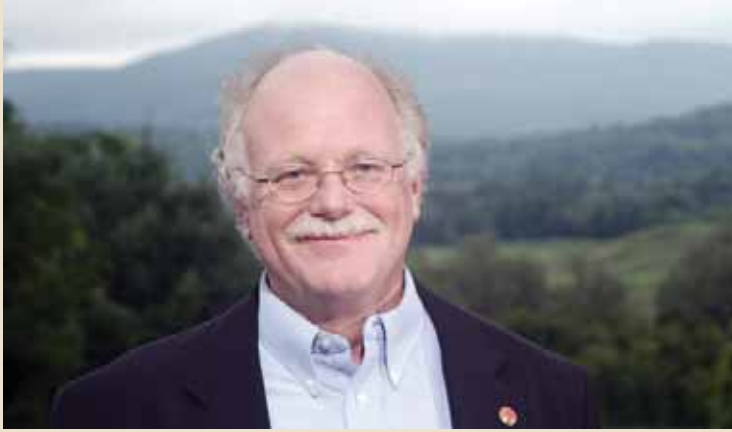


NEWSMAKER: BEN COHEN



Ben Cohen, cofounder of Ben and Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream, has spent the past decade in the pie business—pie charts, that is. President and founder of the 10-year-old group Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities (www.sensiblepriorities.org), Cohen has distributed thousands of pie-chart buttons, pens, and Frisbees documenting how the Pentagon's hearty slice of the federal budget leaves only crumbs for education, public health, job training, and deficit reduction. Getting the message, Reps. Barbara Lee and Lynn Woolsey (both D-Calif.) introduced the Common Sense Budget Act of 2006, which proposes reallocating \$60 billion from cold war weapons to domestic programs.

American Libraries: You've said that you never expected passage of the Common Sense Budget Act of 2006. What, then, did the bill do for your movement to reallocate \$60 billion from defense spending to education, health care, and other social issues?

BEN COHEN: Never say never. We didn't expect the bill to pass in 2006, but we firmly believe that it will pass eventually. Survey after survey shows that an overwhelming majority of Americans want to reduce nuclear and other obsolete Cold War weapons and shift the savings to social needs. We are working our butts off to get Congress and the presidential candidates to listen to the will of the people instead of defense-contractor lobbyists. Every year we are adding more and more members of Congress, state legislators, business leaders, and grass-roots members that support

the Common Sense Budget Act. This year, we are also bird-dogging the presidential candidates all over Iowa and New Hampshire and a bunch of them have already committed to make at least some of the transfers we've been talking about. The bill helps to crystallize what we are for and provides something very specific for legislators and others to sign onto that they can't weasel out of.

How does your initiative differ from the multibillion "peace dividend" that education and social activists sought in vain in the 1990s?

It's no longer just education and peace activists. The Priorities campaign is led by business and military people ranging from the former head of the CIA to the chairman of Hasbro. There are currently over 700 business-leader members, and we have a

board of military advisors headed by Vice Admiral Jack Shanahan (ret.). Also, the campaign relies on a study by Lawrence Korb, assistant secretary of defense under Ronald Reagan, which details \$60 billion per year (15% of the Pentagon budget) for unneeded cold war-era weapon systems.

Where do libraries fit in your vision of a socially responsible society?

Libraries are portals to information in whatever form it exists. Librarians are experts in helping to make the overwhelming amount of information accessible to our citizens. And especially in this time of government- and industry-sponsored propaganda, libraries are a source of unbiased, unfiltered information. Along with that, they are a cultural resource for the arts and can tailor information delivery to the needs of the individual.

What part have libraries played in your life?

I had the most wonderful librarian in elementary school, Mrs. Couchinatta, who made me feel loved and appreciated and introduced me to the world of literature. Then when I got into debate club in high school, the library became a source of endless information.

You're a forceful proponent of publicly funded education and also a self-made man who never finished college. How do you reconcile the two?

I see no conflict between the two. Government has a responsibility to provide a first-class education for all of its citizens regardless of their income. Not everybody needs to take advantage of it. There are lots of ways of learning. I love to learn. I'm just personally not that crazy about doing it in a classroom. ■