



Conservative Philanthropy CEO to Trump: Don't Attack Liberal Nonprofits



AFTER CHARLIE KIRK'S ASSASSINATION, PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP VOWED TO GO AFTER LIBERAL GROUPS THAT HE SAID HAVE DONE "TREMENDOUS DAMAGE TO OUR COUNTRY." (ILLUSTRATION BY *THE FREE PRESS*)

Lawson Bader of DonorsTrust says any revenge is 'going to come back to haunt us.'

By Gabe Kaminsky

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he leader of one of the country's most influential right-leaning nonprofits said that he has cautioned White House officials against pursuing investigations of liberal philanthropic groups without clear evidence of legal wrongdoing.

Lawson Bader, the president and CEO of DonorsTrust, told *The Free Press* that the stream of retaliatory rhetoric since Charlie Kirk's assassination "has the potential to weaponize philanthropy in a way that is antithetical to philanthropic freedom." Anyone who threatens the nonprofit status of law-abiding organizations "narrows the important boundary between citizen and state," Bader said.

Based in Alexandria, Virginia, [DonorsTrust](#) offers what are known as donor-advised funds tailored to conservative and libertarian-minded philanthropists who want to donate money anonymously and receive tax breaks. Democrats have used the phrase "[dark money ATM](#)" to describe DonorsTrust, which had [over \\$1.2 billion](#) in assets at the end of 2023 and paid out \$351 million that year.

The organization says it has routed [about \\$2 billion](#) to over 3,000 charities, including the Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, and Turning Point USA, which Kirk started in 2012 and is now led by his wife, Erika Kirk.

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Bader's comments reflect the deep concern that is spreading throughout the philanthropic world—regardless of political orientation—since

President Donald Trump [vowed to go after](#) liberal groups that he said have done “tremendous damage to our country.” The assassination of Kirk, who was one of America’s most influential conservative activists, has incited Trump administration officials to consider potential retribution against groups like the Open Society Foundations, funded by Democratic megadonor George Soros, and the Ford Foundation, whose philanthropy also funds left-leaning causes.

On Thursday, the president signed a memorandum aimed at fighting “[domestic terrorism](#) and organized political violence.” When he was asked who might be investigated, [Trump floated](#) the names of Soros and Reid Hoffman, another Democratic megadonor. That same day, *The New York Times* reported that a senior Justice Department official has told federal prosecutors [to draft plans](#) to investigate the Soros-backed nonprofit network. Trump also [designated antifa](#) a domestic terrorist organization, perplexing free-speech advocates and many legal experts because antifa is a loosely organized and decentralized far-left movement, not a formal entity.

Meanwhile, Vice President J.D. Vance and Stephen Miller, Trump’s deputy chief of staff, [have pledged since Kirk’s killing](#) to scrutinize left-wing nonprofit groups, which Miller said were fomenting violence and “will now be criminally liable.”

“When Stephen Miller starts talking about an organized strategy against left-leaning organizations, that’s where the White House’s rhetoric gets dangerous,” Bader told *The Free Press*. “If an organization feels strongly about abortion or perceived income inequality, I may disagree with their motivations, but the way we battle it out is in civil society.”

Bader’s sentiment in favor of philanthropic freedom was the subject of [an open letter](#) condemning political violence and defending the nonprofit

sector that more than 100 foundations signed in September. “We will continue to explain the importance of our mission and to assert that we feel justified in pursuing it,” Adam Gamoran, the president of the William T. Grant Foundation, told *The Free Press*. The charity, which signed the letter, funds youth programs, including those aiming to reduce inequality, according to [its website](#).

“Philanthropy is worth defending, no matter who happens to be in the White House.”
—Lawson Bader, president and CEO of DonorsTrust

To Bader, who has led DonorsTrust since 2015, all the talk from Republicans about going after foundations is eerily reminiscent of when hundreds of conservative groups were the target of [extra scrutiny](#) from some Internal Revenue Service employees in 2009 and 2010 after using words such as *patriots* and *Tea Party* in their names. President Barack Obama conceded that those investigations were “outrageous” and “[contrary to our traditions](#).” A later review found that a smaller number of groups with names that included *progressives* and other left-leaning words also were targeted by some IRS employees.

“Philanthropy is worth defending, no matter who happens to be in the White House,” Bader said. There is no publicly known evidence that Kirk’s alleged killer, Tyler Robinson, has ties to antifa or to any of the organizations or people singled out by Trump or White House officials.

The senior Justice Department official’s directive to federal prosecutors about Open Society cited [a recent report](#) by a conservative think tank called Capital Research Center, which claimed that it had given \$80 million to “pro-terror groups.” The report cited public grants from Open

Society to groups that the think tank said endorsed Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel or are associated with "front groups" for foreign terrorist entities.

The groups include Al-Haq, an [Israeli-designated](#) terrorist group that the State Department sanctioned [in September](#) for trying "to investigate, arrest, detain, or prosecute Israeli nationals, without Israel's consent." And Alliance for Global Justice, which was removed by payment processors [like PayPal](#) and [Discover Card](#) from their platforms because of [reported ties](#) to a Palestinian terrorist group.

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"It was a surprise to us," Scott Walter, president of the Capital Research Center, said about the Justice Department official's directive. But "if there is lawbreaking, then people should be held accountable under existing laws," he told *The Free Press*.

Open Society said on Thursday that it condemns terrorism and does not fund it. "These accusations are politically motivated attacks on civil society, meant to silence speech the administration disagrees with and undermine the First Amendment right to free speech," [Open Society said](#).

Open Society and the Ford Foundation came under fire from Vice President Vance when [he filled in](#) as a host for Kirk's radio show after the assassination. Vance had threatened to target what he called the "generous tax treatment" of liberal philanthropic organizations. The Ford

Foundation, founded in 1936 by business magnate Henry Ford, sits on at least \$16.8 billion in assets, according to its most recent tax filing.

“I disagree with the Ford Foundation because I believe it does not honor the intent of Mr. Ford,” said Bader, who called himself a friend of Kirk’s and was introduced by Kirk at a Conservative Political Action Conference conference in Maryland in 2013. But those differences are “a very different conversation than going after the Ford Foundation or George Soros,” Bader told *The Free Press*.

He said he worries that going after philanthropic groups that fund liberal causes will only set a precedent for Democrats to someday go after conservative donors.

“The whole conversation needs to tone down,” Bader said. “I think it’s going to come back to haunt us.”



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