



# Politics of

**The founders of the new Aspen Institute-Rodel Fellowships in Public Leadership believe it is high time to work for change.**

Institute board chairman Bill Mayer, program director former Congressman Mickey Edwards, and the program's primary funder, trustee Bill Budinger

TAKE YOUR SEAT FOR THE FIRST time as a member of Congress and one thought strikes you immediately: everything in the place is divided sharply along partisan lines. At least, that's how it struck me when I first took my seat in the House, and I learned it over and over again through my 16 years of service: The reality of American politics is that campaigns don't end once an election is won. The battle between the parties is constant, and it is partisanship more than deliberation that marks daily life in the House or Senate. And perhaps even more troubling, I have realized in the years since I left Congress that as a member, one thing you never get is time to step back and think—contemplate the fundamental issues underlying the myriad questions on which you are pressed to take a stand.

By MICKEY EDWARDS

# the Future

**“To many young people observing politics, the narrowness and nastiness and partisan warfare they see far outweighs the advantages and allure; just as political parties now find it hard to recruit good potential candidates, I found it truly difficult to persuade my students to jump into the political arena.”**

And it's not just Congress; the decline of “big picture” thinking and the persistent waging of partisan war have become routine features of American politics at all levels of government, from the city council chambers to statehouses to Washington.

It is precisely to reverse this trend, and, we hope, to help restore public trust in government, that has led the Rodel Foundation and the Aspen Institute to pull together a bipartisan group of America's brightest young political leaders—mayors, city council members, state legislators, members of Congress, district attorneys, governors, state treasurers, and others—to participate in a new two-year fellowship program. Designed to provide a new focus on this country's founding democratic principles and, not incidentally, to help foster a greater degree of civility in the public arena, the project, called the Aspen Institute-Rodel Fellowships in Public Leadership, brings together two institutions with a shared sense of idealism.

Institute trustee Bill Budinger represents the Rodel Foundation (his family's charitable foundation, which has provided a major \$10-million grant to launch the new program). He and Institute President and CEO Walter Isaacson both gauged an urgent need to do something to repair what they saw as an increasingly dysfunctional system of public decision-making, driven more by division than by a search for common ground.

When he and I first met, Budinger described his concerns very simply: “The United States,” he said, “is founded on two bedrock ideas—freedom and democracy. I want to do something that helps to ensure that our political leaders understand the degree to which America's unique character rests on those two principles.” Isaacson agreed with Budinger, and saw that goal as integral to the Institute's own vision. The new fellowship program, he said, would be driven by a “well-informed, bipartisan commitment to common efforts to build ‘the good society’”—a perfect fit with the Institute's other programs.

Soon we met with the Institute's chairman, Bill Mayer, who shared not only our enthusiasm for the program, but also a sense of urgency given the country's current political context. “The new fellowship program will be absolutely essential to focusing our political leadership on democratic values,” says Mayer, “especially those who are just beginning their careers, whose ideas and values are still taking shape.”

Institute trustee Bill Budinger felt an urgent need to help educate young political leaders.



In the early days of this program, we have begun the process of creating a national advisory council. Like the fellows who will be selected, it, too, will be diverse and bipartisan. The enthusiastic responses we've gotten—even this early in the project—suggest that our goal is one widely shared. Former Speaker of the US House of Representatives Tom Foley has signed on, as have his former House counterpart Bob Michel; former governors Mario Cuomo and Ann Richards; current and former members of Congress such as Richard Lugar, Sam Nunn, and Alan Simpson; and many others, from a variety of regions and areas of expertise.

Beginning in the fall, we will recruit a fellowship class—bipartisan, diverse, bright, and committed to good government—for a series of retreats and seminars designed to build a deeper understanding of democratic values and their relationship to the great challenges facing America in an increasingly complex world. Fellows



Susan Steinkamp/Corbis

will be those men and women who we believe have the potential—the intellect, the temperament, and the commitment—to be our next public leaders.

The program is not open to self-selection; potential fellows will have to be nominated by others. The members of these fellowship classes will be young—between the ages of 25 and 45—and will either be currently holding elective public office or have already demonstrated a commitment to running for office. Our goal is to work with the young men and women who will be America’s top leaders in the *next* decade, whether at the federal, state, or local level—those who now serve as, say, governors or members of Congress and are poised to move either to another level of government or to a new leadership position within the same institution—as well as those who have proven a commitment to running for office.

**T**he program is broad in its reach and ambitious in its goals. It has been especially challenging to try to envision a network wide enough and focused enough to be able to identify the kind of people we seek from all over the country in all varieties of public office—not to mention considering how then to choose among candidates. But my own experiences in and out of Congress have convinced me that this is worth doing.

When Walter Isaacson called me to describe the program and ask if I would be interested in running it, I was sitting at my desk at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, where I had just taken a position after 11 years at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. During the extensive time I had spent with some of the country’s best students, I had often tried to persuade the brightest ones in my classes to

enter public service—especially political service. “Politics,” I would tell them hopefully, “is how a free people govern themselves. And a political career offers opportunity to help shape public life in a way no other career can match.”

But all too often, my efforts were in vain. To many young people observing politics, the narrowness, and nastiness, and party warfare they see far outweighs the advantages and allure; just as political parties now find it hard to recruit good potential candidates, I found it truly difficult to persuade my young students to jump into the political arena.

I thought about this when Isaacson called, and when I met for the first time with Bill Budinger, and later, with Bill Mayer. I quickly saw that we were all coming from the same place. We all felt it: It is time to work for change—to do what we can to refocus American politics on achievement rather than division, on big ideas and fundamental beliefs rather than petty differences and slick campaign promises. And if we do it right, maybe before too long, promising young students like mine might not flinch at the idea of a career in politics, but embrace it as full of hope, honor, and potential. In other words, this is a program about their future—and ours. ♦

**Weigh In.** If you know of a potential Aspen Institute-Rodel Fellow, we’d like to hear from you. To nominate a fellow, please visit [www.aspeninstitute.org/rodel](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/rodel), where you can complete an online nomination form. Or, you can send basic information about the nominee—name and office(s) held—along with your name and contact information—to [rodel@aspeninst.org](mailto:rodel@aspeninst.org), send a fax to (202) 298-0525, or call the program at (202) 736-5823.