



The Ideas Deficit

If "ideas have consequences," as conservatives like to say, what's the consequence of having none?

MARK SCHMITT | November 16, 2010



David Frum (Flickr/Urban Mixer)

"Ideas have consequences," conservatives intoned during the Reagan era, boasting of their think tanks, journals, and networks of well-financed academics. When I first came to Washington 20 years ago, there was still some truth to this. The conservative intellectual machinery, though heavily weighted toward public relations, still managed to produce a steady flow of fresh-seeming ideas and credible advocates. The center-left, on the other hand, was burdened by stale assumptions, interest-group demands, and a technocratic approach to governing.

In the years since then, the balance of power in the war of ideas has switched. Beginning in the late 1990s, progressive donors began to see the value of think tanks like the New America Foundation and later the Center for American Progress that would not only conduct technical research but develop fresh perspectives and push them out into the world. New approaches to health care, national security, and education reform emerged from this investment.

Meanwhile, the right seems to have decided that ideas are unnecessary baggage. They've embraced candidates of staggering ignorance. Their halfhearted attempts to show that they would have a policy agenda should they take control of Congress have been embarrassingly vague, and not one of their plans would reduce the federal budget deficit by a dime. Right-wing think tanks have undertaken a purge of the brightest, independent-minded conservatives: David Frum was fired from the American Enterprise Institute, and Brink Lindsey and Will Wilkinson left the Cato Institute. Even the only real brain at the Heritage Foundation, the Thatcherite Stuart Butler, has been shuttled off into a small new "think tank within a think tank."

If ideas are so consequential, progressives should be romping over the unilaterally disarmed right. Indeed, as the Obama administration took office in 2009, it was fully armed with big ideas like cap-and-trade and health reform based on the public option as well as lower-profile initiatives such as student-loan reform, K-12 school reform based on teacher accountability, financial re-regulation, and an approach to national security that this magazine called the "Obama Doctrine." *Mandate for Leadership*, the Heritage Foundation's long-admired 1,093-page book of ideas for the incoming Reagan administration in 1980, had finally met its match.

Some of the progressive initiatives have been blocked or ignored, but others are now law, and some are being quietly put into place through provisions of the economic stimulus bill. The education program known as Race to the Top, for example, represents a vast change in the federal government's relationship to state and local school

