

The philanthropists' maestro

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Among Vartan Gregorian's dedicated gatekeepers is a security guard at the Carnegie Corporation's Madison Avenue headquarters. "That's a great man you're going to see," he says. "He's known presidents, dignitaries, everybody. All the most important people."

Moments later, when Gregorian arrives wearing a conservative navy blue suit, he greets the guard by name. It is a Saturday morning, but coming into the office on the weekend is, after all, part of his routine.

The 12th president of the 96-year-old Carnegie Corporation, one of the nation's most prominent foundations, leads his guests through glass doors to the 26th-floor lobby and snaps up a recent edition of "Carnegie Results", the organisation's quarterly newsletter, titled "Looking Back at Zimbabwe". When Gregorian gingerly draws attention to the first line – "This is the anatomy of a grant that failed" – his message is clear: he and the institution he has led for a decade are accountable.

His spacious office seems more the retreat of a fervent academic than a backdrop for the jet-set companion to corporate tycoons, luminaries and socialites. Covering nearly every surface are books and stacks of paper, including clippings from the dozen broadsheets he consumes each week. Pointing to his two large desks, he smiles: "Sometimes I go from this one to that one, and I pretend I just got here."

Gregorian's genial humility belies his accomplishments. A 16-page resumé reveals he is a board member of 11 organisations, including the Museum of Modern Art and the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation, and has similarly served 46 other institutions in the past. He has received 60 honorary degrees, 39 awards, six international decorations, 14 civic honours and 16 prestigious medals, including the National Humanities Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honour.

Renowned historian declares time is his enemy

- "The first is on nationalism, a phenomenon that has endured and has been used and abused since the 18th century. Why can't Serbs and Albanians live together? Why are there irredentist forces? Why must people live in exile? I'm trying to understand the ideology of nationalism and nationalist policies.

- "The second book is on Afghanistan. My last book on Afghanistan [The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946, (Stanford University Press, 1969)] was a big event because there are not many of this sort. I stopped at 1946 and I'd like to bring it up to the

Gregorian became famous in the 1980s when, as president of the New York Public Library, he secured the much-needed funding – \$327m by 1989 – that restored the crumbling landmark to a vibrant cultural nexus. Later, as president of Brown University, he almost tripled its endowment and exceeded expectations by raising \$534m in a five-year capital campaign.

Gregorian has been hailed as a fund-raising genius and served as trusted philanthropic adviser to Bill Gates, Ted Turner, Scottish billionaire Tom Hunter and the late Walter Annenberg, but he insists money is a mere facilitator. Ideas are what change the world.

"You have to believe in your cause because if you have no core beliefs of your own, it's just a business," he says. "I've tried to make it a mission."

Gregorian is at heart an intellectual and scholarship is core to his approach to philanthropy. All great transformation stems from the dissemination of thoughts and theories, and education breeds the understanding and collaboration that will ultimately cure society's ills. "We bring experts together," he says of his work at the Carnegie Corporation. "We believe in solving issues, regardless of where the solutions come from. We want to create debate."

As a result, the \$3bn Carnegie Corporation functions as the microcosm of a university where Gregorian continues to learn and teach. "I surround

present.

- “The third is on Armenia. I’ve read everything possible and want to write a cultural, intellectual and social history. This one is to my grandmother, my sister and my children.”

a university where Gregorian continues to learn and teach. I surround myself with professors and other thinkers. This place is full of scholars, idea people, creatives,” he says. “I’m engaged now in all of learning, all education transcending the regions.”

For context and edification, the foundation’s programme directors attend all big grant meetings and are encouraged to challenge one another. Like a PhD candidate presenting his or her dissertation, each director submits to questions from the group. Research is dissected and analysed. “It’s a very healthy give-and-take. Everybody learns as a result other people’s

projects,” Gregorian says. “We’re not in the self-promotion business, and we’re not afraid to ask critics to assist. Then we include all criticisms in our presentation to trustees.”

Gregorian learnt from leading scientists the importance of acknowledging risk and celebrating trial and error in philanthropy. “I met James Watson [co-discoverer of the structure of DNA] one evening and he said: ‘I’m so excited. I’ve found out how not to do something!’ Why can’t social scientists say the same thing? That would be a great salvation.”

Though known for his warmth and bear hugs, Gregorian demands boundless rigour of those who seek grants from the Carnegie Corporation. Having spent nearly two decades asking for money, Gregorian knows what a solid pitch entails.

Like Watson, grantees don’t have to be right, but they must be thorough and forward-looking, evincing zeal and commitment. “You have to demonstrate that you’re not in the need business, but rather in the idea business. You have to say: ‘I’m not entitled to your support. I want an opportunity to compete for your support,’” Gregorian says.

The Carnegie Corporation is “an incubator, not an oxygen tank”; it takes calculated risks for defined periods of time by endowing the most promising proposals from the sharpest minds. Deserving grantees have done their homework. They arrive at the foundation’s offices with revolutionary scientific evidence or a new orientation, promoting methods unlike those already pursued. “Are you in the reputation-making business or are you already reputable?” Gregorian asks. “I can trust both – people who want to make a reputation and people who already have a reputation to lose.”

Gregorian sees himself as a conductor who, after hiring and subsidising the virtuosi, works to create a unified opus from their individual endeavours. “Everybody else has spent a lifetime to become experts. I cannot second-guess them. All I can do is focus their attention on an important cause,” he says. “My role is how to make a symphony out of all of this.”

In this, he ensures every initiative aligns with his benefactor’s intentions. “Carnegie Corporation money is not Gregorian’s money. It’s his money,” he says, pointing to a portrait of Andrew Carnegie on his office wall. “I’m an instrument of his foundation, so I have to do justice to that. I have my own priorities, but I cannot impose them as a substitute for his mission.”

Fortunately, though, Gregorian’s personal devotion to study and civic engagement runs parallel to the foundation’s objectives. Among the Carnegie Corporation’s big new programmes is ongoing instruction for teachers. Gregorian sees teaching as a profession, not a trade, and believes America needs “a transmission belt whereby new theories of psychology, cognition, anthropology, sociology or neuroscience can reach teachers”.

His labours for international peace are also filtered through the prism of education. Even before September 11 2001, he recognised the need for westerners to better understand Islam, the fastest-growing religion in America – and the world. In 2003, Gregorian, an Armenian Christian born in Iran, published *Islam: A Mosaic, Not a Monolith* to clarify the history of an increasingly vilified faith and show the diversity among its 1.2bn practitioners. “We have to see what we have in common, as well as what divides us,” he says.

By next year, the Carnegie Corporation will have convened 100 scholars in an attempt to bridge orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and to promote open discourse between Muslims and others.

Gregorian is certainly inspired by the classroom, but his accumulated knowledge has practical application far beyond an isolated ivory tower. He sees philanthropy as part of the American ethos, a nimble alternative to our government's ventures in social welfare. "The political, public process is slow," he says. "Philanthropy can innovate, challenge, demonstrate. It can provide immediate breakthroughs and it can allow us to correct governmental actions."

Gregorian advocates this private investment for the public good. He works to advance civilisation and culture because, he says, "there are ideals worth believing in and fighting for. When you stop learning or being curious, you're deadening your soul. You have room to grow, no matter what age you are."

So, at 73, he remains on stage, wielding power with passion and precision. And if history is any indication, when Gregorian raises his baton, his orchestra – magnates, academics, policymakers, all – will begin to play, in harmony and right on cue.

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