Can the 1% Help Fight Poverty?

Synergos, a Rockefeller family NGO, seeks common ground with anti-poverty activists around the world. But do reformist groups funded by the rich help solve problems or perpetuate them a question addressed by Danny Schechter.

By Danny Schechter

Having just finished producing an investigative TV series on Who Rules America, inspired, in part, by the argument that sociologist C. Wright Mills made 50 years ago about how a small group of the rich and powerful run things, I was wondering how I would feel spending a night with the 1 percent of the 1 percent.

An Indonesian friend had invited me to join her at an annual event called University for a Night sponsored by an NGO named Synergos created 25 years ago by Peggy Dulany, the daughter of David Rockefeller, the now 97-year-old patriarch of what was once the richest and most powerful family in America.

This event concludes with dinner discussions that bring participants together with invited faculty – experts from around the world – for an exchange of ideas on specific topics. The organizers say they want “to provide opportunities for networking, brainstorming and inspiration.”

Rockefeller Sr., onetime head of the Chase Bank was there, in a wheel chair now, beaming as an award in his name for bridging and leadership was presented to former President Bill Clinton, who runs a foundation of his own, as well as a global “initiative.”

Clinton was also effusive in praising Peggy and her dad for the good works they do as philanthropists and problem-solvers. He singled them out for promoting partnerships through “sustainable and systems-changing collaborations to address poverty, equity and social justice.”

Unfortunately, my friend got the flu and couldn’t make it, so I was on my own. Fortunately, Occupy Wall Street was not outside protesting at the Millennium Hotel off Times Square, and I didn’t have to cross a picket line to join the folks inside.

Actually, the Occupy Movement might have appreciated Clinton’s engaging speech as he repeatedly indicted our hyper-polarized political system as dysfunctional and stalemated while calling for a new model of decision-making based on a more participatory democratic process.

He said that NGOs are more effective than governments because they try to solve
problems with representation from all the stakeholders in a more bottom-up manner. He was dismissive of the standoff in Washington and believes that innovation cannot be imposed from above.

A master story-teller, Clinton explained how he got involved in trying to lower the costs of AIDS medicines at the urging of Nelson Mandela and that their partnership on the issue had an impact and saved thousands of lives by trying to find common ground among AIDS advocates and pharmaceutical companies.

Clearly, Clinton works with business, not against it, and is a proud reformer as opposed to an angry revolutionary. Synergos’ strategy aims at bringing together “people and institutions in government, business, nonprofits and local communities most affected by poverty and social injustice.”

Synergos works through partnerships, networks and knowledge-sharing with the goal of finding ways for people to act together worldwide, according to the group’s Website.

“Over more than 20 years, we have worked in over 30 countries and regions, including Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Ethiopia, India, Mexico, including the U.S-Mexico border, the Middle East, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe,” it says.

The Rockefeller family has a long history of philanthropy and public service, although the cynics among us know that non-profit foundations can also be a way of sheltering wealth from taxation, and using PR and good deeds to blunt public criticism of the wealthy. Foundations also can increase benefactors’ influence within the society that does their bidding.

In many cases, the great wealth of families was amassed originally in the Robber Baron era. John D Rockefeller became a very controversial and negative symbol as I discovered, when I wrote the introduction to a new edition of the History of the Standard Oil Company by the muckraker Ida M. Tarbell who exposed how his great fortune was accumulated. (Cosimo Books.)

That doesn’t mean that the “sins” of the grandfather should be passed on to other generations. I first met Peggy when she was an active supporter of the freedom movement in South Africa. I was told that her influence, together with some of her cousins, successfully pressed the Rockefeller interests, including Chase, to not rollover debts and to divest from South Africa, actions that helped force the apartheid government to announce reforms and negotiations.

Everyone agrees that this was a form of pressure that persuaded the apartheid diehards to accept the inevitability of change. Perhaps that’s why the head of Nelson Mandela’s foundation works closely with Synergos.
Peggy is an old friend and supporter of Graca Machel, the Mozambican leader who later became Mandela's third wife. She also promotes a circle of wealthy families worldwide to discuss how to use their wealth in socially responsible ways.

At my table, there was a moderated discussion about what constitutes personal leadership. There were other foundation heads there, a retired high-level UN official a real estate power broker, another TV producer and a banker at JP Morgan.

All seemed supportive of the values and projects that Synergos is promoting. The broker told me that he’s never been to a meeting of that size where the word love is used so freely.

That may be a reflection of Peggy’s new focus on the importance of personal transformation and internal growth as a key to the emergence of new leadership. In a paper circulated to the dinner, she offers revealing insights into her own personal journey in “Approaching the Heart of the Matter.”

Her insights share honestly about the personal journey that sustains her commitment to this innovative work after a quarter of a century. It may come off as a bit earnest for some who are more comfortable with objective facts than subjective feelings but her sincerity is unmistakable.

The day after the dinner, I began reading many articles criticizing Occupy Wall Street for being stuck in a rut. Forbes said the Occupy Movement was running out of new ideas. Progressive outlets raised similar concerns.

It occurred to me, then, that the activists in America pushing for economic fairness and equality could learn from the experience of the Synergos-linked global and local organizations that are struggling with many of these same issues in poorer countries the world over.

Yes, the 1 percent could learn a thing or two from the 99 percent but also vice-versa. Occupy could learn from projects that work and adopt best practices in other countries.

Occupy’s “university” may be in the parks and streets, not suites, but the movement has also been conducting classes and training sessions to share ideas and develop skills.

Occupy activists probably would feel uncomfortable consorting with Rockefellers that old fear of co-optation again but maybe there is more common ground here than meets the eye, even as activists are always more confrontational than conciliatory. They don’t do well in fancy hotels!
Both approaches have value. We need to get beyond mutual demonization. Maybe everyone can benefit from some more bridging even as politics becomes a battleground.

There’s plenty of room in the fight against global poverty and injustice for all of us.

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**Neocons Press for Syrian Action**

Led by the neocons, a growing chorus of Washington pols and pundits are clamoring for President Obama to “do something” militarily to remove the Assad regime from power in war-torn Syria. But the real-life options remain fraught with risk, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

International anguish over bloodletting in Syria has come close to the point at which urges to “do something” about the situation there (something more forceful, that is, than supporting Kofi Annan’s diplomacy) may outweigh any sober consideration of whether there is something useful to do.

The grisly events at Houla have provided the most recent boost to the urges. Leaders in Europe, and not just politicians and pundits in the United States, have lately been talking increasingly about external intervention.

Having political support to do something, or anything, forceful or risky in Syria does not mean that there is indeed something to be done that would have a good chance of either stemming the bloodshed or ushering in a more agreeable regime in Damascus. There still are no good options on Syria.

The same sorts of questions that could be asked months ago remain important and unanswered today. The fact that the Free Syrian Army is not really an army but an unorganized collection of local fighting groups poses a host of uncertainties about the consequences of facilitating the shipment of arms to those groups.

Additional questions concern the likely calculations and responses of the Assad regime and those most dependent on its continuation if they see no alternative but a fight to the death. Still more questions concern the nature of any
successor to that regime.

As unsatisfying as it may sound, White House spokesman Jay Carney’s observation that “militarization of the situation in Syria at this point . . . would lead to greater chaos, greater carnage” is probably the best starting point for formulating policy toward that situation.

A recent urging, with a twist, for a substantial arming of Syrian oppositionists comes from Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute, the twist being that Pletka argues that such a move would not only be good policy but also “good politics for Obama the candidate.”

One is entitled to ask whether this is intended as some kind of setup, laying the groundwork for later accusations that a more forceful turn in Obama’s policies was only a desperation move in the midst of a reelection campaign.

Setting aside such suspicions, Pletka probably is correct that more forceful actions on Syria, by responding to the strengthening urges to do something, would be politically popular at least in the short term, before we saw additional chaos and carnage in Syria. But short-term political advantage would of course be an entirely unjustifiable reason to make such a move.

Pletka’s elaboration of her argument about political advantage reveals how weak the part of her contention is that injecting more arms into Syria would make strategic sense. She says the move ought to appeal to Obama as an “un-Bush” way of “allowing others to fight a war that America wishes won”, presumably a contrast with the Bush way of committing a large American force to fight a long and costly war, as in Iraq.

But the rest of her argument is a continuation of the same patterns of neoconservative thinking that led to Bush’s war. There is the same wishful thinking substituting for careful analysis about consequences, such as in talk about how shipments of arms “may finally give the edge to the opposition” and “coax more significant defections” from the regime’s forces.

There is the same assumption that the United States can stage-manage political change in the Middle East, as in references to how the administration “could work more closely with the Syrian political opposition to develop a blueprint for a transition.”

There is the same assumption that the direction of U.S.-fomented political change always will be monotonically in a direction consistent with American values, as in talk about “the prospect of a U.S.-assisted democratic transition” and about how an arms-injection scheme would somehow “ensure” that moderate forces would take the helm in Syria.
After seeing how false such assumptions turned out to be even with the commitment of large American army, it is a wonder to see them applied to the kind of “un-Bush” intervention being recommended.

Bloody situations such as Syria give rise to humanitarian impulses that tend to be contrasted with cold realpolitik. (Pletka gives a nod to this kind of thinking by asserting that Syria presents a “rare confluence of strategic and moral imperatives.”) We would do well to heed a recent statement about Syria by someone often seen (unfairly) as the dark prince of heartless realpolitik, Henry Kissinger:

“Military intervention, humanitarian or strategic, has two prerequisites: First, a consensus on governance after the overthrow of the status quo is critical. If the objective is confined to deposing a specific ruler, a new civil war could follow in the resulting vacuum, as armed groups contest the succession, and outside countries choose different sides.

“Second, the political objective must be explicit and achievable in a domestically sustainable time period. I doubt that the Syrian issue meets these tests.”

Particularly against the backdrop of some situations, such as Syria or Libya, that have arisen in the Middle East, some people divide policy analysts into those who are willing to do tough things to stand up to despicable, bloody-handed regimes and those who are not willing to do such things.

A more illuminating and accurate division is between those who carefully think through consequences before acting on urges and those who do not carefully think through the consequences. The nation’s interests, on Syria or on anything else, are better served by the careful-thinking approach.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)