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## **\$1 Billion for Ideas: Conservative Think Tanks in the 1990s**

*Special Report from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy*

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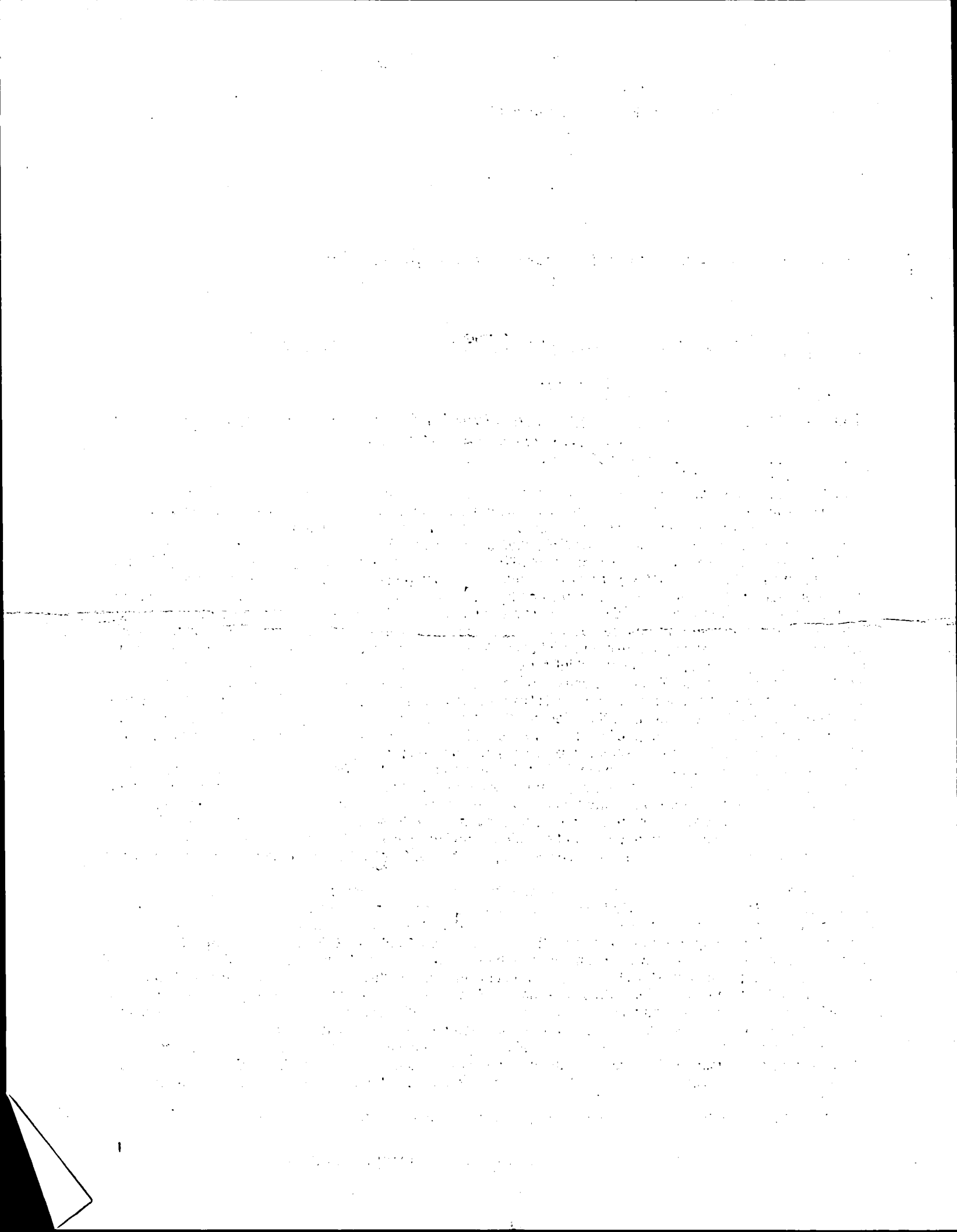
WASHINGTON, DC –Conservative think tanks are likely to increase their strength and impact in the new millennium with their unflagging commitment to marketing their policies, sophisticated political communication, seemingly unlimited resources and strong grassroots networks according to a recent study by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) titled *\$1 Billion for Ideas: Conservative Think Tanks in the 1990s*. *\$1 Billion for Ideas* builds on two earlier NCRP research reports that examined the burgeoning of state-level conservative think tanks (1991) and private foundation funding the conservative political renaissance (1997). This report, authored by David Callahan, picks up the threads of these earlier analyses to provide an expanded and more detailed analysis of 20 leading conservative think tanks. NCRP President, Robert Bothwell commented, "When it comes to 'winning' political battles, ultimate success results less from who's doing the right thing and more from whose view of reality dominates the battlefield. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the millions effectively spent by conservative think tanks have enabled them virtually to dictate the issues and terms of national political debates." The top 20 conservative think tanks in the United States spent \$158 million in 1996 and as *\$1 Billion for Ideas* asserts, spending will likely exceed \$1 billion between 1990 and 2000. The 20 policy institutions included in the study more than doubled their budgets since 1992. "To put the \$158 million spent by the groups in perspective, the Republican Party raised and spent \$138 million in 'soft money' contributions in 1996, \$20 million less than the conservative policy groups profiled in the report," said Callahan. The NCRP's analysis includes well-known conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute, but also many of the smaller, less visible conservative think tanks that have been multiplying and expanding throughout the 1990s. Together, these and other conservative policy groups have been able to define policy issues and approaches for public attention, skillfully using mainstream and alternative media outlets to create a powerful echo effect in and beyond the nation's capital. NCRP found several factors contributing to the success of conservative policy groups in the 1990s and their likely expanding influence in the new millennium:

Conservative think tanks were able to use their spending power to build impressive institutions and infrastructures. Partial data from 1997 indicate that spending by center-right and far-right think tanks continues to grow rapidly, suggesting that the 1990s has been a period of continued institution-building by political conservatives. **Overall spending by these institutions between 1990 and 2000 is likely to top \$1 billion.**

A number of smaller and relatively new conservative think tanks have risen to new positions of visibility in recent years. The five largest and most well-known policy institutions (the Heritage Foundation, Hoover Institution, Center for Strategic and International Studies, American Enterprise Institute, and Free Congress Research and Education Foundation) expended half of the \$158 million total in 1996, but the remaining \$80 million was spent by 15 smaller policy organizations working to advance core elements of the conservative agenda.

The groups continue to promote a highly ideological view through multi-policy fronts arguing for privatization of the public sphere and elevation of the market as the prime mechanisms for social arbitration and resource allocation. Conservative think tanks increasingly attract contributions from corporations interested in affecting the political process.

Conservative policy groups have shown increasing sophistication in waging high-intensity battles over extended



periods of time, better coordinating their activities with lobbyists in the private sector, political operatives in Washington and the states, and activists at the grassroots. Major battles in the 1990s have helped them to refine their advocacy machines. At this point, these groups operate like "extra-party" organizations, adopting the tactics of a permanent political campaign.

The structure of political opportunities in the U.S. continues to advantage conservative policy groups. The disconnect between people and politics and the growing imbalance between private power and public purpose has provided the perfect breeding ground for conservative success. Contributing factors include the continued demobilization of the American electorate, the decisive role that special interest money plays in national politics, the media's political importance, organized labor's declining ability to help set broad national budget and policy priorities, the single-issue focus on many left institutions, and the left's failure to develop and communicate to the American electorate an overarching public philosophy for the country.

The absence of a mainstream or left-of-center parallel to the critical mass of conservative policy institutions currently operating in the U.S. today has allowed conservative policy entrepreneurs formidable power to define, direct and dominate policy and ideological debates. Overall, *\$1 Billion for Ideas* argues that the rising strength of conservative policy institutions is likely to reinforce trends toward a greatly narrowed public policy debate in the U.S. Rising national wealth and economic inequality, growing public disengagement from politics, and enduring racial problems continue to plague the nation, and there are no major initiatives on the horizon that would improve life for all. Unfortunately, as the conservative story becomes ever more influential, the search for substantive solutions creating shared prosperity, a stronger democracy and a more equal society sink even lower as priorities on the national agenda. NCRP was founded in 1976 as a watchdog organization with a mission to make philanthropic institutions more accountable and accessible to the disadvantaged. Copies of the 42-page report *\$1 Billion for Ideas: Conservative Think Tanks in the 1990s* are available at \$25, per copy, prepaid. Copies of the 1997 report, *Moving a Public Policy: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations*, are also available (\$25). For more information or for comment/analysis on the issues reported here contact the report author, David Callahan, at (212)535-4441 or NCRP's Kate Conover at (202)387-9177.

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