



This Obscure Foundation Helped Fund The Alt-Right

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At first glance, Robert Rotella appears to be a typical libertarian donor. Through the foundation named in his honor, the Bellevue, Washington–based founder of Rotella Capital Management has donated millions to libertarian and conservative organizations like the Cato Institute, the Reason Foundation, and Turning Point USA. One of his particular favorites is the Institute for Justice, or IFJ. Since 2010, he has donated nearly a quarter of a million dollars to the group, and through it, he has helped set up a Supreme Court battle with dramatic implications for public schools. Justices heard *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* on Wednesday: IFJ had brought the case against the state of Montana in order to force it to include religious schools in its tax-credit scholarship program. The case has implications not just for the First Amendment but for teachers' unions, who view it as yet another attempt to take precious resources away from public schools.

Rotella's financial support for libertarian causes is enough to make him a consequential figure, but there's another reason to know his name: A closer look at the financial records of the Robert P. Rotella Foundation, which he manages alongside his sister, Rosemarie, reveals that he isn't just interested in right-to-work laws or free enterprise. He's also a significant funder of white nationalism.

Of the \$5.8 million the foundation has donated to various causes since 2002, roughly \$105,000 has gone to organizations like the National Policy Institute, or NPI, which is led by neo-Nazi Richard Spencer. A comprehensive review of the foundation's available 990 reports indicates that its financial support for white nationalism began in 2014 and continued through 2018. Though \$105,000 is not an exceptionally large sum of money, white nationalist organizations are small, and it doesn't take much money to keep them afloat. "Annual recurring donations are kind of where it's at for these guys because they all have financial limits, imposed by federal law, on how large the donations can be," explained David Neiwert, the author of *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*.

"A guy like Spencer, for instance, doesn't need a single sugar daddy to give him money," Neiwert added. "Basically, the National Policy Institute is Spencer, and he just needs an annual salary. Five thousand dollars is basically 5 percent of that annual income for him. He just needs another 20 of those donations and he's done for the year. That's actually not that hard to get, because there are a lot of people out there who are willing to keep that chunk rolling in for him every year."

Rotella was one of those people. His foundation gave \$2,500 to NPI in 2014, then doubled the sum in 2015. It handed off another \$5,000 chunk to the group in 2016. Donations to other white nationalist groups follow a similar pattern. Between 2013 and 2017, his foundation donated \$10,000 every year, or \$40,000 total, to the Charles Martel Society, a white nationalist organization that publishes The Occidental Quarterly, a pseudo-academic journal that focuses on “race science.” Members of the journal’s advisory board include Virginia Abernethy, a Vanderbilt University professor emerita who describes herself as an “ethnic separatist,” and Tom Sunic, a writer whom the Southern Poverty Law Center calls “an intellectual voice for white nationalists” and who once complained that the media “pathologized White Western peoples into endless atonement.” Until 2018, the RPRF’s donations composed roughly 13 to 18 percent of the Charles Martel Society’s donation income, depending on the year.

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Rotella’s foundation also funded the Federation for American Immigration Reform, or FAIR. That group, founded by the late anti-immigration eugenicist John Tanton, has received \$17,500 from Rotella since 2015. FAIR calls for sweeping restrictions on legal immigration based on stereotypes about the criminal tendencies of nonwhites; the Southern Poverty Law Center has designated it a hate group. During the same period, Rotella gave another \$35,000 to the New Century Foundation, publisher of the digital outlet American Renaissance. The website advocates for white separatism, eugenics, and strict immigration restrictions.

Rick McNeely, a spokesperson for the Rotella family, told New York in December that the Charles Martel Society and the National Policy Institute had misrepresented their work to the foundation. “In retrospect, the original goals of why someone would give a donation, in the spirit of diversity and giving other people voices, that certainly wouldn’t have been something [the Rotellas] would do if there had been better disclosure. Or if they had a crystal ball,” McNeely said.

“Unfortunately, none of us can tell the future or hidden agendas or what might happen,” he added. However, the goals and characteristics of the Charles Martel Society are not hidden knowledge. The Southern Poverty Law Center helped publicize the society’s role as a leading purveyor of “academic” racism in 2010, years before the Rotella Foundation started funding the group. The society has been around since 2001, meaning it had 13 years to establish its white nationalist *raison d’être* before it received any Rotella money. FAIR has existed since 1979; NPI, since 2005. Richard Spencer, no stranger to the limelight, had already begun leading NPI by the time it started receiving Rotella money. The intentions of these organizations were clear enough to many.

McNeely said he was unaware that the RPRF had also funded American Renaissance, nor could he explain how the Charles Martel Society and NPI became familiar with a relatively minor foundation in the first place. Public information offers scant additional insight into Rotella or the substance of his views. He has no social-media presence. His official biography on the Rotella Capital Management website says he earned degrees from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Temple University before founding his company in 1995. He eventually relocated from Chicago to Bellevue, where the company is now based. An amateur photographer, he opened the Rotella

Gallery in Bellevue, and his biography on its website says he is originally from Niagara Falls, New York.

Despite Rotella's relatively low profile, his donation history offers a rare glimpse into the way the alt-right is funded. Information about its major donors tends to be scarce. The RPRF is only the second funder of Spencer's organization whose identity has become known; the other is multimillionaire William Regnery II, who founded the Charles Martel Society and also helped found NPI.

Rotella's other charitable causes are not so obviously linked to partisan issues. In addition to funding environmental groups like Conservation International and the Pollinator Partnership, the RPRF donated thousands to obscure groups that tout research efforts into UFOs, anti-vaccination, and the apparently fictitious Morgellons disease. The foundation has donated \$5,000 to the Exopolitics Institute, which offers a "certification program" in "extraterrestrial affairs," and \$25,000 to the Farsight Institute, which claims its team of psychic "remote viewers" has confirmed that aliens built the Pyramids. But Neiwert says this grouping of interests, while strange, isn't completely unusual. "White nationalism runs on conspiracies," he explained.

The psychics of the Farsight Institute probably have little impact on daily affairs, but other Rotella beneficiaries achieve more tangible results. The Southern Poverty Law Center reported in November that before Stephen Miller joined President Trump's speechwriting team, he regularly shared links to American Renaissance stories with Breitbart staffers to influence their coverage. Julie Kirchner, who resigned as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services ombudsman in October, had previously led FAIR for nearly a decade. She wasn't the only FAIR employee in the Trump administration, either. John Zadrozny and Ian Smith both worked for FAIR in different capacities before joining the Department of Homeland Security under Trump; both have since left the administration.

The Rotella Foundation's giving will soon cease: McNeely said it will dissolve this year. The family lacked "the manpower to do it correctly," he explained. But the foundation has already accomplished a great deal during its 18 years in existence — including funding a legal case that could lead to a radical reinterpretation of the First Amendment. The Supreme Court will rule on Espinoza later this year, and, given the conservative makeup of the court, the Rotella-funded Institute for Justice is likely to win. That worries unions like the American Federation of Teachers, which opposes the use of public funds for religious schools. "Robert Rotella and his support for far-right causes is exhibit A in the disturbing story of how money has infiltrated and corrupted our political system," Randi Weingarten, the president of AFT, told New York.

"As a backer of Richard Spencer, Rotella represents a clear and present danger to the tolerance and diversity underpinning American democracy — and it's well past time his influence is exposed and interrogated," Weingarten added.