

# Enterprise Report

Restoring Liberty, Opportunity, and Enterprise in America



## The First Freedom

By Robert Doar

For more than half a century, AEI has remained dedicated to the belief that the competition of ideas is fundamental to a free society. That principle has always strengthened our work, improving our research through rigorous, but respectful, debate.

These days, that example is being challenged all across our country. For some reason, Americans just cannot seem to agree to disagree anymore—and the consequences of this new intolerance have been dire. Threatened by the rise of new orthodoxies, the intellectual curiosity that was once the core of American education seems imperiled. Even worse, the harassment of scholars who speak their minds has created an unhappy culture at our nation's most elite universities. Could freedom of inquiry, which should be central to the mission of every academic institution, be living on borrowed time?

These developments erode free speech. Everyone who believes in that core principle should be appalled when teachers are censured or fired for publishing their research or voicing a heterodox opinion. Some may say that these incidents are rare and receive disproportionate attention from those looking to score political



Robert Doar  
AEI President and  
Morgridge Scholar

points. But I would reply that even just a single incident can scare thousands of educators and students, stifling speech across the country.

I am proud that AEI has remained a port in this storm, offering scholars a refuge from retribution and always defending their academic freedom. We have never been afraid to allow our scholars to publish the most compelling public policy research in Washington, no matter how controversial or unconventional their conclusions may be. Our approach has always been—and will always remain—that our only expectation of our scholars is that they follow the evidence, no matter where it may lead.

And our scholars have responded to these challenges, pushing back against a cancel culture that threatens the pursuit of truth and a “woke” agenda that stifles free thought. That’s why I’m so proud that we’ve brought on some of our country’s best thinkers, such as **Thomas Chatterton Williams**, **Max Eden**, **Robert P. George**, **Yuval Levin**, and **Ian Rowe**, to join us in arguing for academic freedom and intellectual inquiry in higher education across the country. These scholars don’t agree with everything their colleagues write or say—indeed, they don’t even always agree among themselves—but they do agree that only by allowing the greatest possible freedom of expression will we continue to prosper as a nation.

In the rest of this issue, you will read about one of our most recent efforts to bring together education reformers who are dedicated to making American education better, stronger, and more resilient. Led by **Frederick M. Hess** and new Research Fellow **Max Eden**, AEI has launched the Conservative Education Reform Network to bring together hundreds of educators, scholars, elected officials, funders, and advocates interested in pushing back against ideological orthodoxies and improving American education with principled problem-solving

You will also find an interview with one of our newest scholars, **Beth Akers**. Akers’ work will also address looming crises in higher education, including the impacts of COVID-19, the cost of education, and the rise of student debt. Her upcoming book, *Making College Pay*, will provide an important resource for students looking to make sure that their investment in higher education will continue to pay dividends long into the future.

As we begin to see vaccination rates rise across the country, our education policy team is also keeping a close eye on trends in school reopenings. In this issue, you will read about **Nat Malkus’** new Return to Learn Tracker, a first-of-its-kind tool that illustrates how more than 8,500 school districts across the country are responding to changing COVID-19 conditions.

And I’m proud to say that our scholars have also been leading their fields in so many other areas of research. **Mackenzie Eaglen’s** new report on defense appropriations and modernization has made a valuable contribution to the debates over the future of military spending. AEI’s Open Source Policy Center (OSPC) has continued to provide reliable and relevant tools, allowing policymakers to evaluate tax policies, COVID-19 responses, and other data-intensive policy issues. Using these tools, AEI scholars **Kyle Pomerleau** and **Alex Brill** recently released a report on several child tax credit proposals, illustrating their different potential drawbacks and benefits. An accompanying OSPC web app that allows visitors to model the proposals will give users the opportunity to better understand their policy implications.

AEI’s values of independence and freedom of thought also continue to attract leading new talent, as you will read in this *Enterprise Report*. In addition to Akers and Eden, we have recently welcomed **James Coleman**, **Klon Kitchen**, **Chris Stirewalt**, and **Tunku Varadarjan** to our scholar ranks.

Thank you, as always, for your interest in AEI’s work and your support.

## AEI Spotlight

# AEI Launches Conservative Education Reform Network

Education is the most important engine of opportunity in America. But all too often, even seemingly nonpartisan education reformers have embraced projects that expand bureaucracy and advance a harsh ideological agenda. For their part, conservative reformers have failed to articulate a plan to defend American principles or a policy agenda that speaks directly to the practical concerns of children and families.

With the launch of the **Conservative Education Reform Network (CERN)** earlier this year, AEI education is taking an important first step to reversing this trend and creating a framework of ideas that can empower policymakers, educators, advocates, and education funders to promote principled problem-solving and sorely needed reform in early childhood, K–12, and higher education. Chaired by Resident Scholar and Director of Education Policy Studies **Frederick M. Hess** and directed by new Research Fellow **Max Eden**, CERN is a national community of education leaders from a broad array of backgrounds and viewpoints.

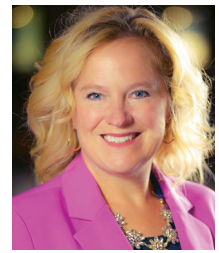
CERN already counts more than 200 members in 42 states and Washington, DC (and is growing every day). Consistent with AEI's fierce commitment to the competition of ideas and the principles of opportunity, personal responsibility, and human dignity, CERN does not preach a particular strand of conservative thought, but rather provides an open forum for all conservatives to discuss and advance our principles—from the schoolhouse to the state house to the White House.

Key early CERN activities in the weeks and months ahead include:

- CERN will continue to grow the network by adding new members to the publicly accessible member database and equipping existing members and the larger education reform community to drive change on crucial issues.
- In May, CERN will host its first annual two-day summit virtually, offering members an opportunity to network with one another, share resources and information, and engage in important discussions about what conservatives should advance in the education policy arena.
- CERN members will contribute to the ongoing “Sketching a New Conservative Education Agenda” report series, which features leading education thinkers offering specific policy reforms on topics such as the crisis in civics education, teacher accountability, and free speech on campus. The first 23 reports in this series will be published as a compilation and disseminated to CERN members and leading policy-makers across the nation this spring.
- CERN will facilitate virtual briefings with CERN members on key education topics, tapping CERN members who have expertise in that area to lead discussions and answer questions from their peers. The team is also forming issue-specific working groups to grapple with particular challenges and offer recommendations for improvement and reform.

To learn more about CERN, visit [www.aei.org/conservative-education-reform-network](http://www.aei.org/conservative-education-reform-network).

*“While those on the left have a robust education agenda, conservative reform is often distilled down to little more than school choice.*



*Although efforts to make education competitive are important, conservatives should also focus on their broader reform goals like ensuring all students have opportunities to flourish as citizens in their communities and as contributors to their own prosperity. CERN is the perfect opportunity to put conservative goals, coupled with research and practice, front and center in American education policy work.”*

—Jillian Balow, CERN member and Wyoming state superintendent of public instruction

## Max Eden Rejoins AEI as CERN Director



Max Eden, who began his career as an AEI research assistant in 2013 and was a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute from 2016 to 2021, rejoined AEI to lead CERN and pursue research on education reform, with a focus on the rise of “woke” indoctrination in American education and policy solutions that can combat and reverse illiberal trends. In addition to several major reports and studies on education, Eden is the author of the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestseller *Why Meadow Died: The People and Policies That Created the Parkland Shooter and Endangered America's Students* (Post Hill Press, 2019). He has testified before Congress and the US Commission on Civil Rights on school violence and has been published widely in policy journals and the popular press.

## Research

# New Report Addresses Challenges Facing US Military

In a uniquely difficult political and fiscal environment, AEI's **Mackenzie Eaglen** is shining a bright light on the massive spending spike to pay for modernization bills across our nation's armed forces that have been ignored, deferred, or inadequately considered. In a major report, *The 2020s Tri-Service Modernization Crunch*, released in March, Eaglen analyzes the budget challenges facing the Department of Defense over the next decade, projecting beyond the available five-year defense data. Offering a hard look at the existing modernization costs the US military must contend with over the next decade to ensure our forces are equipped and ready, projecting costs beyond the publicly available five-year defense data Eaglen reiterates the need for Congress, the White House, and the armed forces to take swift and bold action to address the modernization crunch.

The report has immediately made it into the hands of influential members of the Senate Armed Services Committee and the House Appropriations Committee,

**"While it has long been known that DoD faces a bow wave of modernization programs in the 2020s, this report makes an important contribution to the debate by quantifying the challenges and laying out a menu of options. There are no easy choices or silver bullets for the challenges that lie ahead. The Pentagon and policymakers in Congress will need to make difficult, strategically informed decisions, and this report will help serve as a guide."**

—Todd Harrison, Center for Strategic and International Studies



and it is circulating among top policy-making staff in the Pentagon and both chambers on the Hill. In April, Eaglen will brief members of Congress and staff behind the scenes on the report's groundbreaking findings and help them craft reforms through the National Defense Authorization Act process.

To read *The 2020s Tri-Service Modernization Crunch*, visit [www.aei.org/2020s-tri-service-modernization-crunch](http://www.aei.org/2020s-tri-service-modernization-crunch).

## New Scholar

# Klon Kitchen Leads Work at the Intersection of National Defense and Technology



**Klon Kitchen** joined AEI's Foreign and Defense Policy team as a resident fellow in February, focusing on the intersection of national security and defense technologies and innovation. Through his research, Kitchen works to understand and explain how emerging technologies are shaping modern statecraft, intelligence, and warfighting, while focusing on cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, robotics, and quantum sciences.

Before joining AEI, Kitchen was director of the Center for Technology Policy at the Heritage Foundation. He has also served as Sen. Ben Sasse's (R-NE) national security adviser, during which time he worked on the creation of the US Cyberspace Solarium Commission, a blue-ribbon commission tasked with developing an American grand strategy for cyber. While working for Sen. Sasse, Kitchen served as the staff director of the National Security and International Trade and Finance Subcommittee for the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. You can find all of Kitchen's work here: [www.aei.org/profile/klon-kitchen](http://www.aei.org/profile/klon-kitchen).

## Make Free Enterprise Your Legacy

For more than 80 years, AEI scholars have been tackling our nation's greatest challenges by producing work that bolsters free enterprise and innovation, strengthens our communities, defends our nation's founding values, and revitalizes America's leadership in the world. One of the best ways you can ensure that AEI can carry out this mission far into the future is by including AEI in your life and estate plans. Planned gifts provide AEI with long-term financial stability, guaranteeing the Institute has the means to continue our important work for years to come.

Major ways of making a planned gift include will or trust provisions, charitable remainder trusts, and charitable lead trusts. For more information, please visit [www.aei.org/donate-about/planned-giving](http://www.aei.org/donate-about/planned-giving) or contact Nicole Ruman Skinner ([niskinner@aei.org](mailto:nskinner@aei.org); 202.862.7189).

# Return to Learn Tool: Tracking Real-Time School Pandemic Response



The Return to Learn Tracker (R2L), developed and led by **Nat Malkus**, is the most comprehensive and timely tool tracking current school district instructional models. It is helping stakeholders understand how all regular public school districts with three or more schools—more than 8,500 districts—are changing and adapting to the pandemic.

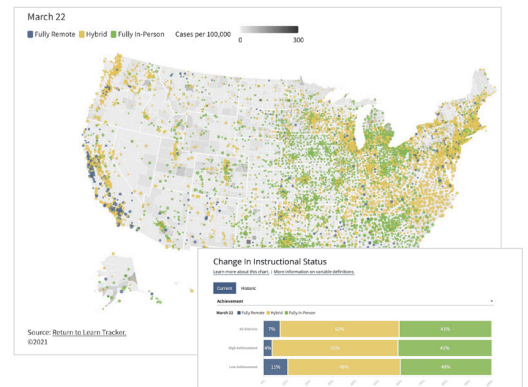
Building on a nationally representative school district response survey Malkus launched in spring 2020, R2L data capture changes in instruction status from the first week of September 2020 through the end of the school year, monitoring weekly how instructional statuses change with fluctuating infection rates and the

governmental pandemic responses in their counties. The data include district demographic and county-level sociopolitical variables, including measures of broadband access, poverty, race, and states' voting histories. The R2L dashboard provides weekly updates that reflect changes in district statuses over time.

Launched in early March, the tracker is already informing news coverage of schools' response to the pandemic in outlets including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, CBS News, Fox News, the *Hill*, Associated Press, *US News & World Report*, and numerous local news outlets. The tracker is also offering accessible, accurate knowledge of schools' plans to stakeholders at the federal and local levels; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the White House, the Federal Reserve, the Department of Education, and various local leaders are using the data to develop strategies for

responding to the crisis. Additionally, researchers at institutions including the University of Washington, Boston College, Yale Law School, University of Texas, Princeton University, and the Ohio State University have contacted Malkus about collaborating using R2L data, and we anticipate it will provide a panel dataset for studies for years to come.

You can find the tracker and learn more at [returntolearntracker.net](http://returntolearntracker.net) and find the original school district response survey here: [www.aei.org/covid-19-education-response-longitudinal-survey-c-erls](http://www.aei.org/covid-19-education-response-longitudinal-survey-c-erls).



## FCC Commissioner Unveils 5G Agenda at AEI

AEI tech policy scholars have long been leaders on the most important policy debates surrounding internet regulation, telecommunications, intellectual property, and more. As a signal of AEI scholars' prominence on these issues, in March, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Commissioner Brendan Carr chose AEI as the venue to outline a multiyear road map for extending US leadership in 5G through continued spectrum auctions, 5G infrastructure builds, and expansion of the telecoms workforce. Following his remarks, Carr and Visiting Fellow **Shane Tews** discussed in detail Carr's plans for closing the digital divide and expanding 5G access nationwide. The event received national media coverage, and Carr's plans have already spurred action by the FCC and Congress.

AEI tech policy scholars have written widely on Carr's and other policymakers' plans to address the digital divide, including President Joe Biden's proposal in the American Jobs Act to dedicate \$100 billion of the \$2 trillion bill to expanding broadband access. While closing the digital divide is a long-standing bipartisan goal, AEI scholars including **Mark Jamison**, **Daniel Lyons**, and Tews have cautioned in op-eds in *AEIdeas* and the *Hill* against massive



government spending to combat an issue that has yet to be fully analyzed.

For more on technology policy from AEI, visit [www.aei.org/5g-leadership](http://www.aei.org/5g-leadership).

## Podcast Spotlight



Every other Tuesday, AEI's Shane Tews hosts tech industry experts on *Explain to Shane* to discuss how the apps, services, and structures of today's information technology system shape our social and economic lives.

To learn more, tune in at [www.aei.org/tag/explain-to-shane-podcast](http://www.aei.org/tag/explain-to-shane-podcast) or subscribe via your preferred listening platform.

# Q&A

## with Beth Akers



In February, **Beth Akers** joined AEI as a resident scholar, focusing on the economics of higher education, student loans, and workforce development. Before joining AEI, she worked as a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a visiting research scholar at the Federal Reserve Board, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, and a staff economist at the Council of Economic Advisers under President George W. Bush.

Akers is the author of the forthcoming book *Making College Pay: An Economist Explains How to Make a Smart Bet on Higher Education* (Penguin Random House, 2021), which uses the latest economic data to show that with the right information and smart decision-making, higher education remains an engine for opportunity, upward mobility, and prosperity. To accompany the book's release on May 18, Akers will release a podcast series, *An Economist Goes to College*, featuring interviews with leaders in higher education finance.

She has testified before Congress on the cost of college, and her writing and research have been featured in a wide array of academic and popular publications. You can find her portfolio of work here: [www.aei.org/profile/beth-akers/](http://www.aei.org/profile/beth-akers/).

### How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed higher education for the better?

I'm optimistic that some of the innovation that was forced to occur so quickly during COVID-19 will stick around long after the pandemic ends. For instance, the availability of online education exploded in 2020 as colleges made accommodations to maintain their offerings for students and faculty who couldn't or wouldn't gather in classrooms. The expansion of online learning is long overdue, and many students, especially those with disabilities, can benefit from accessing a wider spectrum of educational activities online. It also means that students who aren't able to or don't want to relocate geographically will have access to higher-quality and more diverse educational opportunities.

### What role does a place like AEI play in the world of higher education reform?

The realm of higher education is saturated

with liberal ideology. There are relatively few conservative experts and analysts operating in this space. That makes AEI's role especially important for keeping balance in the political discourse about education reform. As a market-oriented thinker, I find myself influencing the conversation by reminding others about the market forces that are naturally at play—and shouldn't be forgotten—in this environment.

### What key questions are you trying to answer with your upcoming book, *Making College Pay*?

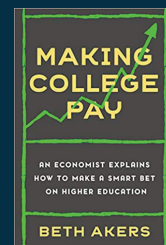
When I was a high school student, I found the expression "follow your passion" wholly unsatisfying when it came to picking where to go to college, what to study, and how to pay. I needed my education to pay dividends for my future career, but I rarely found helpful resources or advice in line with that objective.

Now, as an expert in the field, I've realized

the nature of college decision-making hasn't advanced much beyond where it was over two decades ago. With this book, I want to give aspiring students and their families the tools they need to make an economically sound decision about if and where to go and how to pay. I teach readers what resources to use to inform their decision-making and offer a cost-benefit framework for them to evaluate their options. Ultimately, I wrote the book with my high school self in mind, knowing there are other aspiring students who feel the same way I felt many years ago.

### What is a common misconception that aspiring college students have about college that you wish to dispel?

Not all debt is bad debt. We've come to believe that mortgages are a valuable tool for wealth building, but some would have you believe that education debt is not. This is incorrect. The returns on higher education are (depending on your major) huge, and borrowing funds to gain access to those returns can be a wise choice. In fact, as I explain in my book, it might make sense to borrow even if you already have cash on hand to pay the bill.



"The high cost of college is one of those worries that keeps students and parents up at night. If you're one of them, *Making College*

*Pay* will help you sleep a bit easier, by showing that a college degree is one of the safest, smartest investments you can make in your future, or your child's. Full of easy-to-understand advice grounded in deep expertise and research, this is the rare book that will appeal to both parents and policy wonks alike."

—MARTIN WEST, William Henry Bloomberg Professor of Education, Harvard University



## Beth Akers Advice for Graduating High School Seniors

**Instead of asking, “Is college worth it?” . . . you should ask, “When is college a good bet?”**

Acknowledging the risk of going to college invites a worthwhile discussion of what choices can help make college pay off for you.

**When looking at different universities, understand that what you choose to study (i.e., your major) can affect your future earnings** more than the college you choose does. Having a path to a career in mind before you start school will improve the odds that your degree will pay off.

**Know what you want to get out of college** and be aware of the trade-offs inherent in choosing a school. This one sounds simple, but it’s really not. We don’t all go to college for the same reasons. Know why you want to go to college so you can make the decisions that will get you to your goal. Following the crowd can be an expensive approach.

**Don’t be scared of taking on debt** if you need it to complete your degree. People who graduate generally find loan repayment affordable. Surprisingly, those with small balances often default only because they sometimes didn’t finish their degree.



## New Fellows Join AEI Scholar Ranks



**James Coleman**, associate professor at Southern Methodist University’s Dedman School of Law, joined AEI as a visiting

scholar focusing on energy and environmental policy. His work at AEI will explore how we can remove the regulatory barriers that effectively prohibit the movement of natural gas and renewable power, challenging the drift of legal opinion that upholds the constitutionality of those onerous regulations. His ultimate goal is to restore a free market for the production and transportation of cleaner alternatives.



**Chris Stirewalt**, formerly of Fox News, joined AEI’s Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies research division in March

as a resident fellow focusing on American politics and public opinion. He is the author of *Every Man a King: A Short, Colorful History of American Populists* (Twelve, 2018) and is concurrently a contributing editor at the Dispatch.

In the coming months, he will be working on a report analyzing misconceptions that Democrats and Republicans both hold regarding voter turnout and their impact on how each of the parties approach voting laws. He will also study how dysfunction in liberal and conservative media outlets intersects with voter propensity and engagement.



**Tunku Varadarajan** joined AEI as a resident fellow in March, focusing on American politics, political economy,

political ideologies, society and culture, immigration and integration, and the US Constitution. Concurrently, he is a fellow at the Classical Liberal Institute at New York University School of Law, an editorial page (and books section) contributing writer at the *Wall Street Journal*, a fellow at the Center on Capitalism and Society at Columbia University, and a contributing editor for Politico Europe. He has also taught at various universities including Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, New York University’s Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute and Stern School of Business, and the University of Oxford.

AEI’s Open Source Policy Center (OSPC) is informing policymakers and their staffs as they develop, analyze, and respond to policy ideas. Most recently, OSPC has made a valuable contribution to the ongoing debates on questions surrounding work, family, and poverty, sparked by the inclusion of an expanded child tax credit in the American Rescue Plan.

In February, AEI scholars **Kyle Pomerleau** and **Alex Brill** released a report, *The Tax Benefits of Parenthood: A History and Analysis of Current Proposals*, explaining the history of parental tax benefits and the current child tax credit proposals, which was accompanied by an OSPC-incubated web app, the Design Your Own Child Tax Credit Reform. The app allows users, including policymakers, staffers, journalists, and academics, to explore the differences among several proposed policies for child tax credits. This type of interactive modeling—paired

with informed analysis from AEI scholars—helps users better grasp a policy issue and its many variables and better understand our scholars’ findings, since readers can engage with the data themselves to see how scholars arrived at their conclusions.

Throughout the past year, OSPC has made similarly timely contributions to the policy debates as it focused on supporting pandemic-related policy deliberations and evaluating policy proposals from presidential campaigns using newly incubated tools, including:

- **Tax-Cruncher-Biden**, which enabled users to calculate, analyze, and visualize the impact of Biden’s campaign tax policy proposals on their own tax burdens;
- **Cost-of-Capital-Calculator-Biden**, an interactive data visualization tool to accompany Pomerleau’s report, “The Tax Burden

on Business Investment Under Joe Biden’s Tax Proposal”; and

- **COVID-MCS**, a model to help policymakers determine whether benchmarks for downward trends in the intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic have been satisfied in a region.

These and other OSPC portfolio apps are being used to generate data for significant reports from AEI, the Brookings Institution, UBI Center, the Hoover Institution, and others. This year, OSPC will focus on incubating projects that quantify the growth of government and assist in designing policy that transitions power away from the federal government to state and local government and private-sector actors.

Visit [www.ospc.org](http://www.ospc.org) to learn more.

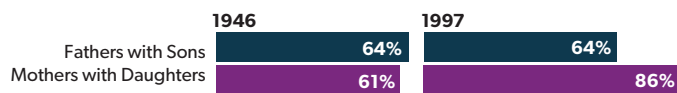
## Women’s History Month

### Blog Series Illustrates Women’s Progress

Throughout March, AEI Resident Fellow **Karlyn Bowman** released a series of blog posts in honor of Women’s History Month. Each installment examined historical polling data to illustrate the progress women have made on various measures, including their perceived opportunities, aptitude for leadership, and division of labor. Notable highlights include:

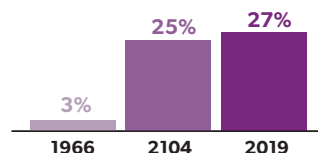
In 1946, 64 percent of fathers with sons thought opportunities for their sons would be better than the ones they’d had. Sixty-one percent of women with daughters gave that response about their daughters. By 1997, fathers’ optimism about their sons was the same, but 86 percent of mothers said their daughters would have better opportunities.

#### Better Opportunities

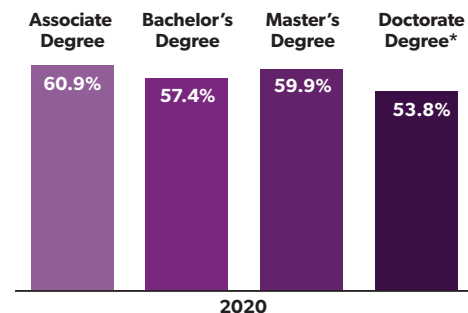


In 1966, 3 percent of entering college freshmen reported that the highest degree their mother obtained was a graduate degree. In 2014, nearly a quarter did. In 2019, using a broader question, 27 percent did.

#### Mothers with Graduate Degrees



According to AEI’s **Mark Perry**, women in the class of 2020 received 60.9 percent of associate degrees, 57.4 percent of bachelor’s degrees, 59.9 percent of master’s degrees, and 53.8 percent of doctorates. For the past nine years, they have been awarded the majority of doctorates.



Source: US Department of Education

You can find all the posts in the series here: [www.aei.org/tag/women-making-history](http://www.aei.org/tag/women-making-history).