

From Local Roots, Bradley Foundation Builds Conservative Empire

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Less than a week after being elected governor, Scott Walker and his wife met privately with one of the most powerful philanthropic forces behind America's conservative movement.

It wasn't the Koch brothers - the bogeymen for the American left.

On Nov. 8, 2010, the Walkers broke bread at the upscale Bacchus restaurant in the Cudahy Tower with the board and senior staff of the Milwaukee-based Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation.

With more than \$600 million in assets, the Bradley Foundation provides a cornerstone for the conservative movement in Wisconsin and across America. It has been the financial backer behind public policy experiments that started in the state and spread across the nation - including welfare reform, public vouchers for private schools and, this year, cutbacks in public employee benefits and collective bargaining.

Yet outside conservative circles, the foundation has kept a low profile. It receives a fraction of the attention given the billionaire brothers David and Charles Koch and the Scaife family.

But the Bradley Foundation is in a different league: From 2001 to 2009, it doled out nearly as much money as the seven Koch and Scaife foundations combined.

Michael W. Grebe, president and chief executive of the foundation, said there's nothing secretive about his organization. Rather, Grebe likened the Bradley Foundation to the 1960s Green Bay Packers, who ruled the football world with a fearsome ground game and a deceptively simple running play, the sweep.

"We're going to run off tackle, right over there, and we're telling you we're going to run there and we're going to knock you on your butt and carry the ball down the field," Grebe said during an interview inside the foundation's headquarters near downtown. "There are no surprises."

Acting like a venture capital firm for ideas, the Bradley Foundation funds thinkers, doers and organizations tethered to conservative ideals of "limited, competent government," free markets and a "vigorous national defense," faithfully executing the will of the late manufacturing titans and brothers Lynde and Harry Bradley.

And make no mistake: Bradley Foundation-funded ideas, as well as political leaders who turn those ideas into action, have helped drive America's conservative revolution over the past quarter-century.

All told, the Bradley Foundation dispersed more than \$350 million in grants from 2001 to 2010 to hundreds of institutions, ranging from arts organizations and school choice groups in Wisconsin to prominent national policy organizations, a Journal Sentinel review shows.

"I think there is some level of understanding of the breadth of organizations and causes they're involved in," said Assembly Minority Leader Peter Barca (D-Kenosha). "But I doubt many people would have any idea that they spent \$350 million over the last 10 years."

Aaron Dorfman, the executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, said the Bradley Foundation supplies "the intellectual justification for conservative causes."

"They have been particularly skillful at funding the think tanks and university programs that provide this intellectual foundation for their policy positions."

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