



BY PETER GOETTLER

“It’s challenging to reach and persuade those with whom we disagree.”

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Preaching to the Unconverted

The phrase “preaching to the choir” conjures in my mind a scene inside an ancient cathedral, so I always assumed the saying’s been with us for hundreds of years and originated in Europe. Actually, it was born in the United States in the 1970s, as a variant of “preaching to the converted.” This latter phrase was coined in mid-19th-century England. And believe it or not, the consistent use of the saying by John Stuart Mill was responsible for injecting it into the mainstream. (I dug all this up on the internet, which means maybe it is 50 percent true. But learning of the supposed connection to Mill, author of the outstanding essay *On Liberty*, I decided to stop digging and go with it.) Most things from the 1970s—like bell-bottoms, the AMC Gremlin, not to mention the politicians of the day—have thankfully been consigned to history’s dustbin. But “preaching to the choir” lives on.

For good reason. It’s challenging to reach and persuade those with whom we disagree. And the current environment of partisan tribalism exacerbates the problem, as more people close their minds to opposing viewpoints or use technology like social media to create echo chambers that alternative ideas can’t penetrate.

One factor that convinced my family, nearly 20 years ago, to support the Cato Institute is that we appreciated how it was distinct: absolutely uncompromising in its defense of liberty, limited government, and the Constitution; yet independent, nonpartisan, and defying characterization along the left–right spectrum. We were convinced that stance allowed Cato to reach audiences that disagreed with its ideas or were simply unfamiliar with them. Delivering the case for liberty to these “unconverted persuadables” is essential to expanding freedom for future generations. After more than three years at the helm of the Institute, I’m even more convinced of Cato’s ability to accomplish this.

Our policy outreach engages all ideologies. For although we’ll always make fundamental arguments for liberty, we’ll also persist in showing those with whom we disagree that our policy ideas can achieve their priorities too. Michael Tanner’s new book, *The Inclusive Economy: Bringing Wealth to America’s Poor*, argues that libertarian reform of education, criminal justice, and poverty programs can deliver a brighter future to our nation’s less fortunate. It’s already received praise from left and right alike. Our project to repeal the Jones Act, a century-old protectionist scheme that pushes more U.S. cargo transport to highways

rather than to more fuel- and cost-efficient ships, is a free-market reform that will mitigate the environmental damage wrought by the act. And our revamped criminal justice effort focuses on factors that contribute most to the system’s shortcomings: issues like overcriminalization, coercive plea bargaining, and lack of accountability for prosecutors. Concern about these factors is shared by nearly all, allowing our work to attract a broad coalition.

We’re doing a better job than ever reaching new audiences. Under the innovative leadership of Aaron Powell and his team, the Libertarianism.org platform is reaching vast numbers of students and others. Through persistent effort, “L.org” books are beginning to make their way into high school and college classrooms. And earlier this year, the team unveiled the Building Tomorrow project. This initiative is pulling in a cross-ideological audience by engaging them in the ways that technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship are creating a freer, wealthier, and more peaceful world. Not policy topics per se, the stories nevertheless all lead to an optimistic vision of how freedom can create a bright future for all. And, of course, the bright present and future is what Cato’s HumanProgress.org platform, led by Marian Tupy, is all about. As I wrote in a recent memo to Sponsors, how thrilled we were to hear from a high school teacher that his entire school starts each day sharing three optimistic facts from HumanProgress. Greater appreciation for the fortunate times in which we live means fewer calls for state action.

But there’s more to come. Although Cato’s reach into diverse audiences is already impressive, we’re exploring a variety of initiatives to take our ability to reach beyond the “choir” to a much higher level. Among the ideas we’re considering is a summer program that could bring hundreds of educators to Washington. And recent additions to our digital talent are intended to deliver a wider array of liberty-focused policy content to more people through more channels. We’ll look forward to updating you as these initiatives progress.

We’ll change the world only by working hard to reach those who aren’t already dedicated supporters of liberty. Thanks, as ever, for your financial support, your involvement, and your partnership. Together, we’ll reach the world one mind at a time.