

# NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

## All Hail Heritage

*As Feulner retires and DeMint steps up, the powerhouse think tank keeps its cutting edge.*

By: John Fund – April 1, 2013

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Everyone in politics seems to be focused on which party will control the White House and Congress.

But the real progress in changing the public-policy landscape is likely to come out of the war of ideas. In Washington, the regiments on the battlefield are often think tanks and public intellectuals working for the day when some leader will take their visions off the shelf and try them.

No one has changed the public-policy terrain in Washington more than Ed Feulner, who is retiring this week after 36 years as president of the Heritage Foundation and handing over the reins to former South Carolina senator Jim DeMint.

Founded by Feulner and the late Paul Weyrich, Heritage began in 1973 as a clearinghouse for research aimed at getting members of Congress to take conservative ideas seriously. At the time, think tanks produced bulky tomes that were rarely noticed and even less read. “I realized they simply chopped down trees and helped employ librarians,” Feulner says. Instead, the then-staffer for Illinois representative Phil Crane began to implement what he called the briefcase test. Every piece of research that Heritage published had to fit inside a briefcase, be in plain English, and take less than an hour to read. If imitation is indeed flattery, Heritage is awash in it, because every think tank in Washington now uses its model. Indeed, when John Podesta, Bill Clinton’s White House chief of staff, founded the liberal Center for American Progress in 2003, he explicitly told his staff he wanted it to be structured like Heritage.

By 1980, Heritage was established as a major voice on the right. That year, Feulner made a bold move and ordered a group of scholars to prepare a thousand-page manual on how to manage and implement a conservative governing agenda. The result, entitled *Mandate for Leadership*, would be of use only if Ronald Reagan won that year’s presidential election. At the time, he was trailing incumbent Jimmy Carter in the polls.

After the Gipper won in a landslide, Heritage presented *Mandate* to Reagan. He liked it so much that he ordered copies to be placed on the chair of every member of his cabinet at their first meeting.

Many of the policy ideas that bore fruit in the administrations of Reagan and the first George Bush can be traced back to *Mandate*. When Reagan stunned the world in 1983 with his announcement that he would develop and deploy a system to destroy incoming strategic ballistic missiles, its origins were in a Heritage program called High Frontier. The fear of U.S. dominance in “Star Wars” helped bring the Soviet Union to the bargaining table, and today, the Patriot and Aegis systems are an integral part of America’s defenses against missile attack.

Similarly, Heritage teamed up with the late Jack Kemp, economist Art Laffer, and House Budget Committee chairman Paul Ryan to make the case for supply-side economics. While much of the Republican party doesn't do enough to argue for economic growth, it's not for any lack of effort by Heritage or other think tanks on the right, such as the Manhattan Institute, the Cato Institute, and the American Enterprise Institute.

But despite its many doubles and triples, and even a few home runs, Heritage can occasionally strike out. For several years, it lost touch with conservative grass-roots activists by promoting an excessively top-down regulatory approach to health care that in 2006 became part of Massachusetts's checkered Romneycare program.

Heritage has always been on the cutting edge of innovation. In the 1990s, it began offering seminars for journalists on how to use online databases and government documents so they could do their own research. Countless talk-radio shows around the country have used Heritage's studios to broadcast from Washington. Almost every Heritage event is recorded and archived, so its 700,000 donors and other interested people can watch them online.

As Heritage begins its 40th year under new leadership, conservatives can be grateful they have such a powerful advocate. In *Leading the Way*, a new book on the foundation that John Miller featured last week on his NRO broadcast "Between the Covers," Heritage scholar Lee Edwards credits its success to what he calls the Three I's: ideas, individuals, and institutions. "Heritage is a fusion of all the strands of conservative thought, but that's not what makes it successful," Edwards explains. "All conservatives share many of the same ideas — limited government, individual responsibility, free markets, and respect for tradition — but you don't have impact unless you bring the right individuals together in credible institutions that can put those ideas into practice."

What a sometimes fractious conservative movement needs is more of Heritage's can-do attitude and even more of Ed Feulner's philosophy. "The conservative movement needs honest debate on implementing principles," Feulner told me last year. "But what it needs even more is Ronald Reagan's view that we should emphasize additions to our cause and multiplication of our message rather than subtraction and division." That attitude served the country, conservatism, and the Gipper well. It's good to see Heritage continue to promote this approach at a time when it's needed more than ever.