

DISCOVERY INSTITUTE

A BRIEF HISTORY

“Discovery Institute is a center for national and international affairs based in Seattle... Our programs are all inspired by a firm commitment to individual liberty, representative democracy, free enterprise, technological advancement, internationalism, and the enduring moral principles of civilized society... We think that good public policy requires healthy doses of exploration, civilized debate, and—above all—common sense about both the possibilities and the limits of political action.”—STATEMENT OF MISSION, circa 1994.

DISCOVERY Institute was founded in 1990 by Bruce Chapman and George Gilder. Chapman had a long background in public life, having served as America’s Ambassador to the United Nations Organizations (UNO) in Vienna, director of the United States Census Bureau, and Washington State’s Secretary of State. Gilder was the best-selling author of *Wealth and Poverty* and *The Spirit of Enterprise*, two path-breaking books that highlighted the role of entrepreneurs and morality in fueling economic growth.

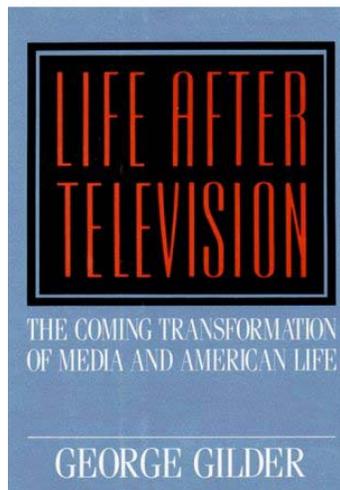
The Institute took its name from the HMS Discovery, the ship that explored the new world of the Pacific Northwest in the 1790s, as well as from the element of “discovery” that is a critical part of the public policy process. From its inception, the Institute was futurist, reform-minded, nonpartisan, and committed to civility. Its early focus was on the economic and cultural implications of the telecommunications revolution. In the seminal book *Life After Television* (1990), George Gilder predicted how computers and networks would revolutionize not only our economy, but the production and distribution of news, information, and entertainment. Received with skepticism at the time by many policymakers and members of the traditional media, Gilder’s book proved prophetic, foresha-

dowing the internet revolution of the latter part of the decade.

Other early Discovery initiatives explored the demoralization of representative democracy and public service; the failure of endangered species laws to protect biodiversity as well as human society; the need for people of faith in politics to appeal to the moral common ground shared by all citizens; the coming revival of urbanism and regionalism; and the development of closer ties of trade and transportation in the bi-national region known as “Cascadia.”

Significant books produced by Discovery Fellows during its first decade included *School’s Out: Hyperlearning, The New Technology, and the End of Education* (1992) by Lewis Perelman, a provocative call to use new technologies to reshape the educational system;

Noah’s Choice: The Future of Endangered Species (1995) by Mark Plummer and Charles Mann, a plea for establishing a middle ground in the battles over biodiversity; *The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation* (1996) by John West, an exploration of how religious liberty and the moral common ground positively shaped the role of faith in politics during America’s formative years; and *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over*



Science and Religion (1997) by Edward Larson, which won the Pulitzer-Prize for its scrupulous and evenhanded presentation of the real story of the Scopes trial.

Future-oriented from the start, the Institute showed an early interest in identifying and training leaders among the next generation. In 1994, it sponsored the Gilder Fellows Program in Technology and Public Life, and for five years (1994-1998) it conducted the George Washington Fellows Program in Religion and Public Life. The latter program trained graduate students and upper-division undergraduates about the history of religion in public life, the importance of religious liberty and the separation of church and state, and the need for people of faith to exercise prudence and frame their public policy proposals in terms of the moral common ground shared by citizens regardless of religion.

The Institute first learned about the emerging debate over intelligent design in December of 1993, when Bruce Chapman and John West read a *Wall Street Journal* essay by Cambridge-trained philosopher of science Stephen Meyer. Meyer wrote about the heavy-handed effort by San Francisco State University to prevent tenured biologist Dean Kenyon from discussing empirical evidence for intelligent design in biology. Concerned about the violation of Kenyon's academic freedom—and intrigued by learning that a new generation of scientists was challenging Neo-Darwinism—Chapman and West contacted Meyer, then a college philosophy professor. Discussions and conferences followed over the next two years, culminating in the launch of the Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture in 1996. The Center was intended to provide an institutional



home for researchers and scientists challenging Neo-Darwinism and working on the theory of intelligent design. The goal was to support the development of a new voice in the origins debate, one that made its arguments based on the best findings of empirical science rather than religion. As a public policy center, Discovery Institute also wanted to explore the broader implications of the debate over Neo-Darwinism for such topics as ethics, human dignity, and personal responsibility; and it wanted to provide a positive response to militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins who were trying to hijack science by claiming that it was somehow hostile to faith.

With a current annual budget of \$4.2 million (\$2.4 million of which is for the Center for Science and Culture), Discovery Institute remains the “small kid on the block” when it comes to national think tanks and research organizations, not to mention universities. But the power of its ideas has far outstripped its pocketbook. By being willing to support thinking outside the box, Discovery has compiled an impressive track record of innovative policy ideas and analysis over the past 18 years, including George Gilder's predictions of the internet revolution; the recognition of the resurgence of urbanism and regionalism; pre-9/11 warnings about the growing threat of radical Islamic terrorism; a pre-9/11 recommendation for a unified “homeland defense” department; the revival of the design argument based on new discoveries in physics, biochemistry, and the nanotechnology of the cell; the reframing of policy debates over the teaching of evolution to focus on science and academic freedom rather than religion; and the championing of hybrid cars as a way of stretching our energy resources.

As it seeks to “make a positive vision of the future practical,” Discovery Institute continues to demonstrate the benefits of unorthodox thinking and fresh ideas in addressing our society's long-standing challenges.



A Program of Discovery Institute