cozy relationship hit an abrupt snag last month. After a blowup over the farm bill, Heritage was abruptly [banned](#) from the RSC's meetings.

Heritage Action had initially urged lawmakers to split the farm bill in two, separating the farm-subsidy piece of the legislation from the food-stamp funding bill. But when House Republicans took that advice and split the bill, Heritage decreed the result insufficient. It advised lawmakers to vote against the split bill and warned that a "yes" vote would count against them on the organization's scorecard, often used as a metric of members' conservatism.

Furious congressmen assailed the group for what they saw as moving the goalposts. "Heritage was now scoring against Republicans for doing exactly what Heritage had been espousing only a month before," Representative Mick Mulvaney of South Carolina -- a die-hard conservative who had previously earned a 95 percent rating on Heritage's scorecard -- [fumed to *National Journal*](#). To the *Wall Street Journal*, he [griped](#), "We went into battle thinking they were on our side, and we find out they're shooting at us." Mulvaney even went so far as to recruit fellow conservatives to co-author a *Journal* op-ed blasting Heritage. But the group backed down when Heritage got wind of their plan and rushed to head it off. "We get the point," a Heritage official assured Mulvaney in an email reported by *National Journal*.

Integrity Questioned

The planned op-ed would not have been the first public-relations disaster for Heritage this year. It also made unwanted headlines in May, when one of the authors of a contentious immigration report, Jason Richwine, was found to have previously written a Harvard dissertation arguing that immigrants have lower IQs than white Americans, and that immigration policy should be based on the disparity.

Richwine was fired; Heritage condemned the dissertation but stood by the report he'd coauthored. But that was problematic, too. Authored by Heritage scholar Robert Rector, the report argued that passing immigration reform would cost American taxpayers more than \$6 trillion. An updated version of a similar Rector study released in 2006, the paper was widely blasted for its shoddy scholarship. The libertarian Cato Institute [called it](#) "fatally flawed"; Doug Holtz-Eakin, who directed the Congressional Budget Office during the George W. Bush Administration, [said it was](#) "biased against finding any kind of success." The CBO's own assessment was that the immigration bill would be a [boon to taxpayers](#), cutting deficits by \$200 billion in the first 10 years.

Though it's less well-known than the reversal on the individual mandate, Heritage has notably flipped on immigration policy in recent years -- from a long history of supporting higher immigration levels and legalization of immigrants, to the current posture of hostility. Throughout the 1980s, Heritage [argued in](#)

[favor of increased immigration](#) as a free-market-based boost to the economy. In 1986, economist Julian Simon, then a Heritage senior fellow, took on the anti-immigration Federation for American Immigration Reform in a well-publicized debate.

The tradition of support for comprehensive immigration reform continued in 2006 with a paper authored by Tim Kane, Heritage's director of international economics. "The century of globalization will see America either descend into timid isolation or affirm its openness," Kane [concluded](#). "Throughout history, great nations have declined because they built up walls of insularity, but America has been the exception for over a century." That sunny assessment was countered a couple of months later, when Rector -- a welfare expert with no background in economics -- issued his starkly different conclusions. ("All I'm doing is counting things," Rector told the McClatchy news service of his economic estimates, which others called wildly off-base.)

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It was the Rector study that the foundation seemed to endorse, publicizing it more than Kane's work and citing it in fundraising pitches. "It was a bit unfortunate that the [Rector] study became the institutional position, or at least it felt that way," Kane, now at the Hudson Institute, told me. Kane didn't want to be perceived as working in opposition to Senator John McCain, the sponsor of immigration reform in the Senate, whose presidential aspirations he supported. He left Heritage for the Kansas City-based Kauffman Foundation. In a blog post on this year's edition of the Rector report, Kane [wrote](#), "I am disappointed in its poor quality."

Immigration policy is the source of [considerable tension](#) on the right. But critics see in Heritage's flip a case study in the think tank's recent willingness to discard analytical integrity in favor of partisan red meat. "Rector pretended to write an immigration study. There was not an ounce of solid calculation in it," said Joshua Culling, a pro-immigration-reform conservative policy strategist who formerly worked for Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform. "But it got the headlines. It was something they could fundraise off of."

Culling sees the Richwine debacle and the Rector report as products of the same destructive mindset, one that he blames for alienating Hispanics and "losing the next generation" for Republicans. As Heritage has been consumed by politics, he complained, "there's been a serious atrophy in the quality of scholarship, which was once legitimate and respected."

Culling and others in conservative policy circles report constantly fielding calls and emails from Heritage staffers shopping their resumes, looking for an out. Numerous top staffers have left in recent years; Heritage insists it is a normal rate of turnover. (Bill Beach, the longtime director of Heritage's Center for Data Analysis, told me he left for the Senate Budget Committee not out of dissatisfaction with Heritage but because he wanted to work more directly on policy. But Beach also expressed the view that Rector's report presented an incomplete picture of immigration's economic effects, and that the CBO's work was "excellent.")

If Heritage loses its standing as the right's font of ideas, Culling wonders what will fill the void. "We have Cato, a great libertarian think tank, but not all conservatives are libertarians," Culling said. "[The American Enterprise Institute] does good work here and there, but it doesn't have the influence. Heritage was the arbiter of serious, conservative scholarship. Now there's no pillar anymore."

Heritage Responds

Phillip Truluck came to Heritage in 1977 to establish the foundation's research department. Today the executive vice president and chief operating officer, he recalls the Reagan years as a "golden era" for the foundation and for conservatism. But Capitol Hill has changed since those days, he told me, and Heritage had to get with the times. Too much of the foundation's worthy research sat moldering on a shelf as politicians, buffeted by demands from lobbyists and activist groups, felt safe to ignore it.

"The research hasn't changed. The credibility of the research is still the No. 1 thing, the No. 1 priority," Truluck said. "Heritage Action is a way to exert a little more pressure and get [Congress] members' attention."

The structure may have changed, but clashing with Republicans is nothing new for Heritage, Truluck notes. Tom DeLay, incensed by its opposition to George W. Bush's expensive Medicare expansion, banned Heritage from reserving meeting rooms in the Capitol. George H.W. Bush's chief of staff, John Sununu, "screamed at us for not supporting the administration" when Heritage criticized the president for breaking his promise not to raise taxes. Even under Reagan, there were disagreements. Resisting the pleading of presidential Counselor Ed Meese, the foundation refused to support Reagan's second tax bill. (When Reagan left office, Meese joined Heritage, where he held a chair named for Reagan for more than two decades. He retired earlier this year.)

"I understand why some of the politicians get upset. I get it," Truluck said. "But our role is not to make politicians happy or angry. Our goal is to get the best policy adopted that we can for the country."

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If anything, the current uproar shows Heritage's activism is having an effect, said Mike Needham, the CEO of Heritage Action and a former Heritage Foundation chief of staff. Heritage's turn to more hard-edged activism is part of a larger trend of increased grassroots influence on politics, enabled by communication technology, he posited. "For two decades, the two political parties had all the power, controlled the narrative, and told constituents their spin on their votes," he said. "Now, well-informed constituents can form tough questions and challenge members' monopoly on influence. That's an exciting change."

As the Republican Party has weakened, outside groups like Heritage have gained strength because they feed the grassroots hunger for true conservatism, said Dan Holler, Heritage Action's communications director. "From 2003 to 2007, our donor base grew astronomically. It went from 250,000 to 600,000," he said. "Folks were telling us, 'I've stopped giving to the RNC and the NRCC. I want someone in

Washington who's going to actually fight for conservative principles." Heritage's goal, in Holler's view, is "to push the policy discussion as far to the right as possible."

For Republicans, stuck in a defensive crouch, being pushed as far to the right as possible is an alarming prospect, particularly when they thought they were pretty far to the right to begin with.

In my interviews with them, Heritage officials could recite chapter and verse on why Heritage turned against the individual mandate -- a turn, they claim, that occurred before Romney or Obama adopted the idea. "We still believe universal coverage is a good idea," Truluck said. But none of the four Heritage officials I interviewed could tell me offhand how the foundation proposes to reform health care and cover the uninsured if Obamacare is scrapped. (Later, an assistant followed up by emailing me links to Heritage papers on "[putting patients first](#)," [regulating the health-insurance market](#), and [Medicare reform](#).)

Mickey Edwards, the onetime Heritage trustee, agrees that the foundation was never intended to be an arm of the GOP. "We always considered this to be a conservative organization, not a Republican organization," he said. "However, nor was it meant to be an activist group. It was to advocate for ideas, not campaign to try and beat people."

Because of the threat of right-wing primary challenges, there seems to be no limit to how far right Republican politicians can be pushed, Edwards said. "The American people don't want the government shut down. They want control over taxes and spending," he said. "But when you carry that to the point of saying, 'We want what we want, and if we don't get what we want we're going to shut down the government,' I don't think that'll be popular at all. I think the Republican Party will be hurt a lot if Republicans in Congress go along with this idea."

But the Republican Party, as Republicans are finding out the hard way, is not the Heritage Foundation's concern.