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## The Needless Assault on Private Philanthropy

By Bob McClure

Americans are an incredibly generous people. Despite this deep and all-encompassing recession, charitable giving in the United States last year topped \$307.6 billion, the second-highest total on record.

Who received it? According to the Giving USA Foundation, recipients included religious groups (\$106.8 billion), education (\$40.9 billion), charitable foundations (\$32.6 billion), health organizations (\$21.6 billion), the arts (\$12.7 billion), international affairs (\$13.3 billion), the environment (\$6.5 billion), and miscellaneous other causes (\$23.8 billion). These are figures almost unfathomable to the mind in their scope and depth.

Who gave it? Individuals gave the most (\$229.2 billion), while the rest came from grant-making foundations (\$41.5 billion), charitable bequests (\$22.6 billion) and corporate giving (\$14.5 billion).

And what do these groups all have in common? They are all privately held philanthropic entities that believe in using their dollars to make the lives of others better. Indeed, the word *philanthropy* comes from the Greek root meaning “love of mankind.”

Compare that to the so-called “stimulus” plan that quickly devolved into nothing more than a political slush fund for Congress. See the funds allocated for fighting forest fires in the District of Columbia as one absurd example. In fact, the economy has continued

to worsen and, sadly, unemployment has reached double-digits since its passage.

So who but a Grinch could possibly want to disrupt something so effective and compassionate as private philanthropy? “Greenliners,” that’s who.

Now, with the holiday season upon us, many Americans will again ponder their year-end giving. Some will be inspired by the yuletide spirit, others by the desire for tax deductions.

Whatever their motivation, however, there’s one wish virtually all donors share: the desire to choose where their gifts go. Indeed, if there’s one guiding star in the philanthropic firmament, it’s respect for the donor’s intent.

Individuals exercise that freedom whenever they walk past the Salvation Army’s red kettles and decide whether to give. They do so when they receive funding appeals from various charities and causes.

Surely donors deserve the right to choose where their money goes. After all, most gifts represent the bounty from the fruits of their labor – what’s left after life’s necessities have been purchased, payrolls have been met, or federal, state, and local taxes have been paid.

Indeed, the right to give some of what remains to the recipients of one’s choice is fundamental to the concept of private property, and fundamentally American.

Granted, some choices may seem eccentric. Imagine the scene when eager heirs

gather to hear the reading of Aunt Sadie's will, only to learn that she placed most of her millions in a trust fund to care for her beloved poodle, Fifi, and to help a local animal shelter.

Yet here in Florida there are heart-warming examples of how personal experiences ignited a passion for a cause. Wendy's founder Dave Thomas, adopted as a child, gave much of his wealth to his foundation to support adoption and foster care.

When one of Miami Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino's sons was diagnosed with autism, Marino started a foundation to support autism research. Another Dolphin, Nick Buoniconti, co-founded a group to seek a cure for paralysis after his son, Marc, was paralyzed while playing football. There are countless examples of such generosity by businesses, foundations and individuals across the country.

In each of these instances, the desire to give arose from a very personal experience or a defined need in a community. Private philanthropy is more effective than a government program precisely because it is so often intensely personal for a donor who may be pursuing a particular passion.

Yet because charitable giving is tax deductible, and because many charitable groups are tax-exempt, some advocates of ever-larger government now argue that donors are playing Santa Claus with money that otherwise would go to the government and, therefore, that philanthropy needs political oversight beyond the careful auditing already performed by taxing authorities.

In particular, the so-called "greenliners" not only want to insure that preferred groups receive what they deem as a fair share of the giving, but that any boards of directors governing the donors and recipients include the requisite numbers of those preferred groups. Imagine the chaos if private

philanthropy is saddled with all-encompassing regulations.

In California, increasingly notorious for dysfunctional government, greenliners were even able to enlist the power of the state, which enacted a statute to enforce the greenliners' preferences and impose their litmus tests for "inclusiveness".

Unfortunately, Florida is also among the greenliners' targets. They've already made inroads on certain goals unrelated to philanthropy. These include threatening to bring down the federal government's wrath on lenders whose loan portfolios don't include what the greenliners regard as enough lending to preferred minorities.

Florida's greenliners have also targeted corporate philanthropy, and their logical next step would be an attempt to second-guess the philanthropy of individuals and charitable foundations.

Yet when donors are no longer free to choose the recipients of their charity, their zeal to give will diminish. That, in turn, could cause individuals and groups that now benefit from private philanthropy to become more dependent on the government, a government that can't even get the requisite number of flu shots to the American public. Imagine if those same bureaucrats got their fingers into private philanthropy. Then again, perhaps that's the ultimate (but covert) goal of the greenliners and other forces. They must not succeed.

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