

## The Center for American Progress: “Think Tank On Steroids”

By John Gizzi

*Summary: The liberal Center for American Progress (CAP) is off to a roaring start. Headed by John Podesta, President Bill Clinton’s former White House chief of staff, and funded by George Soros, the four-year-old think tank aspires to be nothing less than a ‘Heritage Foundation’ for America’s left.*

The Center for American Progress (CAP) sees itself as the intellectual ammunition depot for contemporary liberalism. As liberals become increasingly angry and their rhetoric becomes more and more strident and insulting, the Center, according to a National Public Radio profile, aims “to reinvigorate political thinking and advocacy among Democrats.” Now, with a staff of 120, nine research fellows, and a \$23 million budget (2005) funded in large part by billionaire George Soros and his friends, the four-year-old think tank is making its presence known—and flexing considerable political muscle.

The Center likes to note that its experts had racked up more than 300 appearances on TV news programs in the eight months following its founding in 2003. CAP founder John Podesta, onetime White House chief of staff to Bill Clinton, has gone *mano a mano* in televised fisticuffs with conservative media pugilists Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity, and the Center has been churning out white papers and holding conferences on a host of issues ranging from immigration reform to repealing the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. Last year, it was turning out monographs mapping out “a responsible exit” of U.S. forces from Iraq.



**President Bill Clinton (left) with John Podesta (right), on January 19, 2001, Clinton’s last full day as U.S. president. Podesta, now head of the Center for American Progress, was White House chief of staff from 1998 to 2001.**

Today CAP manages its own radio studio (which produces a daily radio talk program by liberal TV commentator Bill Press, who is a former California Democratic Party chairman), it publishes a daily e-mail newsletter, and it has a full-time blogger commenting on political news and policy issues. CAP also supports student publications at colleges and universities – it even sponsored a national conference of “campus progressives”—not unlike the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, which has attracted young conservatives since 1973.

In contrast to venerable liberal research organizations such as the Brookings Institu-

tion, with its older scholars and longer books, CAP is high-tech and projects an air of irreverence and panache. In 2004, CAP worked with “Project Billboard,” a Berkeley, California-based nonprofit financed by Deborah Rappaport, the Silicon Valley political funder, to unveil two anti-war billboards in the heart

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of New York City's Times Square. One featured a ticking clock displaying the cost of the Iraq War—it started at \$134.5 billion and increased at a rate of \$177 million per day, \$7.4 million per hour, and \$122,820 per minute. Today on CAP's website, one can play "Contractopoly," a game "that lets you win sweetheart deals from the Bush Administration as you rebuild Iraq." (See graphic on page 7.)

Podesta and other top CAP supporters may enjoy considerable influence in Washington's Georgetown dinner party circuit and in the highest circles of the Democratic National Committee, but it is abundantly clear that the Center for American Progress has the inventiveness, resources, media savvy, and intellectual firepower to be a significant player in politics nationwide.

Inevitably CAP is compared to the conservative Heritage Foundation, which began in far humbler surroundings in the 1970s and with less "venture capital" at its launch. Heritage, of course, has since mushroomed into a \$39.5 million a year operation (2005) and it provided ideas and personnel for the Reagan and Bush administrations and for the "Gingrich Revolution" that was the Republican takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994. "A hatchery of ideas, yes, but also a packager, promoter, expeditor, whole-

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aler, matchmaker, and orchestrator," is how the Washington Post characterized the Heritage Foundation. The evidence suggests that the Center will soon merit the same sort of commentary. "A think tank on steroids" is Podesta's own sound-bite for the Center for American Progress.



**Richard C. Leone, president of the Century Foundation, sits on CAP's board.**

Given its size and scope and those rapidly associating themselves with the liberals' "new kid in town," the Center could well be providing personnel and ideas for a "President Clinton 44" or a "President Obama" should Democrats recapture the White House in 2008.

### **2002: The Liberals' Wake-Up Year**

For John Podesta, the elections of 2002 were an epiphany. After the 2000 elections, Republicans and Democrats had 50 seats each in the Senate, and with Vice President Dick Cheney casting the tie-breaking vote, the GOP had control. This changed in 2001 when Vermont's James Jeffords switched parties. But after the votes were counted in 2002, the GOP had won outright control of both the Senate and the House—and it held the presidency. For the first time since 1953 the Republicans were totally in charge.

Republican dominance over politics and policymaking terrified Podesta and other liberal Democrats. "For as long as I can remember," Podesta, onetime chief of staff to Presi-

dent Bill Clinton and a professor at Georgetown University, later recalled to the *Washington Post*, "people have talked about the rise of the Republican think tank machine with a powerful communications machinery really embedded inside it—creating the ability not just to develop the philosophy, but sell it." Was the Democrats' fate sealed? Slowly, it began to sink in among liberals that they would need new ways to flesh out alternative policy proposals and aggressively communicate their ideas to the media and the public.

Podesta, whom the Post calls "a man with many admirers and few enemies despite 30 years in politics," took on the project of creating a new laboratory for liberalism. The Center for American Progress was born.

How to achieve its goals? The Center proposes to "develop bold new ideas," "learn everything we can about the vital issues facing America and the world," and "shape the national debate." However, the nature of its mission—linking the nonprofit advocacy world to the arena of politics—and Podesta's involvement in CAP signaled something important: George Soros was in on the deal.

Sure enough, the Hungarian immigrant known as the "paymaster of the left" weighed in with seed money for the Center. So did his friends Herbert and Marion Sandler, the billionaire mortgage bankers who last year sold their interest in Golden West Financial to Wachovia for \$24.2 billion. Soros and the Sandler reportedly provided CAP with almost \$13 million in initial funding. They remain the only publicly-identified Center funders.

CAP has no information about funding on its website, and Daniella Leger, CAP's director of press relations, would only say: "We don't release the names of donors because they are private citizens." However, it's likely that the Center solicits grants from donors participating in the Democracy Alliance, the Soros-led effort to fund a permanent political

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infrastructure of think tanks, nonprofits, media outlets, leadership schools, and activist groups. CAP's board includes Marion Sandler; Richard C. Leone, president of the Century Foundation; and Peter B. Lewis, a close Soros friend and chairman of Progressive Insurance. Lewis gave nearly \$23 million to anti-Bush "527" groups in the 2004 election. (For more, see "George Soros's Democracy Alliance: In Search of a Permanent Democratic Majority," by James Dellinger and Matthew Vadum, in *Foundation Watch*, December 2006; "Peter B. Lewis: Aviator of the Left," by John Gizzi, in *Foundation Watch*, May 2005; and "The Century Foundation," by Martin Morse Wooster, in *Foundation Watch*, February 2006.)

As for becoming another Heritage Foundation, Podesta repeatedly salutes it as a model, pointing out to National Public Radio that "one of the things that the Heritage Foundation, I think, has done a good job of is that they've gotten their people out into that public debate. They've had a strategy to not just come up with analysis, not just to write good ideas in papers and in academic journals, but to actually get out and fight for the hearts and minds of the American people for public opinion. And that's what we aim to do."



**Billionaire couple Marion (left) and Herb Sandler (right) gave the Center millions of dollars in seed money.**



**CAP helped Representative John Murtha develop the concept of "strategic redeployment," leftist double-speak for withdrawing troops on a timetable.**

The Center is certainly growing at a faster clip than Heritage 30 years ago. According to its tax forms, it took in \$11.7 million and spent \$2.9 million in 2003, its first year of operation. In 2005, the latest year available, donors contributed \$22.9 million and expenses were \$16.2 million.

The Center's output of position papers rivals its counterparts, the Brookings Institution, the oldest think tank in Washington

(founded 1927), the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) and the far-left Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), which have been churning out position papers for many years. However, CAP differs from these groups in that it emphasizes the communication of ideas and the training of a new generation of spokesmen for the liberal cause. In this sense, the Center is more like Heritage.

As the Washington Post states: "But analysis and philosophy amount to little in political terms unless there is someone to sell the results. This Podesta learned from watching Heritage. It is not the largest think tank in Washington (that would be the venerable Brookings Institution) nor is it stocked with the most sheepskins. But it would be hard to name an outfit as good at taking an idea that sounds extreme and moving it onto the agenda."

"We definitely learned from other existing think tanks," said Leger, "and what they did well."

Laura Nichols, CAP's senior vice president for communications and strategy, has summarized the plight of liberals. In 2003, she told the Washington Post, "We progressives feel we're not in the game when it comes to the media. We're not on cable to the extent the other side is. We don't have the talking heads. We're not offering effective pushback for the right-wing agenda. So one of our goals is to start building a new bench of cable commentators."

# Organization Trends

## Old Proposals, Familiar Faces

Despite its emphasis on improved marketing and communications, the Center for American Progress does not really have fresh ideas.

An examination of the “Fifteen New Ideas” section of the organization’s website reveals old and familiar liberal policy prescriptions, but whether they are actually *new* ideas is a matter of opinion.

For example, the section on “Building Strong Communities” promotes universal healthcare coverage, a longtime favorite of left-leaning policy groups. The “Offering Opportunity for All,” calls on policymakers to “extend learning time,” a euphemism for longer classroom hours, a panacea that teachers’ unions have backed for years.

The topics of CAP’s most recent reports and conferences also reflect remedies that liberal Democrats typically prescribe.

\* It wants Congress to repeal the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” ban on openly gay military personnel.

\* It favors racial integration to improve the school performance of minorities but complains that despite a half-century of progress,

“thousands of schools around the country are almost completely segregated.”

\* It collaborated with the conservative American Enterprise Institute and the U.S.



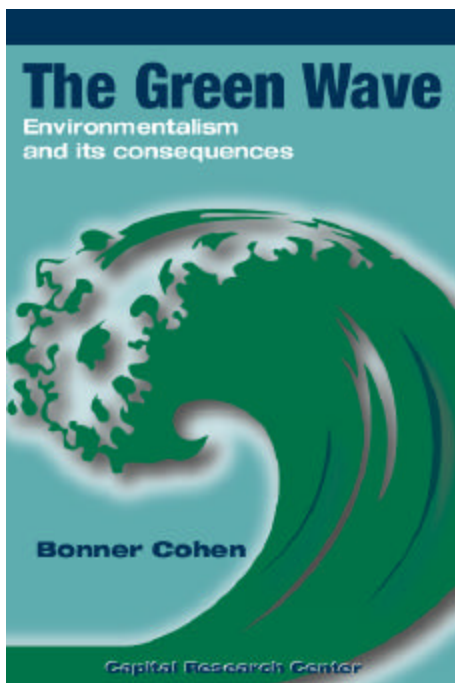
**CAP’s David Sirota is a prominent blogger and Democratic strategist.**

Chamber of Commerce to issue a March 2007 report card on American education that contended that states are failing students and putting American competitiveness at risk. If

an alliance between CAP and the voice of American business appears incongruous, CAP spokeswoman Leger explained that “Tom Donahue, president of the Chamber, reached out to us and wanted the partnering with us. He was aware of the work we had done on education and agreed that education was important to prepare young Americans for the workplace.”

\* Also in March, the Center hosted a day-long panel on immigration reform where three speakers discussed “the daily consequences of an unjust system that causes undue suffering and hardship to the people they serve.” The panelists: Rev. Sam Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference; Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, executive director of the Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice; and Jim Wallis, president and executive director of Sojourners/Call to Renewal.

\* Perhaps the Center’s most important recommendation was a 2006 report calling on U.S. troops to leave Iraq “as part of a balanced global strategy to make Americans safer.” CAP helped Representative John Murtha (D-Pennsylvania) develop the concept “strategic redeployment,” which is the left’s double-speak for withdrawing troops on a timetable. Six months later came “Strate-



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gic Redeployment 2.0,” which underscored the earlier report and spelled out a strategy to have U.S. troops exit Iraq by 2007. The report was prepared by CAP senior fellow Lawrence J. Korb, a former assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration and, more recently, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution.

As times change and new issues emerge, the Center for American Progress will apparently have the resources to offer new ideas. But it remains to be seen whether the ideas CAP espouses will be as groundbreaking and revolutionary as, for example, the concept of school vouchers, which the Heritage Foundation brought into the mainstream.

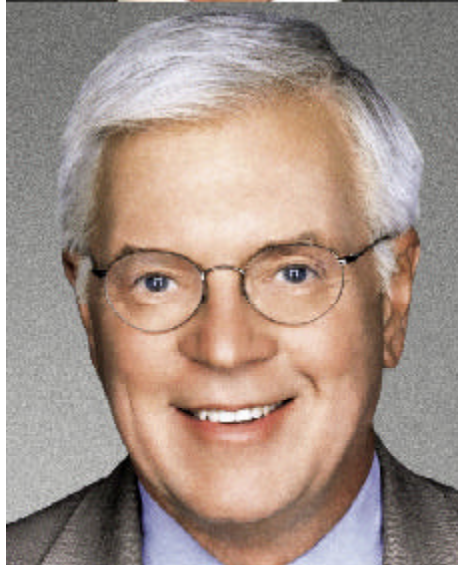
Meanwhile, the Center’s roll call of fellows contains many familiar names: political scientist Ruy Teixeira, formerly with the Progressive Policy Institute and co-author of the widely-praised political book *The Emerging Democratic Majority*; economist Gene Sperling, onetime national economic adviser to President Clinton; health care expert Jeanne Lambrew; Africa expert Gayle E. Smith; nationally syndicated columnist Matthew Miller; and former Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle (D-South Dakota).

More controversial is Podesta’s recruitment of Morton Halperin to head CAP’s “Security and Peace Initiative.” A veteran denizen of liberal groups (Brookings, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the ACLU and the Council on Foreign Relations), Halperin was in 1993 President Clinton’s failed nominee to be assistant secretary of defense for democracy and peace-keeping. He came under intense fire from intelligence agencies and senators in both parties because of his long history of condemning U.S. covert intelligence activities and his outspoken defense of Phillip Agee, the renegade CIA turncoat. (President Clinton eventually pulled the nomination and gave Halperin a position that did not require Senate confirmation.)

Halperin has called for dissolving the CIA’s covert career service, criticized the intelligence agency as “the subverter of everyone else’s freedom,” and declared it “an open question” whether it might one day turn to assassinating American citizens.

## Photo Gallery: Three of the Center’s heavy hitters.

**Top:** CAP Fellow Lawrence Korb  
**Center:** commentator Bill Press  
**Bottom:** analyst Morton Halperin



## Media Training and Lobbying: The CAP Action Fund

To ramp up its media operations CAP staffers attend what amounts to a “boot camp” for commentators and “talking heads.” CAP hired Debbie Berger, a former producer of CNN’s “Crossfire” show, to conduct media training and set up a booking operation to put CAP spokesmen on radio and TV talk shows. Berger’s staff includes one assistant for talk radio and another whose job it is to “find ways to reach young people,” according to the Post. CAP also has hired blogger David Sirota, who, the Post reports, “patrols the Internet daily before dawn to compose a summary and critique of the day’s news from a liberal perspective.” A Democratic Party strategist known as a progressive populist, Sirota used to work as a key aide to Representative Dave Obey (D-Wisconsin), now chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

The Center’s success in nailing down radio and TV spots for its budding talking heads is well-recognized. Genevieve Wood, director of strategic operations at the Heritage Foundation and a media trainer for the conservative Leadership Institute, has said of CAP: “[W]e welcome them into the arena. They will try to cover up bad policies with good sound bites but if we’re doing our job effectively, the American public will see through it.”

To push its ideas into legislation CAP has created the Center for American Progress Action Fund. As a legally separate 501(c)(4) lobbying group, the Fund can undertake a greater number of grassroots and legislative lobbying activities than the Center. The Center’s 2005 tax form shows that it transferred \$162,500 to the Action Fund for lobbying activities (and \$953,976 to the Action Fund for educational activities). The Action Fund had 2005 revenue of \$1.8 million. (For a snapshot of the Fund’s website, see graphic on page 7.)

\* The Action Fund sponsors a “Kick the Oil Habit” campaign led by actor-environmentalist Robert Redford.

\* The Fund’s “Campus Progress” program, two years old in January, is meant to strengthen liberal political activism on campus—as if that were a big problem. It supports campus newspapers at more than 50

## Organization Trends

colleges and universities; runs a speakers' bureau for campus lectures, debates, film screenings, and training workshops; conducts national issue campaigns to reinforce student issue campaigns; and sponsors CampusProgress.org, a daily web magazine (estimated readership: 1.8 million) that interviews political celebrities such as Sen. Barack Obama (D-Illinois), White House reporter Helen Thomas, and Seymour Hersh, the New Yorker magazine writer.

\*In March 2007, the Action Fund sponsored a "Presidential Forum" on health care in Las Vegas in which—as a sign of the clout the Center and its advocacy arm packs—seven of the eight announced Democratic presidential candidates participated.

\*Most interesting of all is the Action Fund's annual National Student Conference. Some liken the conference to the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) as a vital staging ground for campus political activists. However, far-left activists worry that the Conference could channel radical student energies into a more centrist politics

and serve merely as a prop to support ambitious politicians.

"For the first time ever, campus progressives convened, conversed and organized at their own national conference—something right-wing groups have done annually since the 1970s," wrote Sam Graham-Felsen, a writer for The Nation magazine soon after the first conference in Washington D.C. in July 2005 (at which the guest of honor was Bill Clinton). "The conference left students from Young Democrats to radical activists, energized and teeming with hope. Almost everyone I spoke with left the conference believing that a real, thriving, and broad-based progressive student movement was overdue, necessary and most importantly, possible."

### From Here to Where?

In July 2006, the second annual National Student Conference was held in Washington and drew more than 1,000 attendees. CPAC, its 34-year-old conservative counterpart, had its largest-ever session seven months later, with more than 6,000 participants. The difference in numbers is glaring. But evidence is mounting that the left will soon match the right. Its annual national conference could soon feature just as many participants, high-profile speakers, and panels and workshops on issues and political action.

Consider CAP's rapid-response to the firestorm over the actions of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales concerning the firing of eight U.S. Attorneys in March. CAP did not wait to issue a lengthy legal analysis. Instead, it made it easy for producers and talk show hosts to have anti-Bush opposition research at their fingertips. For instance, when Gonzales conceded that "mistakes were made," CAP blitzed cyberspace with a "Progress Report" entitled "More Than Mistakes." The report details what its authors consider "an orchestrated effort to fire several U.S. attorneys, counter to Gonzales's previous assertions that the firings were not instigated by the White House." Other "Progress Reports" are dotted with provocative bold-faced lead-ins such as "White House Directly Involved" and "The 'Clinton Did It Too' Defense Further Weakened."

As it approaches its fifth birthday, the Center is going strong. It now has a staff of 120 and its media placements now far exceed

the 300 radio and TV appearances of its first eight months.

The obvious question facing the Center is: What about the elections of 2008 and beyond? If a Democrat wins, will CAP become the type of clearinghouse for White House staff and administration appointments that the Heritage Foundation was for Ronald Reagan in 1980? It's worth noting that both Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have ties to CAP. Obama was a featured speaker at the second annual National Student Conference in 2006. Senator Clinton, according to Podesta, has "been helpful, she's talked to people about what we're doing."

"But," he quickly added in response to interviewer Juan Williams, "we're beholden to no individual politician."

Echoed CAP spokeswoman Leger: "Obviously we have people here who worked in the Clinton White House and are supporters of different candidates [for president]. But we are a non-partisan think tank that is pushing progressive ideas and we welcome support from Republicans and Democrats." She noted that Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana) delivered the keynote address at a Center forum on agriculture and that moderate Republican Representatives Chris Shays (R-Connecticut) and Michael Castle (R-Delaware) have also participated in Center events. "We will host other events with other Republicans," she added.

In laying out his vision of the Center, Podesta has proclaimed that it will be a long-term project, "to modernize the [progressive] movement, marry it to policies that work, and sell it all over again." An argument can be made that the Center has already modernized the movement by showing how to effectively package liberal ideas.

One thing is clear: in a short time the Center for American Progress has cut a wide swath in liberal policy and earned the ultimate Washington encomium: a player. All signs now point to it being a player that is listened to for a long time.

*John Gizzi is the political editor for Human Events, a weekly Washington news journal.*

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President Bush is attempting to employ the tactics...



**EVENTS**  
Presidential Forum on Health Care  
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Rebuilding the U.S. Armed Forces with Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton

The website of CAP’s lobbying arm, the Center for American Progress Action Fund, as of April 12, 2007

# BrieflyNoted

**James Hansen**, the director of **NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies**, has complained that the **Bush** administration is preventing him from speaking to the media because he believes global warming could be catastrophic. But he admitted giving 1,400 interviews to the media on the taxpayer's dime. Hansen, whose advocacy work was examined in *Organization Trends* (June 2006), told the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee March 19 that he has no regrets. "For the sake of the taxpayers, they should be availed of my expertise," Hansen said. He also refused to distance himself from his previous statement that the White House was a "propaganda office," and that "it seems more like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union than the United States." In 2001 Hansen received a \$250,000 **Heinz Foundation** award from **Teresa Heinz Kerry**.

The antiwar feminist group **Code Pink** has been hounding Senator **Hillary Rodham Clinton** at nearly every presidential campaign event she attends. Recently it angered officials of the **International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers** meeting Clinton at a Washington hotel. Spokeswoman **Gael Murphy** said the group will continue trailing Clinton until she sponsors legislation to withdraw U.S. soldiers from Iraq. Code Pink, whose most famous public face is **Cindy Sheehan**, was profiled in *Organization Trends* (December 2006).

Lending money to racial minorities violates their civil rights, says the **National Council of La Raza** ("The Race," in Spanish). In coalition with other race-based pressure groups, it is demanding that subprime mortgage lenders slap a six-month moratorium on foreclosures, arguing they should have known better than to lend money to people with bad credit, many of whom are visible minorities. "We are calling on them to match families to the sustainable loans that they should have gotten in the first place," said **Janet Murguia**, president of La Raza. She charges racism because 2005 data shows subprime loans with high interest rates comprise more than 50% of all mortgages taken out by African-American borrowers and 40% of Latino borrowers, compared to 19% of white borrowers. A wave of foreclosures stemming from "reckless and unaffordable loans" will hit the nation soon, the coalition predicted, and lenders, real estate agents, and investors who bought up subprime loans could be sued using a federal law forbidding housing discrimination.

Americans are lucky to be filing their 1040s, according to the pro-tax group **United for a Fair Economy**. In fact, April 15 should be called "Tax Pride Day," said **Karen Kraut**, coordinator of the Boston-based nonprofit's Tax Fairness Organizing Collaborative. "In the face of all the greed and laying up of treasure going on all around us in our consumerist society, let's celebrate those who want a good government that provides all citizens with opportunity and essential services," Kraut said.

The recent *emergency* war supplemental appropriations bill debated in the U.S. Senate was greased heavily with pork and items most Americans wouldn't consider emergencies. Included was \$31 million for the Milk Income Loss Contract program, \$24 million for sugar beets, \$425 million for education grants for rural areas, \$13 million for mine safety technology research, and another \$13 million for the Ewe Lamb Replacement and Retention program.

**Burger King** is the latest mega-corporation caving in to pressure from animal rights radicals. The company has agreed to begin purchasing eggs and pork from companies that do not keep their animals in crates and cages, and will favor suppliers that use more humane methods of slaughtering livestock, the New York Times reported. **Wayne Pacelle**, president of the **Humane Society of the United States**, said the company's policy change is "an important trigger for reform throughout the entire industry."

**Clint Bolick** has stepped down as president of the **Alliance for School Choice** in order to return to public interest litigation. Bolick will launch a new **Center for Constitutional Litigation** at the Phoenix, Arizona-based **Goldwater Institute**.