News



Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, speaks at the 2022 AmericaFest at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, Arizona. AmericaFest is an annual event of Turning Point USA, a conservative organization co-founded by the activist Charlie Kirk. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore)



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***Editor's note**: This article was originally published by WyoFile, an independent news organization reporting on the state of Wyoming. It is being republished in a condensed form and in two parts, with permission via the Institute for Nonprofit News, of which NCR is a member. This is the first part. NCR will publish the second part on March 21.*

When Kevin Roberts took over as president of tiny Wyoming Catholic College in 2013, few people outside its Lander, Wyoming, base even knew the school existed. But in just three years, the media-savvy Roberts managed to put the conservative campus in the national spotlight by embracing the term "cowboy Catholics" and by refusing to accept federal grants and student loans that he felt would compromise the school's independence and religious freedom.

"I fully expected Kevin to be the next senator from Texas or something," said Glenn Arbery, who became the college's president after Roberts' departure in 2016. "The man has an energy and a brilliance about what he wants to do politically. That was just evident. He was too big for our little college for sure."

Still, few could have imagined that only six years after he left town, Roberts would be the $668,880-a-year president of the Heritage Foundation, the country's biggest, richest and, arguably, most influential conservative think tank — a popular idea mill for right-wing politicians in Wyoming and other red states. If Donald Trump is reelected U.S. president, Heritage under Roberts is uniquely poised to be the main policy and personnel engine for the new administration, just as it was for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

On Jan. 18, the 49-year-old former Lander, Wyoming, resident made international headlines by lambasting his hosts at the elite World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Speaking before an overflow crowd in a panel discussion entitled "What to Expect from a Possible Republican Administration?" Roberts said: "The agenda the administration needs to have is to compile a list of everything that's ever been

proposed by the World Economic Forum and object to all of them wholesale." The right-wing press applauded.

"Heritage Foundation head defends Trump, scolds 'elites' at World Economic Forum," a Fox Business News headline reported.

"Heritage Foundation Leader Bashes World Economic Forum," The Daily Caller wrote.

Writing on X, the social media site formerly known as Twitter, Roberts himself proclaimed in his increasingly populist rhetoric: "My message to the self-appointed global elites: Your time is up."

Roberts understands that because of his high-paying, high-profile position, many Americans might consider him part of the "elite." But he makes a distinction between his success and those who want to "concentrate power and wealth for themselves, with a sometimes explicit condescension toward commoners," he said to Wyofile. The product of a broken home and hardscrabble childhood in Lafayette, Louisiana, Roberts considers himself one of the commoners.

In Washington, Roberts seems to be everywhere these days. He has his own weekly YouTube podcast, "The Kevin Roberts Show," and he is a regular on Fox News, with more than 40 appearances in the last year alone. The New York Times featured him in a Jan. 21 magazine interview, "Inside the Heritage Foundation's Plans for 'Institutionalizing Trumpism.'" He has a regular column that appears in Newsweek, the Washington Examiner, The Wall Street Journal and other publications. A book is in the works, title still pending, for publication this fall in a HarperCollins imprint.



A screenshot of "The Kevin Roberts Show," a weekly podcast (NCR screenshot/YouTube/"The Kevin Roberts Show")

In many of his appearances, he repeats the same phrases. "America is on fire" or "America is on fire, literally in some inner cities." Other favorites are "cultural Marxism," "climate alarmism," "Stalinist cult of wokeism," and "globalist technological elite."

If he agrees with someone, he says they "know what time it is," as in "Donald Trump knows what time it is" or "Ron DeSantis knows what time it is." The message is that America and the American way of life are in mortal danger and must be fixed ASAP. People who understand this "know what time it is."

A plan for Donald Trump

In late October, Roberts made one of the most important speeches in his burgeoning career as a leading American conservative intellectual.

The American Conservative magazine — founded by the culture warrior, pundit and perennial presidential candidate Pat Buchanan — was holding its annual gala at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Pentagon City, Virginia. Roberts, in his second year as president

of the Heritage Foundation in Washington, delivered the keynote address before several hundred mostly older right-wing luminaries.

Like Buchanan, Roberts is a devout Catholic. As a freshman at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Roberts volunteered on the 1992 Buchanan presidential campaign. Roberts attended the Republican National Convention that year in the Houston Astrodome, where Buchanan delivered his famous "culture war" speech in which he railed against abortion, homosexual rights, women in combat and discrimination against religious schools. In interviews and conversations, Roberts will sometimes refer to himself as "Buchananite."



Then-President Ronald Reagan meets with Pat Buchanan in the Oval Office in March 1982. Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts volunteered on the 1992 Buchanan presidential campaign and sometimes refers to himself as "Buchananite." (White House Photographic Collection)

In his American Conservative keynote, Roberts invoked Buchanan's name seven times, Ronald Reagan's six and Donald Trump's only once.

Roberts attacked Republican leaders as well as Democrats for squandering the advantage won after the end of the Cold War with ill-advised trade agreements and senseless wars. He criticized his own misguided past as a neoconservative, which he said ended in the late 2010s after the two American wars with Iraq. "Trump certainly clarified, in 2016 and 2017, the problems with the neocons," Roberts wrote in an email to WyoFile. Coming under special scorn were the Bush presidents, father and son. "And all this was before George W. Bush, his team of neocon mediocrities, and their dog-eared copies of The Weekly Standard strutted America into the successive catastrophes of Iraq, the financial crisis, No Child Left Behind, the Great Recession, and the presidency of Barack Obama," he wrote.

The speech contained one overriding message: Buchanan had it right all along. America is in the grip of a political and moral crisis and both parties, Democrats and Republicans, are to blame:

"And so today, our nation is beset by unprecedented crises around the world, and of course here at home. Along our borders, on our crime-ridden streets, in our gas, grocery and utility bills. In our toxic and atomized culture. In our exploding national debt and falling birthrates and life expectancy. In our empty churches, fatherless neighborhoods, failing schools, and overflowing prisons and mental health facilities."

He then assured the audience that he and the Heritage Foundation have a plan.

> 'I presume that conservative voters — and voters period — in Wyoming understand they're selecting a president of the United States, not the pastor for their church.'
> —Kevin Roberts
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If Trump is reelected, then the 6-foot-1-inch, piercingly blue-eyed Louisiana native has carefully positioned both himself and the Heritage Foundation to play a major policy role in the new administration, in much the same way that Edwin Feulner Jr. and Heritage did during Ronald Reagan's two terms as president.

Before Reagan was first elected president in 1980, then Heritage Foundation president Feulner — whom Roberts refers to as his "mentor" — presented the new administration with a 3,000-page "Mandate for Leadership" document that contained

2,000 specific policy recommendations. Reagan distributed the document at his first cabinet meeting and essentially adopted the mandate as his executive operating manual for the next eight years.

The Roberts' Heritage Foundation version of Mandate is a 1,000-page handbook called "Project 2025" and is designed, as The Associated Press has reported, "to have the civic infrastructure in place on Day One to commandeer, reshape and do away with what Republicans deride as the 'deep state' bureaucracy, in part by firing as many as 50,000 federal workers."



Kevin Roberts addresses CPAC Hungary 2023 at the Bálna Convention Center. Roberts, former president of Wyoming Catholic College, was named president of the Heritage Foundation in 2021. (Wikimedia Commons/Elekes Andor)

As a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, Heritage is prohibited from endorsing candidates for public office. Roberts claims to be close to Trump rivals Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley. After leaving office, former Vice President Mike Pence joined

Heritage as a "distinguished visiting fellow" before resigning to become a candidate himself.

But claims of neutrality aside, the "Project 2025" plan seems custom-made for a Trump presidency.

Like nearly everyone else in Washington, Heritage was blindsided by Trump's nomination in 2016. Former Heritage Action leader Michael Needham had earlier described Trump as a "clown."

Its original dismissal of Trump as a legitimate candidate forced Heritage to scramble for influence. Roberts and Heritage have vowed not to let that happen again. To lead the "Project 2025" team, Roberts hired two former Trump administration insiders.

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Project leader Paul Dans is a South Carolina attorney who served in the Trump administration as chief of staff at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, working with the White House to select the 4,000 presidential appointees in the federal government.

Associate Project Director Spencer Chretien served in the White House as special assistant to Trump and associate director of presidential personnel. Both men are ideally situated to help pick appointees for another Trump term.

As a devout Catholic and family man, Roberts notes that Trump is a flawed person, but said he sees qualities that make up for any shortcomings. In a December interview with WyoFile, he was asked to explain the former president's enormous popularity in Wyoming, the state that gave Trump his biggest margin of victory in the 2020 presidential election.

"I presume that conservative voters — and voters period — in Wyoming understand they're selecting a president of the United States, not the pastor for their church," Roberts said. "I think the real key thing for people in Wyoming is they understand that the country's on fire, largely figuratively, but in some inner cities, literally.

"And Donald Trump knows what time it is."