



**In His Own Words. A Q&A with Vartan Gregorian
Part 2 of 5: *Foundations as Incubators***

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

Susan King: There's an audience out there who may be cynical, because they've seen us around, they call us a dinosaur foundation, we're not the social entrepreneurs that others may be: fat and sassy, they've got all those millions. You're sitting here at the time of the centennial: how do you convince skeptics that we are still relevant?

Vartan Gregorian: I have no room in my life for cynics. It's easy. And it's a shortcut; without even ever being an idealist and then becoming disillusioned, suddenly you're a cynic. Without having any convictions, that's easy, that's cheap. So I don't have answers to cynics. Cynics always will question every motivation. And they can find plenty of evidence to question. If you give, they say you are giving because you like fame. If you don't give, they say what a miserly person you are. If you give anonymously, they say what a show-off you are. There's no room for anybody to hide from cynics. But life is not determined by cynics. Life is determined by activists, idealists, revolutionaries of thought and action. And cynics can only judge. In other ages, cynics become irrelevant people. Look back in history: politics is a cynical game because it consists of compromises. But philanthropists have tried to transcend those compromises in order to act as incubators of social change. Philanthropy is like a laboratory with which you can experiment in order to try and do permanent, lasting and measurable good in the world. That's the purpose, for example, of institutional philanthropy. That's why Andrew Carnegie will be known for many years to come. For example, the great biographer David Nasaw started his book about Carnegie by being critical of him—at first, Nasaw thought Carnegie used his philanthropy in order to cover his guilt about harm he might have caused through being viewed as responsible for putting down the Homestead Strike at one of his mines, and so forth. But in doing his research, Nasaw found that long before Homestead, Carnegie had already determined to become a philanthropist. It was not expiation for his sins, it was not about the omission or commission or guilt—his philanthropy was a testament to his great dedication to humanity.

SK: The fact is, he did say he wanted "perpetuity." Now you are the steward of this huge endowment which has continued to grow. Is that almost a burden to keep that stewardship?

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VG: Not, it's not a burden, it's an obligation. A burden, you try to get out from under. An obligation you cannot do without. It's a major obligation, not because of the size of our endowment, which is miniscule compared to many other foundations, but because of the size of our heritage and our mission. Carnegie Corporation, after a century, has no identity crisis. It becomes a burden when you have a mission which is obsolete, a vision which is no longer a vision but becomes a kind of sloganeering, and a value system which is vacuous because you don't believe in it. And then you become a cynic. That's when you close the doors. It would be unfair and unfit for Andrew Carnegie's legacy to be entrusted to cynics who don't believe in humanity's welfare, the possibilities of education, the redemptive qualities of science, and the values of a democratic society. The vision is important: it makes money the means and the mission the aim rather than merely considering money as a source of power.

SK: As an institution, over one hundred years, we've seen Carnegie Corporation keep its relevance.

VG: That's basically because we've been open to innovators and innovation. We have not put boundaries around our institution or its work. We have not put ideological shackles on people in terms of who can apply for grants or who cannot. Frankly, what we have practiced is grantmaking in support of ideas that need funding in order to improve humanity, advance international peace, promote nuclear nonproliferation, and deal with immigration, which Andrew Carnegie thought was a critical issue: Americanization, which we call now citizenship, was very important to him. He believed in empowering institutions and individuals through knowledge, an idea we certainly continue to endorse through supporting universities, think tanks, and others. So, as I see it, as long as we are open and welcoming to new ideas and to knowledge, I would not put ideological blinders on our work and choose people to work with because of what they believe in rather than what programs they propose, which have to be examined, tested, put into motion. That is what is important. Also, we have to be mindful of the needs of America's democratic society. Because the American Revolution is an unfinished agenda. We are one of the few nations perpetually in a state of becoming. And if we start to be satisfied with the status quo, we will atrophy; many of our institutions will atrophy if we don't examine them carefully and constantly renew their mission, purpose and work. It's very hard to be a democratic society in which you try to accommodate many forces, many newcomers. It's like being perpetually in school. America is very much a kind of perpetual school: as immigrant wave after immigrant wave comes, you have to integrate newcomers into the social fabric of this nation and therefore, you have to have a strong educational structure, social structure, economic structure, and providing all of these things is a major task. So it's a vision of Andrew Carnegie's that you need more than merely meager resources to have an impact in these areas. I say "meager" because two or three billion dollars nowadays is not what it used to be! But the mission still is what it has always been.

SK: For those who don't know, how would you describe Carnegie Corporation at the hundred-year mark?

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VG: Carnegie Corporation during this century has been at the forefront of creating and supporting major institutions in the U.S., major ideas in the U.S., and major institutions around the world. We have always kept international peace high on our agenda along with supporting education and educational institutions: in terms of the democratic ideals of our country, that is what Carnegie Corporation is about. A kind of incubator of ideas, a laboratory for change, but at the same time, and I stress this, a testament to our people, our nation, and our democratic institutions.

SK: Why do you think Andrew Carnegie established his grantmaking foundation in the U.S.?

VG: Because he saw that this country was not based on class alone and was not based on wealth alone: it was based on ideals. Ideals articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville, for one, who said that America was the best hope for incubating the future of mankind, for developing and sustaining democratic ideals and for creating a nation in which people are citizens rather than subjects, people are equal, and equal opportunity is important.

He deeply believed in the strength and transformative potential of democracy. He writes extensively about that idea in his book, *Democracy in America*, which few people have read. Derived from his travels in the U.S. in 1831, it is one of the greatest tributes to American democracy.

Andrew Carnegie, who was born in Scotland, felt that the strength and structure of U.S. democracy could not have developed in the U.K., for example, where the class structure and institutional atrophy of some institutions would not have allowed for it. The British system allowed them to become an empire, but not a just and equal society. Hence, Carnegie tried to contribute to the vitality of democracy in America without neglecting his home country by establishing trusts in Scotland and England to open university education to those who would otherwise be unable to afford it as well as to fund social welfare projects addressing issues of poverty, unemployment and urban renewal. But his main headquarters was here and the only institution he created that he actually presided over was Carnegie Corporation. Incidentally, he used the term “corporation” because he’d already created organizations with the titles of “trust,” “foundation,” “institute,” etc., so he’d run out of names. But when they hear “Carnegie Corporation,” people always think we’re a business corporation. I get lots of mail addressed to Carnegie Corporation at home, because they think the corporation is the same as my home. They don’t know that Harvard is a corporation, for example; Yale is a corporation; Brown University is a corporation—in the 18th and 19th century sense, not the modern sense.

SK: You have a phrase, that’s said around here as we’re looking over grants, about what you think we should be.

VG: Yes, that we are an incubator, not an oxygen tank. We prepare ideas, cherish them, protect them, and then we disseminate them, but we don’t keep them going

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forever by providing them oxygen. Because for Andrew Carnegie, self sufficiency and independence were as important as support, and that is one of the reasons why he believed that when somebody is hungry, yes, give him a fish—my words—but above all, give him a fishing rod so he can become independent, not dependent. And if I could transform foreign policy, that's one of the ingredients I would add: that foreign policy should include Andrew Carnegie's philosophy that aid, or whatever we call it—aid with international ramifications—has to help make others independent of us, not dependent on us. That was Andrew Carnegie's major philosophy. He believed in the dignity, independence and autonomy of individuals. And in not making them dependent.

SK: You also sometimes say we have more cachet than cash.

VG: We have a good reputation, and a good “brand.” The reason many organizations want to cooperate with us is because of our reputation, not because of our cash. I am glad of the fact that, thanks to the Corporation's tradition of working with other institutions, we have no proprietary sense that only we know the good causes. Financially we may be insignificant. All foundations together are insignificant financially. Intellectually, we are very relevant, and especially in times such as we are going through now, we need the introspection, analysis, and nonpartisan way of approaching things in partnership so that we are not rationalizing failures, but illuminating possibilities or successes and how to redeem ourselves from failure and achieve success.