



**In His Own Words. A Q&A with Vartan Gregorian  
Part 1 of 5: *Andrew Carnegie's Legacy***

**Vartan Gregorian, President of Carnegie Corporation of New York is interviewed by Susan King, Carnegie Corporation Vice President, External Affairs.**

**Susan King:** You're a historian, you have a sense of what these moments are like. What does it mean for an institution right now, for Carnegie Corporation, which is celebrating one hundred years?

**Vartan Gregorian:** It's about time, because Andrew Carnegie wanted this institution to survive in perpetuity. And a century is a good beginning. I'm very excited about the centennial, because as you know Andrew Carnegie's picture is hanging in my office, and once in a while I see his eyes moving around with me, seeing how I'm doing. And unlike Mayor Koch I'm not asking "How'm I doing?" But I'm always aware, as a historian, of my role of being here as one of Carnegie's successors, and it's an awesome historical responsibility. Because what he accomplished during his lifetime is not only legendary, it's unbelievable. He was a short man with a big vision and he was legendary, for good reason. He had vision, a vision accompanied with action. He did not speculate; he researched and acted upon his convictions and his vision of America as a vibrant democracy that needed education to become stronger, because he believed in an educated citizenry as a foundation of democracy. He also believed in science and he believed in learning. As a result, he did something which I had read about him when I was fourteen years old, in Tabriz, Iran where I was born. I read in Armenian of famous self-made people, and included was Andrew Carnegie along with Fulton, the inventor of the steam engine, and others of that ilk. I never imagined that one day I would sit in a chair that was once occupied by such a man as Andrew Carnegie.

One important characteristic I admired about Carnegie, even without knowing about capitalism, without knowing about how his ideas about giving away his wealth to benefit society went against the theory of social Darwinism, without knowing much else about him, was that I knew that he loved libraries. As a little boy I was starved for learning, and library books, which were hard to come by, were so valuable to me. So I became grateful to Carnegie when I discovered that he was the father of the modern public library system around the world. He established libraries from Fiji to Hawaii to South Africa, everywhere, thousands of libraries, because he believed that learning has no frontiers. And knowledge has no boundaries, so I admired him before I knew much else

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about him, and I admire him more now because I know his vision and his dedication to learning, education, knowledge, and especially to democracy as an institution.

**SK:** Do you see him as the father of philanthropy?

**VG:** I see two of them as fathers of philanthropy: John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie came to philanthropy from different backgrounds. Rockefeller from religious impulse and civic duty, Carnegie entirely from the idea of civic duty. One, Rockefeller, believed in capitalism, and the other, Carnegie, became a capitalist. Rockefeller saw capitalism as a right, capital inheritance as a right; Carnegie thought of it only as a trust. Carnegie thought capitalists were trustees of public wealth. That wealth does not belong to the wealthy, it is entrusted to them and they have to pass it along to future generations. Unlike Rockefeller, Carnegie believed aristocracy is like potatoes: the best part is underground. You can't brag about your ancestors, you have to be a good ancestor, and be a good ancestor in the making. Both of them, however, believed in philanthropy. But in that connection, you have to differentiate between charity and philanthropy. Charity is one of the foundations of all the religions. Whether it's Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or other faiths. You give to the poor and the destitute. You don't question why they are poor, you alleviate ills without necessarily attempting to eradicate the cause of those ills. Andrew Carnegie decided, like John D. Rockefeller, that they had to deal with causes, through philanthropy, as a long-term investment. They believed in "scientific philanthropy" or what we might today call strategic philanthropy, in order to distinguish it from charity and make clear that they were in the solution business, not simply the alleviation business. And since for Rockefeller and Carnegie it was their own money they were using for philanthropic purposes, and there was no tax exemption at the time, they did not have to appear before different committees to say why they are spending or investing their money the way they did. So as a result, they became prototypes for modern philanthropy.

**SK:** What motivated Andrew Carnegie? What was it in Andrew Carnegie that made him see philanthropy as such an important thing?

**VG:** I can only speculate. He came from a reformist radical family. He knew about poverty, he knew about hard work. He knew the concept or notion of citizenship, and he saw inequality, and unequal access to learning. He could not buy books because his family was poor, he could not borrow books because there were no organized libraries, and so he became aware of the denial of learning as a way of oppression because if you are curious to learn, the tools of learning should be there. That's one of the things that differentiates him, that when he became rich, he made books available to all the others who were denied learning in similar situations. Another thing that affected him was seeing how hard his father worked and how little he accomplished. He attributed that to lack of educational opportunity. So learning and educational opportunity became two fundamental ideas for him. He came to the U.S. with practically nothing. And suddenly, age 30, he was one of the richest, if not the richest, man in the world. He was not dazzled by this, he was empowered by it. And he decided he was going to act on his wealth, the responsibility thrust upon him by a capitalist society in which he had earned

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the money, not inherited it. That's another thing that came up throughout my reading about him: that reputations are earned, but excellence always has to be struggled for. And that's what he did. He did not inherit anything except his name and his thirst for learning. He acted on his convictions—and that's one of the great things that happens when individuals have the means to act on their convictions: they can have real impact. And Andrew Carnegie did.

**SK:** But he created many institutions, and then philanthropy in perpetuity to keep those ideas going. That is unique.

**VG:** It's not altogether unique, but he did create institutions that can last. *That's* unique. He made sure that anything he created he differentiated from charity by the very fact that it was institutionalized and became a force for change. And that's one of the important attributes of the organizations and institutions he founded.

**SK:** How do you understand the mandate, "in perpetuity"?

Recently, I heard an anecdote about a friend of mine, Leon Levy, who died a few years ago; when he gave his major art collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, supposedly the then-director of the museum, Philippe de Montebello, said "We'll preserve it in perpetuity." And Leon said, "How long is perpetuity nowadays?" When Montebello replied "Fifty years," Leon said, "Make it 75 and we have a deal." But Andrew Carnegie's concept of perpetuity really *was* perpetuity—meaning, everlasting. That as long as the money lasts, as long as the mission lasts, as long as the mission is relevant, then that's how long the work lasts. But if you create an institution with a specifically focused mission, someday that mission may be irrelevant. Hence, one of the engines of perpetuity is self renewal, and Carnegie gave the entities he founded the impetus to change, to renew themselves as changing times and conditions required. Look at the Carnegie Institution for Science in Washington: it has renewed and refocused several times. Look at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: it, too, has renewed many times. Look at the renewal of the Carnegie Endowment for the Advancement of Teaching, which has also reoriented its work several times. Look at us, at Carnegie Corporation, the institution Andrew Carnegie became the first president of. We have renewed ourselves many times, because we have to keep abreast and ahead of developments in the world in order to be relevant. Not relevant to ourselves but relevant to the needs of the world and its societies.

**SK:** Is that what a centennial is about, is it about institutional renewal?

**VG:** A centennial is largely about retrospection, insight, self-examination, to see who you are and to see what the next phase of your renewal leads you into. It's a creative period and also a critical period. You cannot just brag about all the success you have achieved, you also have to say where did we fail, what forces contributed to our success or failure? For example, we always take credit for *An American Dilemma*, which I am very proud of—Gunnar Myrdal's major work about African Americans and democracy, which played a major role internationally and nationally. We also know we

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were skeptical about releasing it at the time, because we thought we could not keep up with the enormous changes taking place in U.S. race relations, but we were wrong, and now we claim victory for having published the study. In that regard, it is always important to understand exactly which actions we took that were successful, which were opportunistic, which were of lasting value, etc., so we can learn from a century of experience, not only for ourselves, but for all the other foundations and all the other new philanthropies so they will not make all the mistakes that we did in the past. We have a century of tradition to teach, so the centennial is also a teaching period, much as it is a time to brag about our accomplishments.

**SK:** Assessment as well?

**VG:** Assessment, definitely. People confuse strategy, tactics, mission, goals—all of these are confused. Andrew Carnegie believed in the mission, he had a strategy, and he knew exactly which tactics to use to accomplish his goals.