

Big thinker: John Allison

By: Matt Evans – January 4th, 2012

Mr. Allison has gone to Washington, with the mission in 2013 of reinvigorating the most venerable and well-known libertarian think-tank in the nation's capital.

To accomplish his goals for the Cato Institute, John Allison will be leaning on the organizational and leadership skills that stem from two decades leading one of the Triad's most influential companies, BB&T Corp. It's a big job with big implications, both for himself and for the country, he believes.

"When I retired from BB&T I didn't want to quit. I wanted to change jobs," he says. "I loved that organization, but I also felt there were other things I could enjoy and that would create a sense of purpose for myself, and that is defending individual rights and free markets."

Allison is no newbie to libertarianism, as one of the most vocal and well-known admirers of the fully-hands-off government philosophy espoused by author Ayn Rand. The Cato Institute was founded in 1977 by financier Charles Koch and Ed Crane, who remained Cato's president until a lengthy and public spat with the politically active Koch and his family paved the way for his departure and Allison's ascent in October.

The feuding was distracting and no doubt embarrassing for Cato's staff, authors and policy experts, but Allison says the "internal conflict" is now a thing of the past. His plans for 2013, he says, include to apply more business-tested strategies to the nonprofit organization, turn up the volume on Cato's intellectual influence, add to its roster of "world-class" scholars and to "raise the visibility of the Cato brand and of libertarianism in general."

Exactly how Allison intends to brand libertarianism has been a source of concern for some Cato allies. Objectivists - the followers of Ayn Rand - don't always get along with traditional libertarians and have some intense philosophical divisions, including a more hawkish foreign policy than Cato wonks have typically espoused. Chat boards and blogs have been forums for vocal debate about Allison's plans.

But "I have no intention of changing any philosophies or policies at Cato," Allison says. "I would call it a scale issue. Cato has grown a lot. It started as a two-person operation and now it has 120 employees" who are in need of more organizational and systemic approaches to their work that his experience at BB&T can bring, he says.

John Hood, president of the Raleigh-based libertarian think-tank John Locke Foundation, says he doubts Allison is seeking any fundamental shifts in Cato's philosophy, but rather a more effective way of promoting that philosophy. Cato's recent drama created challenges, but "it's not as if John is moving into an organization that needs to be rebuilt

from the ground up."

Hood thinks Allison will do well in promoting Cato's views. Think tanks often turn to policy wonks and academics as leaders. But Hood says Allison knows libertarianism as well as anyone, and he's also got the managerial experience to put it to work.

The job wouldn't have been fundamentally different under a Mitt Romney administration in 2013, he added. Cato's job is to market ideas more than push a particular bill in a particular year.

"If Romney had been elected it would have given Cato a new audience to pitch, but a re-elected Obama administration will give Cato many things to study and critique and argue about," he says.

Allison says one of his biggest challenges for 2013 will be designing metrics to measure his own and Cato's success and influencing the public debate. Bankers can swim in a bottomless pool of performance ratios, earnings and other data. Think tanks are a different beast.

"We're going through the process of establishing concrete objectives. We'll measure whether we write enough good books, publish enough papers and are visible in the media," he says. "It won't be perfect; you don't really know the long-term impact of a good article. But we'll have indicators to know that we're moving in the right direction."