

The Public Interest Fellowship at 10

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This is a lightly edited version of remarks delivered on July 11 at the opening dinner of The Public Interest Fellowship's Annual Forum. The author spoke in his capacity as director of studies for TPIF's flagship fellowship program.

BALTIMORE — Welcome to [The Public Interest Fellowship](#)'s Annual Forum.

About this time 10 years ago, in July 2015, TPIF was four months old.

We had a purpose: We sought to advance the American experiment in ordered liberty.

And we had a concept: We would accomplish our purpose by providing talented young men and women jobs that advanced constitutional government in America. We would also supply a continuing education in ideas, institutions, and public policy. And we would form a network of friends and colleagues for those just getting started and who shared our dedication to freedom and democracy in America.

Our convictions were and remain those that undergird America's experiment in ordered liberty. These are the same convictions that informed that great quarterly, founded in 1965 by Irving Kristol and Daniel Bell, The Public Interest. We believe that the American experiment in ordered liberty is grounded in individual freedom; human equality; limited constitutional government; the rule of law; free markets; good character; a vibrant civil society comprising families, communities, civic associations, and houses of worship; and a strong America abroad.

At its inception, TPIF differed from other Washington programs for young men and women. Ten years ago, D.C. had internships aplenty that enabled twenty-somethings to acquire political experience. And undergraduates and graduate students could find opportunities in D.C. to study ideas and public policy.

In those days, though, it would have been hard to find in Washington a full-time program that stressed *both* working in politics *and* studying politics. TPIF aimed to provide our fellows hands-on experience and vigorous discussion around the seminar table – discussion of great books, seminal articles, and thorny policy issues. This raises the venerable question: Which is more important to preparing for politics, experience or study? TPIF answers that both experience and study are essential to forming responsible citizens and effective public servants.

So, 10 years ago this month, TPIF had a purpose and a concept. But we had no full-time employees. And we had no fellows. In July 2015, we part-timers – Joel Winton, Mike Goldfarb, Nani Beraha, and I – were still assembling what became TPIF’s legendary first-year class.

That legendary first-year class consisted of five men and two women. Four of them – two men, two women – went on to occupy positions of weight and responsibility in either the first or second Trump administration.

The late Ian Lindquist was a stalwart member of TPIF’s first-year class. Ian excelled in the activities in which it is most worth excelling. He shined as student, teacher, friend, mentor, colleague, thinker, doer, son, husband, and father. Ian remains for TPIF a model and a standard. His memory is a blessing.

One year after completing the program, Ian returned as TPIF executive director. He served in that position for nearly three years. Ian played a pivotal role in launching the expansion of TPIF’s offerings beyond the flagship fellowship but in view of TPIF’s founding mission.

The flagship fellowship hosts around 20 twenty-somethings each year. It involves two years of full-time work, bi-monthly evening seminars, monthly dinners with distinguished guests, seasonal retreats to delve into issues and ideas, and an every-other-year trip to Israel. TPIF also offers monthly seminar programs for young conservatives in D.C. on major dimensions of American politics. These fellowships include security and strategic studies, the rule of law, American capitalism, and social conservatism and freedom. In addition, we host a military-history program built around World War II study trips to Europe. And we provide grants – to new authors writing books that advance TPIF aims, and to mid-career professionals seeking to bolster U.S. national security.

Not bad for a young organization for which at its birth there was no model.

TPIF’s steady expansion and smooth operation owe much to my colleagues. Our outstanding Executive Director Garrett Exner heads a superb TPIF team. The team includes Director of Operations Nani Beraha, Director of Alumni Engagement Kate Matus, Director of External Affairs Abby Zovak, and Strategic Projects Manager Renee Lataif.

I should mention TPIF alum and former Deputy Director Serena Pfeiffer. For several years, Serena worked closely with Garrett and the team managing TPIF’s expansion. Recently, Serena was spirited away from TPIF by Garrett’s wife, Michele Exner. Michele serves as assistant secretary for the Bureau of Global Public Affairs in the U.S. State Department; Serena serves as Michele’s chief of staff. I have been reliably informed that intra-Exner negotiations over Serena’s highly valued services were intense but amicable. That said, Michele clearly obtained the superior outcome.

In our efforts to advance the public interest, TPIF fosters discussion among fellows about timely topics. In recent years, the flagship fellowship has explored contemporary quarrels on the right about the meaning of conservatism. Interest in the varieties of conservatism and the quarrels among them has arisen in other TPIF programs as well. Ten years ago this month, those quarrels, a persistent feature of the American conservative movement, were intensifying.

In July 2015, more than a dozen Republicans were competing for their party's nomination for president. Remember? The stellar list included Jeb Bush, Ben Carson, Chris Christie, Ted Cruz, Carly Fiorina, Lindsey Graham, Mike Huckabee, Bobby Jindal, John Kasich, George Pataki, Rand Paul, Rick Perry, Marco Rubio, Rick Santorum, and Scott Walker.

One month before, another hopeful had thrown his hat in the ring, but who could take him seriously?

On June 16, 2015, Donald J. Trump descended a gold-plated escalator at Trump Tower to announce his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president. Few of the establishment candidates, to say nothing of the professional scribblers and seasoned operatives, gave the real-estate tycoon and reality TV star much chance.

If, as the months passed, the expert-class had spent more time talking to voters and less time talking to themselves, they would have discerned that Trump had tapped into a seething discontent among working- and middle-class voters. Ordinary people were angry and appalled by profligate government spending, illegal immigration, and the setbacks of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Especially galling to ordinary people was the elites' palpable disdain for them.

Most Republicans since Barry Goldwater ran against progressive elites. GOP presidential campaigns were also marked by an undercurrent if not more of rebellion against the Republican establishment. Trump, however, railed against the Republican establishment with at least as much relish as he inveighed against Democratic elites. Some of Trump's acolytes called the bipartisan Washington establishment "the Uniparty."

As Trump's 2016 campaign gained steam, more than a few outraged critics on the right charged that Trump's populist turn betrayed conservatism. Those critics, however, forgot their history. Or they never learned it. From the beginning, leading lights of modern conservatism have forged alliances with the people.

Edmund Burke took the side of the people against the elites. In 1790, the Whig statesman defended the untutored moral sense of the common man while decrying the pernicious schemes for remaking society of the "political men of letters."

William F. Buckley took the side of the people against the elites. In the 1960s, the founder and then-editor of *National Review* famously quipped, “I would rather be governed by the first two thousand people in the Boston telephone directory than by the entire faculty of Harvard University.”

Irving Kristol took the side of the people against the elites. In the mid-1980s, the sage of neoconservatism argued that ordinary Americans were proving themselves a decidedly safer repository of common sense than the elites, who coddled criminals, perverted education, and conducted foreign policy with arrogance and ineptitude.

It turns out that in this critical respect – taking the people’s side against the elites – Trump followed, if intuitively, in the footsteps of seminal American conservatives and the broader conservative tradition.

The New Right, a loose coalition of right-wing intellectuals who tend to believe that American conservatism is part of the problem, forms an influential division of the Trump right. New Right intellectuals espouse a mixture of traditional and extreme criticisms of America. In contrast to Trump, who operates based on instinct and impulse and who loves deals, the New Right traffics in grand theories and favors ideological contestation over transactional politics.

Many young conservatives – especially the college-educated, upwardly mobile, and politically ambitious – are drawn to the New Right.

These young conservatives admire the New Right’s jeremiads against cultural corruption and institutional rot. They thrill to the New Right’s call to clean house and, where necessary, burn down the house. They embrace the New Right’s exhortation to remake America, very much including the conservative movement itself.

Young conservatives’ attraction to the New Right is not surprising. Young people are driven by intense passions; disposed to impatience with their elders’ compromises, vanities, and errors; keen to act boldly and do things their own way; and inclined to see prudence as pusillanimity and moderation as meekness.

Ardor, indignation, and impetuosity have their advantages.

Yet the New Right has adopted radical ideas, demanded radical changes, and endorsed radical goals. All this is hard to reconcile with a conservatism that is faithful to America’s founding principles and the best in our country’s constitutional traditions.

At TPIF, we seek to learn from our friends on the New Right while avoiding their blind spots, exaggerations, and overreach.

For example, American conservatives who take their bearings by the nation's founding principles and the best in our constitutional traditions will agree with friends in the national conservatism movement: American citizens should put America before other nations. But such conservatives will recognize that the American nation that we put first affirms universal principles, starting with human equality in unalienable rights.

American conservatives who take their bearings by the nation's founding principles and the best in our constitutional traditions will agree with friends in the common-good conservative movement: American politics must revolve around shared moral and political beliefs. But such conservatives will appreciate that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution form a nation in which the common good is not the highest good. That's because our government of limited powers lacks the authority to legislate or enforce a settled doctrine about the perfection or salvation of the soul. In America, the common good, the good to which all citizens should strive, consists in the preservation and improvement of a political order that secures citizens' unalienable rights – among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

American conservatives who take their bearings by the nation's founding principles and the best in our constitutional traditions will agree with friends in the postliberal movement that the freedom Americans cherish contains the seeds of its own destruction. But such conservatives will not hold that against American's dedication to equal liberty under law, because they know that all regimes contain the seeds of their own destruction. Instead, conservatives devoted to America's founding principles and the best in our constitutional traditions will support measures that counteract freedom's bad tendencies; that, within the boundaries set by the Constitution, foster the virtues of freedom; and that discipline and elevate the nation's enduring love of liberty.

And American conservatives who take their bearings by the nation's founding principles and the best in our constitutional traditions will agree with friends among the so-called "restrainers" in foreign affairs: Smugness, miscalculation, and muddled goals stemming in no small measure from ignorance of our adversaries and of ourselves, have plagued U.S. foreign policy. But such conservatives also know that U.S. national security requires landing crushing blows on America's enemies; coming to the aid of friends and partners; refurbishing and expanding alliances; preserving the global flow of goods, services, and people; favoring conditions that favor freedom and democracy; championing human rights; and keeping voters informed about the multiplicity of challenges abroad to America's security, freedom, and prosperity.

I am aware that in weighing in on current controversies about American conservatism, I have advanced contestable claims. I look forward to contesting them with you this weekend. And I hope that you will contest them with one another.

Now, though, is not the time to contest. Now is the time to close.

TPIF has enjoyed 10 terrific years. We couldn't have done it without you all, TPIF's terrific fellows. We will do our best to make the coming years better still.

Thanks for joining us tonight and for participating in the entire weekend. Please take every advantage of the opportunities afforded by TPIF's Annual Forum to talk, to listen, and to learn.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](https://peterberkowitz.com) and he can be followed on X @BerkowitzPeter.