

# States of the Union

## FUNDING FEMINISTS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*There are, I know, persons who cannot imagine that men like Rockefeller, Carnegie, Harkness, Rosenwald, Eastman and others could give millions without thought of an ulterior purpose, social or political. Nevertheless such is the case. Would it have been socially better if, instead of foundations, we had created a nobility or aristocracy?*

—FROM ABRAHAM FLEXNER'S  
*I Remember* (1940)

*Playboy uses its foundation to clean up its sexist image*

—FROM A RECENT INTERVIEW  
WITH A CHICAGO FEMINIST

**W**E ARE IN the presence of a mystery—the issuance of good from evil and of evil from good. Andrew Carnegie was already a towering benefactor, a donator of libraries and music halls, when his Pinkertons killed 10 striking steelworkers and bloodied 60 more in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Discovered in Scotland shooting grouse, Carnegie told a reporter for the Associated Press that “The handling of the case on the part of the company has my full approval and sanction.”

John D. Rockefeller's reputations for ruthlessness and magnanimity were both deserved. At age 22 he contributed \$259,970 to charity, including a grant for emancipation of a slave. As Allan Nevins tells us in *Study in Power*, the future founder of Standard Oil “had not waited to become rich before he became generous.”

Can it be that all capitalist forms of philanthropy are tainted? Or, à la Flexner, that certain Robber Barons and entrepreneurial geniuses are somewhat tainted? Let us consider the case of Hugh M. Hefner and the Playboy Foundation.

The 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, an event not rich in happy consequences, had at least one positive outcome. It got Hefner thinking along philanthropic lines. Walking home one evening, Hefner was caught in one of the many police riots occurring around town. A cop whacked him painfully on the rump. Hefner went to bed that night entertaining visions of a better society, where a citizen could take a stroll without fear of being clubbed by the constabulary. A Playboy Foundation, he reflected, might promote some essential reforms.

“It was a catalytic moment for Hefner,” recalls Burton Joseph, a civil liberties lawyer and longtime friend whom Hefner eventually hired as the foundation's first executive director. “It caused him to do on a systematic basis what he'd been doing all along in an *ad hoc* sort of way.”

From the start the foundation was seen as a charitable extension of the “Playboy Philosophy,” that smorgasbord of libertarian tidbits that Hefner published in a 25-part series during the mid-'60s. The earnest editorials accomplished for fans of the magazine what the *Book of Mormon* accomplished for followers of Joseph Smith. They provided guidelines and a set of beliefs for the faithful.

“The Playboy Philosophy,” Hefner declared early on, “is predicated on our belief in the importance of the individual and his rights as a member of a free society. That's our most basic premise—the starting point from which everything else in which we believe evolves.”

A glance at last year's roster of 95 grantees suggests that Playboy Foundation officials seldom stray from the original premise. Civil liberties and the First Amendment get top billing, with the national office of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) heading the list. Also prominent are groups that have been busy waging some of the magazine's favorite crusades—sex law reform, abolition of capital punishment, abortion rights, disarmament, decriminalization of marijuana, and the entitlements of Vietnam veterans, to name a few.

In addition, the foundation invests conspicuously in feminist causes, though not without peril. Given the magazine's editorial fare, wherein the flesh seems anything but weak, it is hardly surprising that some feminist organizations have viewed Playboy Foundation overtures with a certain uneasiness. “I never go inside the Playboy Building,” a feminist leader in Chicago told me. “All those vaginas on the wall!”

Playboy has responded to feminist hostility in a customarily assertive manner. It has placed feminists at the head

of the foundation—both Rebecca Sive-Tomashevsky, the present director, and Margaret Standish, her predecessor, are prominent women's rights advocates—and it has found ways to showcase its commitment to feminist causes. Four years ago Hugh Hefner's house in California, known to the faithful as "Playboy Mansion West," was the setting for a big fundraiser on behalf of the National Organization for Women's ERA campaign. They collected \$25,000.

These efforts have yielded mixed results. While Phyllis Schlafly has favored the foundation with welcome abuse, calling it "the mastermind of the Equal Rights Amendment campaign," others have remained less than friendly. In the early '70s, according to Carol Kleiman, a writer on the staff of the *Chicago Tribune* and a friend of Burt Joseph's, "I kept getting calls from Burt asking for names of women's rights organizations that would accept money from Playboy. There were very few at the time."

One of the foundation's initial offers, a \$40,000 women's rights grant, was turned down by the Illinois ACLU on grounds that the source was unacceptable. The money eventually landed in the parent ACLU office in Washington, where it is still having effect. "That national project has been a tremendous success," says Kathleen A. Miller, associate director of the Illinois branch. "It's taken more women's rights cases to the Supreme Court than any other program." Miller says her state board, which today includes both Joseph and Christie Hefner (Hugh's daughter from his first marriage, and now president of Playboy Enterprises, Inc.), no longer refuses Playboy checks. "We're glad to get whatever help we can," she says. "I have no qualms about taking money from Playboy."

The dramatization in recent years of pornography as an up-front feminist issue has heightened the ambiguities, both for the foundation and for the organizations it befriends. The Ms. Foundation for Women, publisher of *Ms.* magazine, is a case in point. In 1978 the Ms. Foundation began accepting

small contributions from Playboy, albeit in a gingerly manner. As Gloria Steinem would later explain in a letter to Sive-Tomashevsky, Ms. acquiescence was based in part on its "belief that such contributions were intended as reparations for the damage done to women in *Playboy Magazine*."

Four years later even that grudging rationale was no longer acceptable to some Ms. Foundation board members. Two public events seem to have prompted the second thoughts. First, during a discussion about *Playboy* and feminism on the Phil Donahue television show, Donahue pointedly mentioned that the Ms. Foundation was getting money from Playboy. Around the same time Christie Hefner wrote a book review that upset many feminists.

THE REVIEW, published in *Inquiry* magazine and reprinted in an Illinois ACLU periodical called *The Brief*, focused on *Take Back the Night*, a collection of essays about sexual violence edited by Laura Lederer. Some of the contributors were unhappy with *Playboy*. One called the Playboy ethic "a threat to our very lives as human and humane beings." Another declared that "healthy, self-respecting females do not want to see *Playboy*, *Penthouse* or any other pornographic magazines in drugstores, grocery stores or markets."

Christie's review amounted to a rebuttal. Among other things she pointed out that *Playboy* was read by 5 million women. She also noted that Laura Lederer had once applied to the Playboy Foundation for a grant on behalf of Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media. Lederer's letter to Playboy had brought balm to Gilead: "*Playboy Magazine* has always been in the frontlines of the battle against this country's social problems," she'd written. "*Playboy* has always been interested in healthy, happy relations between the sexes."

The contradiction between Lederer's book and her letter were not lost on readers of the review. As a source close to Ms. has explained, "Christie's essay put us on the spot by equating the Play-

boy Foundation with the magazine. Quite a few friends began urging us to clean up our act."

Accordingly, in April 1982 Steinem returned \$11,000 to Sive-Tomashevsky, representing Playboy's total four-year donation to the Ms. Foundation's reproductive rights project. The Ms. board, Steinem wrote in an accompanying letter, felt concerned that the money was "being used to argue that *Playboy* and its impact are harmless to or even good for women." Ms. board members "do not agree with this argument."

But Sive-Tomashevsky had the last word. "It seems to me," she wrote in a reply to Steinem, "that the commitment of the corporation to women's issues is demonstrated by its decision to hire Margaret and me to direct its foundation. Particularly now that Christie has been named president of the corporation, I believe you ought to find reason to sustain the faith in our good will and friendly intentions which motivated you to accept our contributions originally."

For added measure she enclosed a letter of support that was signed by 44 staff and board members of liberal foundations around the country. "All of us who work in this field," the foundation officials asserted, recognize a basic paradox. "The great majority of the profits that create and sustain private philanthropy have been derived from the exploitation of one group or another."

"In our opinion," they admonished the Ms. board, "you have not paid sufficient attention to the importance of supporting those women who are struggling to find funds for women's causes. Given the need for aggressive action on women's issues, it seems particularly ill-chosen to target the Playboy Foundation—one of the only sources of the hard money so crucial to those efforts."

According to Sive-Tomashevsky, Steinem has not replied to either letter. The ricocheting \$11,000, meanwhile, has been recycled by the Playboy Foundation and given to other feminist organizations.