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Momentous Innovation

The men who created the modern foundation—Mr. Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and others—accomplished considerably more than a demonstration of their own generosity. In fashioning a distinctively new type of philanthropic institution, for general instead of specific purposes, they made a genuinely creative contribution to American life.

The modern foundation joins two great American traditions. One is the tradition of private giving for public purposes. In 1834 de Tocqueville remarked on the spirit of mutual helpfulness that characterized the American community, and in 1888 James Bryce wrote, "In works of active beneficence, no country has surpassed, perhaps none has equalled the United States."

The other great American tradition nourishing the modern foundation is that of searching creatively for solutions to the problems of mankind, a search which Americans have pursued with notable energy, optimism, and imaginativeness.

The contribution of Mr. Carnegie, Mr. Rockefeller, and the other early philanthropists was to bring these two traditions together and to devise an instrument capable of serving both. The modern foundation as we know it is an impressive social invention. Wealth is nothing new in the history of the world. Nor is charity. But the idea of using private wealth imaginatively, constructively, and systematically to attack the fundamental problems of mankind is new.

One of the most remarkable innovations of the creators of the modern foundation was their early decision to leave the conventional tasks of charity to those organizations that had originally borne them and to forge for the new foundation a new role with respect to human welfare. Briefly, they proposed to concern themselves with the fundamental problems of man rather than with palliative measures. They set themselves the task, not of caring for the ill, but of preventing and curing illness; not of feeding the hungry, but of discovering improved methods of growing food; not of protecting the ignorant, but of discovering ways to diminish ignorance. This philosophy is now so familiar it is difficult to recall how imaginative and forward-looking it was at the time. The establishment of institutions charged wholly with a creative concern for the fundamental problems of human life was a momentous innovation.—["Fifty Years in Review," 1961 Annual Report, Carnegie Corporation of New York]