

Wal-Mart Member Education Kit May 2005

Cynical Philanthropy: A Brief History of an Unfortunately Long Tradition

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Philanthropy, the bequeathing of money for the betterment of society, has been a powerful force in society since the first king gave the first coin to the first charitable cause. Over the centuries, the wealthy and the elite have given untold sums of wealth to make the world a better, more enlightened place, and in so doing have helped to define the concept of civic-mindedness in modern society. The largess of oligarchs has built parks, music halls, and institutions of learning that have benefited all humankind, and for that, the names of great benefactors like Alfred Nobel and Andrew Carnegie are revered by history. Their names, carved in the marble of noble buildings, are their legacy, as far as the public at-large is concerned; to the historian falls the sad duty of reminding us that there is always a context for giving, that altruism attested to in granite can serve as an historical smokescreen, obscuring a lifetime of corporate malfeasance and personal excess.

It has probably always been so. Certainly by the time trade and commerce begat aristocracies so entrenched in their power that the elite were afforded the luxury of concern for their legacy, a cynical kind of philanthropy had taken hold amongst the sharing of the truly good-hearted. This kind of public giving was designed to buy in death the good reputation that a person may or may not have earned in life, as in Alexander the Great establishing a great library in a mighty city that bore his own name. Like all who would bend history to reflect themselves in a positive light, Alexander knew that associating himself with an unprecedented gathering of knowledge would speak to the ages far more favorably than if he were remembered solely for the glory and carnage of his conquests.

The use of philanthropy as a cynical form of historical propaganda reached its zenith with the robber barons of the late 19th century, though the people behind some of contemporary society's most powerful corporate entities are beginning to give the Nobels and the Carnegies a run for their money. We live in an age in which television moguls make billion-dollar donations to the United Nations, media magnates affect national policy by the way they order it described, and snack-chip companies affix their names to venerated sporting events. The scale of what an individual or corporation must donate in order to whitewash a history of misdeeds may have increased over time, but the screen of doing the public good remains a potent means to that end.

Matching the blatancy of the legacy-buying of Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, will not be easy for the modern cynical philanthropist, however. Nobel's historical epiphany came in 1888, when his brother Ludwig passed away and a newspaper mistakenly published his own obituary. It was entitled "The Merchant of Death is Dead," and described the Swedish chemist as a man who had gotten rich from helping men find better ways of killing one another. Profoundly disturbed by the revelation that his name was synonymous with military use of high explosives, Nobel, upon his death in 1896, left \$9 million to fund awards for work that benefited humankind. These awards eventually became the Nobel Prizes, and a scant century later, they have become the man's legacy, while his invention of TNT has become the historical footnote.

Guilt can be a powerful motivator for philanthropy, as with Andrew Carnegie, builder of hundreds of libraries and the most famous music hall in the nation. The Scottish immigrant had lived a life out of a Horatio Alger story, rising from obscure beginnings to dominate steel production in the United States. A Social Darwinist, Carnegie believed that his achievements were scientific proof that he was more fit to survive in the cutthroat capitalist world of the

industrial age than those who toiled in his factories and foundries; his philosophy virtually compelled Carnegie to regard these people as inferiors, and to treat them as such. Though his public rhetoric often supported the rights of workers to organize, when push came to shove, the weaver's son put his own interests at the fore of his considerations.

This was the case when Carnegie threw his support behind plant manager Henry Frick during the Homestead Strike in 1892. Frick subsequently hired scabs and an army of 300 goons from the Pinkerton Detective Agency to escort them through the striker's picket lines. In the ensuing violence, 11 union men and bystanders and 10 guards were killed. History records that the violence of the strike haunted Andrew Carnegie even as it besmirched his public reputation, but then again, the writing of history is generally the province of either the victor or the guy who paid the most.

If anything should have been haunting Carnegie, it was his partial culpability in a much greater tragedy that had occurred only a few years before the Homestead Strike. In 1879, he and about 50 aristocrats (among whom numbered Andrew Mellon, Henry Frick, and Philander Knox) chipped in to buy an old dam and reservoir near the town of South Fork, Pennsylvania. Throughout the 1880's, the wealthy and privileged enjoyed the beauty and solace of the exclusive preserve, all the while ignoring their responsibility in maintaining the dam. In 1889, the ill-maintained earthworks burst, inundating the valley below with water from the South Fork Hunting & Fishing Club's private lake. The resultant flood destroyed several towns; the largest, Johnstown, now gives its name to the disaster. Property damage was estimated at \$17 million, with over 2,200 souls perishing in the deluge.

Carnegie and Nobel, like many of their fellow captains of industry around the turn of the century, were able to buy redemption through public works, and for this, history has forgiven them many of their worst misdeeds. This established a precedent that has been noted by the *nouveau riche* of our time: be as big a bastard as you'd like in the boardroom, so long as you leave enough to charity to ensure that your name gets connected with something the public will long perceive as beneficial. Contemporary oligarchs like Bill Gates are thus willing to fund experimental school models while Donald Trump affixes his name to anything he associates with "class."

The Walton family, the wealthiest family in America, has chosen the beneficiaries of its largess with more care than most philanthropies that claim to operate on behalf of the public good. It has given over \$1 billion to charities, but this amounts to less than 2% of its \$94 billion fortune, and much of the money that was given was spread over such a wide base that it will likely have little lasting impact. An excellent example of this is Wal-Mart Teacher of the Year Award, which provides cash prizes for teachers nominated by members of the community.

Wal-Mart touts the program as one which inspires teachers to excellence, especially when they enter the competitive national realm, but it is, at its heart, a form of cynical philanthropy designed to co-opt potential opposition to the Walton Foundation's extremist education policies. A \$1000 prize like the one presented to teachers represents less than a single second's profit for Wal-Mart — a corporation with more wealth than most nations — but is received gratefully by underpaid, under-recognized educators. The Walton Foundation, with an absolutely minimal investment, is thus able to allow community members to take an active role in recognizing outstanding teachers, show the teaching community as a whole that Wal-Mart "cares" about education, and persuade individual teachers to be more favorably disposed toward Wal-Mart and the Walton Foundation's agenda. From Wal-Mart's perspective, this has the potential added benefit of undermining teacher support for their unions and professional

associations, as the latter engage the Walton family in debate over the course of public education in America. If anyone objects to the cynical undertones of Walton Foundation philanthropy, the family can always make the don't-look-a-gift-horse-in-the-mouth argument to a public with scant attention for the politics of giving.

In looking closely at the Walton Foundation's teacher recognition program, one is reminded less of the noble helping hand that an endowment can be, as when Sears, Roebuck & Co. President Julius Rosenberg built more than 5000 schools throughout the rural South (subsequently employing more than 14,000 teachers) in the 1920's, and more of the coins casually tossed from the balconies of the Mexico City Jockey Club during the reign of Porfirio Diaz, thirty years earlier. There, the poor would gather for the chance to fight and claw in the dust as money and trinkets were tossed down, their struggling and fighting a source of amusement for the aristocrats above, who laughed and teased the surging crowds by dangling and pretend-tossing the coins, the way one toys with a dog and a fetching-stick.

Philanthropy can and should be a great shaper of civilization, a means for those who have realized society's dreams of success to leave a legacy of culture and gratitude to the unknown multitudes that helped, however indirectly, to lift them to the pinnacles of fortune. It is the undeniable prerogative of the endower to determine how that which they choose to bequeath should be directed, but with that prerogative comes a certain moral obligation concerning purity of motive. To be revered by history, a gift ought to be free of the taint of pandering. Barring that, a bequeathing to right past misdeeds should reflect a true spirit of penitence on the part of the giver, not a latter-day indulgence ponied up to avoid purgatory. To behave otherwise is to mock and muddle the veracity of history.

How many Peace Prizes absolve the father of high explosives for the military application of his invention? How many concert halls whitewash a lifetime spent fighting worker attempts to unionize? How many \$1000 checks to get teachers to look past the fact that their prizes were drawn from the profits of sweatshop labor? The lines may vary with knowledge and perception of intent, but society should be under no obligation to receive with gratitude a benevolence born of false pretense, nor history to preserve any less or more than a philanthropist's true, fully-disclosed legacy.

The public should be as proud to receive a gift as a benefactor is to give it. For this reason alone, teachers should reject cynical philanthropic attempts by the Walton Foundation to obscure its profound negative impact on educational discourse in the modern political arena. The rights of workers to organize in their workplace and the plight of sweatshop laborers are worth more than thirty pieces of silver, and John Walton enjoys no more privilege to prescribe the moral tone of his own legacy than did the robber barons of the past.