

In-Depth Interview

A Conversation With Tom and Tim Pearson About The Pearson Institute and a World More at Peace

Thomas L. Pearson and Timothy R. Pearson are business entrepreneurs, investors and philanthropists with a lifelong devotion to a world more at peace.

The Thomas L. Pearson and The Pearson Family Members Foundation's \$100 million gift to the University of Chicago established The Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts and The Pearson Global Forum. The Pearson Family has previously served as Global Benefactor of the annual Nobel Peace Prize concert in Oslo.

Interviewed early in 2017, Tom and Tim Pearson reflected on the progress that has been made at The Pearson Institute since it was first established, and they looked ahead to the goals of the year to come.

Interview Q&A

Just to get oriented, when was The Pearson Institute established?

Tom: There are two benchmark dates. We announced *The Thomas L. Pearson and The Pearson Family Members Foundation's* \$100 million gift in conjunction with the University of Chicago in September 2015. The Pearson Institute was officially launched in July 2016, having appointed a faculty director and two of the three named chairs. We're currently conducting a search for our executive director.

I should also take this early opportunity to note that we are delighted with the progress we have made to date, thanks in large part to their interest in The Pearson Institute and the relationship we enjoy with University of Chicago President Robert J. Zimmer and Provost Daniel Diermeier, formerly dean of the Harris School.

How would you describe this innovative and ambitious initiative, in a sentence or two?

Tom: The Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts and The Pearson Global Forum, established by *The Thomas L. Pearson and The Pearson Family Members Foundations* \$100 million gift to the University of Chicago, will act as catalysts to promote research practices and share insights that will inform public policy. This important initiative will fill a critical gap in identifying new strategies to reduce or mitigate global conflicts.

Where is this work taking place?

Tim: The Pearson Institute is housed at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy, although the research related activities are taking place in many different locations

around the world, including Sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Nigeria, Liberia, Indonesia, and Colombia.

What is the mission of The Pearson Institute?

Tim: The Pearson Institute will seek to understand the complex causes and consequences of conflict, mobilizing the best minds and the most innovative tools and technology to get to the roots of terrorism. In the shadow of continued attacks in this country as well as those abroad, this effort is about identifying how terrorism is spawned, how it grows, and how it spreads, effectively halting terrorism before it ever reaches our shores.

One unique attribute will be how we will share The Pearson Institute's findings and outcomes – through The Pearson Global Forum – across the full spectrum of diplomatic, government leadership, legislators, military, non-governmental organizations, and other key parties. One of the main objectives of The Pearson Institute is to inform public policy almost on a real-time basis.

What progress has The Pearson Institute made in attracting prominent global conflict experts and scholars?

Tom: We have named James A. Robinson, a prominent political scientist and economist who has done influential research in the field of global conflicts, to the newly-created position of faculty director of The Pearson Institute. In the new faculty director role, effective July 1, 2016, Robinson has been named the Reverend Dr. Richard L. Pearson professor of global conflict studies.

The University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy also has appointed two new distinguished faculty who joined The Pearson Institute in 2016. Chris Blattman, who focuses on ways to reduce poverty and violence in developing countries, and Oeindrila Dube, a scholar of the political economy of conflict and development, have received inaugural named professorships at The Pearson Institute. Blattman was named the Ramalee E. Pearson Professor of Global Conflict Studies; Dube was appointed as the Philip K. Pearson Professor of Global Conflict Studies.

Have you started to tell the story of The Pearson Institute and the interplay of research and policy to the wider audience?

Tim: We made some early progress during the presidential campaign last year to take the message about The Pearson Institute and the crucial importance of conflict resolution to the wider audience through the media. While we were able to generate interest in targeted major markets, unfortunately, as you know, the national media was distracted to a great extent by campaign controversy and topics that had little relevance to policymaking that addresses global conflicts.

It is a great story to tell, and we are optimistic about seeing more media interest as we communicate the results of The Pearson Institute's research programs as that work matures – and we will certainly be pointing to the positive impact that work has on public policy in the future.

The Pearson's clearly believe that we must do whatever we can to help bring about a world more at peace. How does this apply here at home?

Tim: The recent terrorist killings in Fort Lauderdale, the earlier bombings in New York, and New Jersey, and the previous killings in San Bernardino and Orlando, are compelling reminders that terrorism can occur anytime and anywhere in this country.

In fact, a national survey ([Pew](#)) revealed that 40 percent of Americans believe the country is more vulnerable to terrorism today than it was at the time of the 9/11 attacks. Whether terrorist-directed or -inspired attacks, we believe this is a signal issue that must be addressed now. The cycle must be broken for future generations.

I should immediately add that we believe a serious dialogue on foreign policy and national security has been conspicuously absent from the vital national issues driving the news – while the threat of terror and its global spread obviously remains so very real.

A new Administration has moved into the White House. How would you suggest President Trump and his team focus on conflict resolution?

Tom: That is an excellent and very timely question. We believe the country can work proactively toward impeding the growth of terrorism. We would suggest to the new Administration, in the name of informed foreign policy and strengthened national security, that specific steps can be taken to uncover the “roots of terrorism.” In other words, looking forward, things can be done now to keep Americans safe – for the long-term – at home and abroad.

How might that pursuit of the “roots of terrorism” be accomplished?

Tim: While this deserves much deeper treatment, in capsule form those steps include:

- First, recognize the rationale for a new approach to understanding terrorism: Cold War-type solutions alone are less effective in today's era of global conflicts.
- Second, lead with innovative research approaches. Innovative and data-driven research approaches will act as a driving force in transforming how we understand and approach conflicts between and within states.
- Third, share the findings across the spectrum of government, military, and other appropriate policymakers. This is not happening now. These research findings need to be shared in order to inform more effective policy solutions for resolving violent conflicts.
- Fourth, and last, the new Administration must act. Ideally, President Trump's team will be able to draw upon these kinds of ideas to shape their own near- and long-term strategies for understanding terrorism. It's time to mobilize the best minds and utilize the most innovative tools and technology to get to the roots of terrorism.

Are the Pearson's receptive to the idea of other donors and participants joining in this effort?

Tom: Yes, we would welcome their participation. In fact, when we decided as a family to create this peace-seeking initiative we also envisioned that, in addition to The Thomas L. Pearson and The Pearson Family Members Foundation's \$100 million contribution, the initiative would continue to expand as it attracts additional outside support and funding – targeted at both the research and the educational agenda.

How do you sum all this up? You've spoken about The Pearson Institute "making a real and lasting impact."

Tom: Our vision for The Pearson Institute is to make a real and enduring impact, influencing and informing public policy in such a way that the eventual result is a world more at peace. We have pursued this ambitious initiative to honor our parents and also to create a family legacy.

While we cannot say with complete certainty that it will begin to produce desired results in five years, or a decade or more, we are confident that today's blueprint will help lessen the threat of terror in the years to come.

And your closing comment?

Tim: Speaking on behalf of the Pearson Family, I will offer that, if we save one life through these wide-ranging and groundbreaking global conflict resolution efforts, we will have made a difference. If we save millions of people's lives, then we will have made a real contribution to mankind.

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