



October 19, 2016

Open letter re: *Wall Street Journal's* recent editorial

Heritage Action has agreed and continues to agree with *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page on many of the important issues facing our nation. And The Heritage Foundation had a long and enduring relationship with late conservative icon Robert Bartley, who served as the editorial page editor for decades. Upon Bartley's passing in 2003, then-Heritage Foundation President Edwin J. Feulner said "His commitment to the free society was extraordinary." Today, however, the right faces new challenges that call for new solutions. Meeting those challenges will require resolving disagreements internal to the right as much as overcoming the challenges to the free society posed by the left. And on these debates, the *Journal* has consistently positioned itself against the forces advocating much-needed change.

One of the core challenges facing conservatives in the 21st Century is how to build upon rather than merely wax nostalgically for Ronald Reagan's America. The unconventional politics of the right in 2016 have demonstrated that it was naively simplistic -- and, as it turns out, politically tone deaf -- to assume that the messages that proved successful in 1980 and 1984 would be received in the same manner decades later when the problems facing families and communities had changed.

In 2011, Heritage Action's chief operating officer Tim Chapman and I began our own effort to sketch a vision of the future in an op-ed for *Real Clear Politics* explaining the challenges facing our nation. We argued the "corrupt nexus" of the Big Wall Street, Big Government, Big Labor, and Big Business -- all of which are protected classes in the American political system -- was "at the heart of the dissatisfaction across the country towards Washington." So long as it was the party of Wall Street and K Street, we argued, the Republican Party would not be trusted by its own voters as agents of the change they demanded. A new approach was required if conservatism was to be advanced.

"Our Founders created a Republic in which individuals were limited only by their determination to work hard. 'America is an idea, not a place,' said Winston Churchill. And the great power of the idea behind America is that freedom, opportunity and

prosperity are available to all who are willing to work for it. Why else would generations upon generations of immigrants risk life and limb to come to our great nation?

“But the suffocating culture of The Establishment that now permeates the halls of power in Washington threatens to undermine the very bedrock of our country. This situation brings us to the moment in history at which we have arrived.”

Left unaddressed, it was obvious that dissatisfaction with the Republican Party would reach a boiling point. This is why Heritage Action and many others in the conservative movement set about putting forward an agenda to shed old stereotypes and empower Americans from every walk of life the opportunity to succeed in our ever-changing global economy. Those efforts were largely ignored by our nation’s political and media elites. They assumed the populist moment would dissipate -- that the fever would break -- and that those who enjoyed the perks of the status quo would return to their positions within the corrupt nexus.

This election season should have called that assumption into question. Yet even as this year’s populist moment upended both major political parties, the political establishment as represented by the *Journal* has kept its head in the sand. One recent editorial (Review & Outlook: Trump’s Moment of Truth, October 12, 2016) offers a telling example.

“The other GOP camp [‘Trumpian wing of the GOP’] has disdained such outreach in favor of mobilizing the white working-class voters who supposedly stayed home in 2012. The evidence is strong that most of those voters weren’t in swing states and so didn’t affect the election. But Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions, the talk-radio gang, Heritage Action and Breitbart.com decided that the path to victory is flogging immigration and trade resentments to mobilize white voters rightly upset with the results of Mr. Obama’s economic policies.”

The editorial espouses a view that is obviously shared by many elite Republicans in Washington who simply refuse to acknowledge three important facts: 1) Americans of all backgrounds are struggling in this economy; 2) those same Americans no longer trust politicians -- Republican or Democrat -- after decades of failed promises; and 3) those anxieties combined with distrust will force political upheaval if not addressed by our parties.

A healthy conservative movement intent on saving the idea that is America must confront these challenges. Simply hoping for the political winds to change in Republicans’ favor or resorting to ad hominem attacks on frustrated Republican voters (on occasion the *Journal*’s editorial writers invoke archaic Nazi references to dismiss conservatives) will ensure the

conservative movement remains on the sidelines as America lurches through another four years of progressive rule, unable to move beyond its own internal divisions.

Our nation's political and media elites can no longer ignore the existence of America's populist movement, but they appear eager to dismiss its root causes. For the last several years, Heritage Action has offered a different vision with its "Opportunity for All, Favoritism to None" agenda:

"Overcoming these obstacles no doubt presents political challenges. The consultant class has dragged its feet for a reason. But we posit that our only hope of building a new governing coalition is not winning the crass game of interest group politics always played better by the left than by the right. Rather, it is to signal to the American people that our principles represent a different, better way than what the left has had on offer."

We welcome others to join us, even those who buried their head in the sand for the last several years. It is never too late to get it right, but getting it right becomes harder the longer you wait.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michael A. Needham". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Michael A. Needham
Chief Executive Officer