



BY JOHN A. ALLISON

“What is the optimal way to achieve Cato’s mission of limited government, free markets, individual liberty, and peace?”

President’s Message

Thoughts on Joining the Cato Institute

Having spent 20 years as CEO of an S&P 500 company and 3 years as a professor at the Wake Forest Schools of Business, I have learned a great deal about organizational cultures. However, a think tank provides a new and exciting opportunity. In business, there is a tangible bottom line. How do you measure the performance of a think tank? What is the optimal way to achieve Cato’s mission of expanding the understanding of public policies based on the principles of limited government, free markets, individual liberty, and peace?

It is appropriate to recognize that Cato is the world’s leading libertarian think tank. Obviously Cato is not “broke” and therefore does not need fixing. Ed Crane, Cato’s board, and all of Cato’s team and Sponsors can be proud of the organization you have created.

On the other hand, I believe everything can be done better. When I retired from BB&T after 37 years and 20 years as CEO, I still had a list of 50 things we could do better. What are the greatest opportunities for Cato?

First, the strategic planning principles from business can be applied at Cato to focus our resources on where we can have both an immediate impact on policy debates, but equally important, shape the long-term discussion of fundamental policy issues. We must align our most important assets, the Cato scholars, with our agreed-upon strategic goals so their work has the maximum effect.

Second, Cato has a number of first-class departments and centers. However, there is an opportunity to take these to “world standard” performance. What do I mean by world standard? As an example, our Center for Constitutional Studies has significantly redirected the debate on the limitation on governmental action imposed by the U.S. Constitution. However, as strong as the Center is, we will achieve world standard status when the professors at the Harvard Law School find it necessary to respond to the arguments of Cato scholars and when the Supreme Court Justices feel consistently obligated to consider the Cato perspective in reaching their judicial decisions.

Third, to achieve world standard performance requires world standard scholars. We must attract more of those scholars and continue to focus on educating future scholars. Unfortunately, we are in competition with a tax-funded university system which grinds out liberal professors by the thousands. We need scholars who can hit major league curve balls delivered from those opposed to limited government.

We need the kind of thinkers who can take libertarian ideals and present arguments that change the public debate.

The fourth opportunity is to provide leadership to the greater free-society movement by working with other think tanks with which we share specific common goals. The objective is to move these think tank scholars to a deeper understanding of libertarian principles and thereby to our public policy positions.

In my pre-Cato life, I met many individuals with libertarian ideas who did not realize they were libertarians and who had never heard of Cato. We need to educate and energize these potential supporters. By effectively promoting libertarian principles and the Cato “brand” we can significantly increase our audience, impact, and resources.

Regardless of the immediate political outcome, our society is engaged in a fundamental debate over the future of Western Civilization. I joined Cato because Cato is essential to defending the classical liberal/libertarian principles of “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” We hold the moral high ground, not just from an economic well-being perspective but because the type of society we envision is necessary for individual self-fulfillment and true personal happiness.

We must be free to think for ourselves if we are to be productive, creative, innovative, and happy. By definition, all human progress is based on creativity (innovation). Unless someone does something better (that is, different), there can be no progress. Creativity is only possible for an independent thinker. If someone forces you to act as if 2 plus 2 is 5, you cannot think. Government regulations often force decision-makers to act inconsistently with what they know to be correct, discouraging productivity and lowering our standard of living.

Even more fundamentally, if we are to pursue our personal happiness, each of us must be allowed to live life on our own terms—while not violating the rights of others. We must be free to act in a manner consistent with our personal beliefs. Libertarian principles are essential for human happiness, in the Aristotelian ideal of a life well lived. This concept is the foundation for the unique American “sense of life” that inspired the Founding Fathers and created the most successful and benevolent society in history.