

# The New Criterion

Notes & Comments November 2005

## Freedom and philanthropy

*A look back at the Olin Foundation's contributions to America.*

As regular readers of *The New Criterion* know, the magazine has from its founding been a beneficiary of the John M. Olin Foundation. As we noted in this space last year, the Olin Foundation, in accordance with the wishes of Mr. Olin, will be closing its doors this Autumn, putting an end to more than twenty-five years of enlightened conservative philanthropy. We have already had occasion to celebrate what the Olin Foundation and its directors, Michael S. Joyce at the beginning and for the last two decades James Piereson, have meant to *The New Criterion*. Quite simply, the magazine would not have been created without the Foundation's initial interest and support, nor could it have persisted for—*mirabile dictu*—almost twenty-five years without its ongoing help.

In the minds of many—of many on the Left, at least—the whole idea of “conservative philanthropy” in the realm of ideas has the aroma of an oxymoron. Ever since John Stuart Mill dismissed conservatives as “the stupid party,” there has been a presumption that the Left had an unofficial monopoly in the realm of culture and ideas. The Olin Foundation was one institution that demonstrated how misguided that presumption was. We are immensely grateful for the Olin Foundation's essential support of our endeavors and are delighted to note that a worthy testament to its work is being published this month: *A Gift of Freedom: How the John M. Olin Foundation Changed America* (Encounter Books) by John J. Miller. Early on in his book, Mr. Miller quotes Lionel Trilling's famous observation—written in 1950—that “There are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation,” only “irritable mental gestures.” How different things look today. “If Trilling were to come back and assess the political and social scene in the first years of the twenty-first century,” Mr. Miller notes,

he would certainly reverse his earlier judgment. Conservative ideas are ascendant; indeed, America may be in the middle of a “conservative moment.” The success of conservatism owes much to the inherent power of ideas, as well as to the talents of individual men and women who promote them. Yet it is impossible not to see the steady influence of the John M. Olin Foundation in this triumph.

We believe Mr. Miller is correct. And if we would caution that the “conservative moment” he heralds is besieged on many sides by ideas that, though they call themselves liberal, are really radical or antinomian, there is no question that the Olin Foundation was instrumental in changing, in opening up, social, political, intellectual, and aesthetic debate in this country. Ironically, the one-party monopoly on ideas that Trilling discerned and lamented now holds sway only in the one institution dedicated to the life of the mind: the university. Thus, as we bid a grateful farewell to the Olin Foundation, we look forward to the next John M. Olin, the next visionary, who will help continue to bring genuine freedom and intellectual diversity to those institutions that speak the language of liberalism but in fact bear the same relation to liberty as those states whose names begin with the phrase “The People’s Republic of ...”

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