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Friday, March 26, 2010

On David Frum’s Departure from AEI [Charles Murray]

With Mike Allen’s account of his exchange with David Frum, we apparently have David’s version of his departure from AEI: Donor pressure forced AEI president Arthur Brooks to fire him. “But the elite isn’t leading anymore,” David is quoted as saying. “It’s trapped. Partly because of the desperate economic situation in the country, what were once the leading institutions of conservatism are constrained. I think Arthur took no pleasure in this. I think he was embarrassed. I think he would have avoided it if he possibly could, but he couldn’t.”

I have known and liked David and Danielle Frum for many years, and what I am about to write will end that friendship. I regret that. But his statement goes beyond self-serving. It is a calumny against an organization that has treated him not just fairly but generously.

Regarding donor pressure: The idea that AEI donors sit down to talk with AEI’s president about who should and shouldn’t be on the staff, or what the staff should write, is fantasy. David has never seen the slightest sign of anything like that at AEI. He can’t have. He made it up. AEI has a culture, the scholars are fiercely proud of that culture, and at its heart is total intellectual freedom. As for the reality of that intellectual freedom, I think it’s fair to say I know what I’m talking about. I’ve pushed it to the limit. Arthur Brooks is just as adamant about preserving that culture as Chris DeMuth was, and Chris’s devotion to it was seamless.

I do not have any certain information to convey about David’s departure, except what Arthur Brooks has already said publicly: David resigned. He could have stayed. But I will tell what is common knowledge around AEI: David got a handsome salary but, for the last few years, has been invisible as a member of the institute. Being a scholar at a think tank (or any institution) is not just a matter of acknowledging your affiliation in your books and op-eds. It’s also a matter of blogging at the institute’s blog, not just your own blog (David had a grand total of 3 posts on AEI’s blog in the year since it began), reviewing colleagues’ drafts, reacting to their ideas, contributing chapters to their books, organizing scholarly events, participating on the institute’s panels, attending the institute’s conferences, helping out with fundraising, serving on in-house committees, giving in-house seminars, and mentoring junior staff. Different scholars are engaged in these activities to different degrees. Full disclosure: I’m on the left-hand side of that bell curve (I make the trek from Burkittsville so seldom that I don’t even have an office at AEI). But David was at the left-hand tail. If I had to guess — and that’s what I’m doing, guessing — David’s departure arose from something as simple as this: Management thinks that an employee is not as productive a member of the organization as management thinks he should be. The employee disagrees. They part company.

I think that’s what happened. I also think that for David to have leveled the charge that Arthur Brooks caved in to donor pressure, knowing that the charge would be picked up and spread beyond recall, knowing that such a charge strikes at the core of the Institute’s integrity, and making such a sensational charge without a shred of evidence, is despicable.

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