

## 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/<u>Urban Mixer</u>)

"Ideas have consequences," conservatives intoned during the Reagan era, boasting of their think tanks, journals, and networks of wellfinanced 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

systems but was barely noticed when enacted. Other ideas served a more political purpose. Funding for green-jobs programs helped cement a coalition of labor and environmental groups, even if the promise of a renewable-energy economy was overstated. The public option in health care helped mobilize a supportive constituency on the left, even if it was ultimately bargained away.

Aside from health-care reform, however, the last two years have been defined largely by reactive policies, such as the auto bailout, rather than an affirmative agenda. Then there's the problem that on the economy, it's time to admit that we're missing a clear vision for how individuals can make the most of their potential. We have some small ideas -- more economic stimulus and investment in infrastructure -- that would ease the pain of the recession and perhaps hasten a recovery, but economists expect it to take several years to return to pre-recession employment levels. The Clinton-era answer, "Get more education," is no longer persuasive, even though it remains the default Democratic response. College graduates are better off than young workers without degrees, but researchers at Northeastern University estimate that fewer than half of recent college graduates hold jobs that require a degree, making the job market even tougher for less educated workers. "Invest in manufacturing," we often say in this magazine, but manufacturing is now so efficient that it can hardly be expected to create millions of middle-class jobs, as it did in the 1950s.

Without a persuasive alternative vision for the economy, it's no surprise that voters and legislators would be attracted to vacuous slogans like "lower taxes" or "reduce the size of government." It's time to get the idea machines cranked up. What we're looking for now aren't political answers, incremental reforms, or bargaining chips. We don't need ideas that will help Democrats win; we need ideas for the country. We need clarity about just how different the economy will be, even after the recession ends, and a strategy for how we can, once again, make sure that the vast majority of people will have a place in it.

## \*



**Mark Schmitt** is the executive editor of *The American Prospect*. Previously he was a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, director of the Governance and Public Policy program at the Open Society Institute, and policy director to Senator Bill Bradley.