

Compassionate Conservatism

Is it just a well-intended rhetorical gimmick?

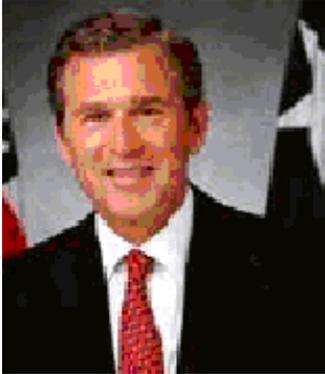
American Studies Chung Ah-young

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1. Introduction

Compassionate conservatism was one of President George W. Bush's slogans in his presidential election. Compassionate conservatism is designed to dispel his party's image that it has turned a deaf ear to the social welfare of the underprivileged. Compassionate conservatism derails the Democratic Party's greatest rhetorical

advantage of a monopoly on caring about the worst-off. Republicans challenge Democrats' failure to solve poverty by touting this slogan.



This conception originates from scholars who believe this philosophy can contribute to solving societal ills. Marvin Olasky, a University of Texas journalism professor, and Myron Magnet of the Manhattan Institute can be named as the godfathers of compassionate conservatism.^{123[1]} Mr. Magnet and Mr. Olasky greatly influenced President Bush's political strategy. The literal meaning of com-*passion* is "*suffering with*" or "*fellow-feeling*" for the "*sorrows*" of others.^{124[2]} Mr. Olasky developed his idea of compassionate conservatism by repudiating the modern social welfare system which he believes allows people to keep suffering.^{125[3]} He calls for transformation of the welfare system by adopting faith-based contributions to charities. He insists government should play a role to encourage social efforts to maximize resources for the poor. Mr. Olasky dubbed Mr. Bush the compassionate conservative leader during his term of Governor of Texas because Mr. Bush allowed private and religious charities to play roles in welfare services.^{126[4]} The then Governor of Texas, Mr. Bush implemented policies based on compassionate conservatism including education. Meanwhile, Mr. Magnet criticized the

^{123[1]} <http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/>

^{124[2]} <http://www.frontpagemag.com/archives/conswithaheart/>

^{125[3]} Marvin Olasky points out the country made a mistake that a big, generous government could solve social problems in his 1992 book *The Tragedy of American Compassion*.

^{126[4]} Marvin Olasky delineates this ideas in *Compassionate Conservatism: What it Is, What it Does, and How it can Transform America*. Free Press, 2000

attitudes of the 1960's counterculture and its legacy to the poor^{127[5]},

blaming liberalism for creating an entrenched underclass.



The core of compassionate conservatism advocates the individual's ability to contribute to prosperity, the importance of the marketplace^{128[6]}, and prosperity with a moral purpose. Compassionate conservatives argue that the government should have a limited role and responsibility.^{129[7]} It should not redistribute the wealth of citizens but rather promote competition in the

marketplace and ultimately generate social and economic progress by championing the vast power of the free enterprise system.^{130[8]}

^{127[5]} Myron Magnet, "*The Dream and The Nightmare: The Sixties' Legacy to the Underclass*", Encounter Books, 1999. This book crystallized Mr. Bush's thoughts.

^{128[6]} Kenneth Godwin's opinion supports this idea in the book, *Using Market-Based Incentives to Empower the Poor, Public policy for Democracy*, that well-organised markets provide the best chance to make a long-term success in delivering services to the poor and maximizing their capacities as citizens.

^{129[7]} As Mr. Magnet put it, *government is not evil, and it should not be neutral either. It should encourage good behavior and responsibility, and it should welcome the participation of nonprofits and churches in helping the disadvantaged.*

^{130[8]} <http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/publications/digest/004/goldsmith.html>



Through this research, I hope that you can understand the Bush administration's social policies reflecting compassionate conservatism and how well the administration follows its political philosophy and puts it into practice. I want you to ponder whether it is just hollow words or a well-intended gimmick.



VICTORY WAVE: Texas Gov. George W. Bush, seen here at his victory party in November, has taken up the mantle of conservatism with a heart. He's even swayed some Democrats in Texas to back him.
(L.M. OTERO/ AP)

2. THE DEFINITION OF COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM AND ITS TENETS AND PRINCIPLES

<http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/publications/digest/004/goldsmith.html>

WHAT IS COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM?

The word "compassion" until 1990 was a liberal rhetoric. Literally *com-passion* means "suffering with" or "fellow-feeling" for the "sorrows" of others. Some cast doubt on whether compassionate conservatism is just a political slogan or a real philosophy. Compassionate conservatives insist that it is a principled and coherent approach to domestic policy. Compassionate conservatism was coined as a tool to shed conservatives' negative image on social welfare of the poor.^{131[9]} Its pivot is that through the marketplace, the government is supposed to promote individual's prosperity contributing to greater social benefits for the poor. Compassionate conservatism shares fundamental principles of political and traditional conservatism and at the same time it bears liberals' ideal to care for the disadvantaged which is supposed to ultimately solve social problems.

EMPOWERMENT, NOT ENTITLEMENT

Compassionate conservatives' argument is that their goal should be achieved by empowerment, not by entitlement. They see this as a distinct difference between liberals and compassionate conservatives. They want to grant people tools to overcome adversities like tax cuts which they assume will promote individual's investment through control of wealth. They materialize this goal through retirement accounts and

^{131[9]} *The Wall Street Journal, What is Compassionate Conservatism?* February 5, 1999

home ownership. The principles of compassionate conservatism reflect the significance of the marketplace and individuals. Compassionate conservatives believe that giving people control of their own equities through their Social Security accounts can promote investment and building of wealth for the future. They recognize the need for assistance from the government for those without economic means but they rely on aggressive tools rather than on passive ones. In other words, they provide conditions that allow more individuals to become homeowners with low-cost loans or the creation of independent development accounts rather than just offering public housing. In the case of housing, they point out that the Department of Housing and Urban Development has spent much money on the problem, giving people housing but no real stake in the future without any means to accumulate personal wealth through home ownership.

THE POWER OF THE MARKETPLACE

Compassionate conservatives believe the most effective way to realize their aim is competition in the marketplace. They argue that rigid and bureaucratic programs are hindrances in helping people. The public education system is a case in point. The debate over the public education has been fierce. Many people criticize the role of the federal government in education. The role is supposed to supply the necessary resources for the poor children, but the funds poured into Title I^{132[10]} often failed to help the poor children and went in the hands of state and local bureaucracies. Compassionate conservatives attach the strings to school districts to adopt a thorough testing of every child in grades 3 to 8. The testing should be conducted at the state and local levels to

^{132[10]} Title I was created specifically to help poor children.

ensure local control and the scores will be posted on the Internet to let parents know. They argue that if schools do not present considerable improvements in performance, parents should control funds and be allowed to make educational decisions for their children. Poor parents should be given an equal voice with more affluent parents in making a choice of school. This reflects the market competition. Health care is also a similar case. According to their argument, customer competition and various options in the insurance market can generate efficiencies and innovations in service.

PROSPERITY WITH A PURPOSE

According to compassionate conservatives, the above principles should be combined with prosperity with a purpose. They assert that individuals prosper in a strong value system like the family, church or other institutions of civil society. They believe social problems and weaknesses derive from the lack of spiritual and cultural values. As a consequence, compassionate conservatives back the function of faith-based groups or institutions.^{133[11]} They advocate the role of the government to assist the poor. They argue religious organizations and other civic institutions can better provide the detailed knowledge and flexibility required to deliver social services to the poor. However, this draws a strong backlash from critics in that it can erode the separation of religion and nation guaranteed in the Constitution.^{134[12]} Compassionate conservatives recognize the need of the separation between state and church. Mr. Olasky argues that *the primary goal of the establishment clause is freedom of, and not from, religion*. They argue if

^{133 [11]} Compassionate conservatives point out the doomed result of the Great Society because unfortunately it supplanted the local, faith-based groups that were supposed to transform individual's values and lives.

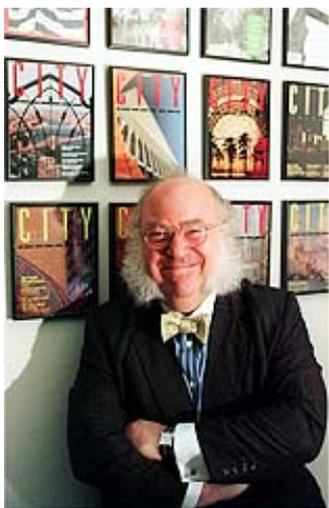
^{134[12]} According to Thomas Jefferson, the First Amendment created a "wall of separation" between church and state, forbidding not just favoritism but also any support for religion at all.

religious groups efficiently provide services for those in need, these organizations are allowed to conduct these missions. This can promote assistance in a voluntary way. Besides, the best way is a broad network of churches, synagogues, mosques, and related faith-based groups.

They highlight the capacities of the market and individuals with appropriate tools.

¹³⁵[¹³] Compassionate conservatives strongly believe that by respecting individuals and the marketplace, empowering people to select various options, and giving individuals the education and the opportunities to control their own property through stocks and homes, Americans can make a promising future.

3. THE GODFATHERS OF COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM; MYRON MAGNET AND MARVIN OLASKY



MYRON MAGNET <http://www.manhattan-institute.org>

The Manhattan-based institution gives information on Mr. Magnet's views on compassionate conservatism. "*The Dream and The Nightmare*" written by Mr. Magnet in 1993 shaped Mr. Bush's thoughts of compassionate conservatism.¹³⁶[¹⁴] In his book, he argues that the radical transformation of

¹³⁵[¹³] The then Governor Bush said, "*It is conservative to cut taxes, and compassionate to give people more money to spend. It is conservative to insist upon local control of schools and high standards and results; it is compassionate to make sure every child learns to read and no one is left behind. It is conservative to reform the welfare system by insisting on work; it's compassionate to free people from dependency on government. It is conservative to reform the juvenile justice code to insist on consequences for bad behavior; it is compassionate to recognize that discipline and love go hand in hand.*"

¹³⁶[¹⁴] *City Journal, Solving President Bush's Urban Problem*, Winter 2001

American culture in the 1960s entrenched the underclass. He believes that government should have a responsibility for poor Americans. This view is not a typical Republican's perception.^{137[15]} Mr. Magnet argues that compassionate conservatism is an urban agenda because the poor are concentrated in the cities. It is easier to understand this urban agenda, given that the geographical distribution of the vote in the 2000 presidential election indicates the urban elites and blacks went for Gore while the rest of the country with the traditional values of the countryside voted for Bush.



MARVIN OLASKY <http://www.olasky.com>

"Compassionate Conservatism, What It Is, What It Does, and How It Can Transform America" and *"The Tragedy of American Compassion"* written by Mr. Olasky outline his philosophy.^{138[16]} Mr. Olasky advocates faith-based institutions as an efficient way

to draw charities to the poor. He argues that social problems can be better solved by the private sector like churches, faith-based institutions, volunteers, and civic-minded corporations. Mr. Olasky espouses 19th century-style charity over the entitlements of the welfare state. That means the 19th century America's religious-based charity was preferable to the welfare state. He who became first a Marxist and then an evangelical Christian thinks that the social revolution of the 1960's was disastrous because it forced

^{137[15]} Historically, from Richard Nixon on down, the policy of Republican presidents toward the poor, especially the minority poor, has been benign neglect. Presidents Reagan and Bush similarly paid meager attention to poverty and urban problems. However in the 1990s, innovative big-city Republican mayors and urban-state governors have made some headway in wrestling with these problems and put these on the top of the agenda. Compassionate conservatism makes an effort to put these solutions central to national politics. (*City Journal*, Myron Magnet, Winter 2001, Vol.11, No.1)

^{138[16]} <http://www.olasky.com>

people to rely too much on entitlements, asking nothing in return. He wrote that religious charities of the last century were more effective in that they required donors to give both time and money.

These two authors formulated the bedrock of compassionate conservatism and still remain Mr. Bush's influential policy-making advisors. It is essential to understand their philosophy to get a clear picture of compassionate conservatism.

4 . EXAMPLES OF HOW COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM WORKS AND HOW IT AFFECTS THE POLICY-MAKING OF THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION

A series of current domestic agenda items reflect compassionate conservatism. Bush's social programs remain incomplete, especially in education reform and health care.



EDUCATION REFORM www.ed.gov

One of Mr. Bush's ambitious plans reflecting compassionate conservatism is education reform. He emphasizes the significance of public education because many children without proper basic education lag behind in the more complicated society. Compassionate conservatives condemn that traditionally Democrats have strong ties with teachers' unions. Compassionate conservatives say Democrats put the employment and working conditions of teachers far above the education of children. Second, the state education

authorities do not require high standards for teacher qualification or student achievement. Democrats make the school district bureaucracies impose an one-size-fits-all education upon various children with various needs. For that reason, Mr. Bush promised to normalize education to give children basic knowledge like the three R's^{139[17]} as the top priority.



President George W. Bush and
U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige

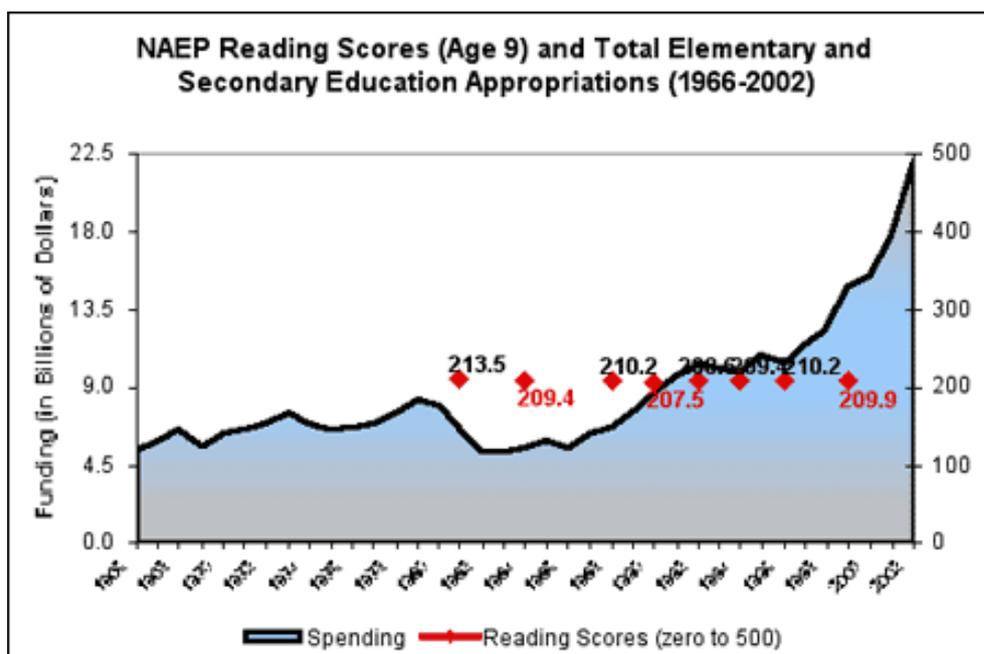
After taking office, Mr. Bush declared the framework of educational reform "*No Child Left Behind* (NCLB)" This is the expanded form of accountability and flexibility for poor children and their parents' choice from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)

and Title I . Less than a year later, President Bush secured the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB Act) to improve the performance of school system and save the children left behind.^{140[18]} President Bush has wanted to reform education because the current educational system has turned a blind eye to the poor children who remain mostly illiterate in the three R's. So the then Texas governor Bush launched standards of basic knowledge and skills that all students are supposed to master. Mr. Bush materialized educational reform in Texas through an annual testing. He intended to raise the levels of knowledge of the poor and minority children through this mandatory

^{139[17]} It indicates basic knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

^{140[18]} <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/esea/exec-summ.html>

testing. It contributed to easing the conservatives' deep-rooted negative image not to care the poor. So he adopted educational reform under the slogan of "*No Child is Left Behind*". It was designed to improve educational bill because the government wasted too much dollars on education but the situation was rarely improved. (See the Figure)



<Figure >

This figure shows that since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first passed Congress in 1965, the federal government has spent more than \$321 billion (in 2002 dollars) to help educate disadvantaged children. However, nearly 40 years later, only 32 percent of fourth-graders can read skillfully at grade level. Unfortunately, most of the 68 percent who cannot read well are minority children and those who live in poverty. It is fortunate that campuses in cities and towns across the nation are making high achievement for these same children. If some schools can do it, then all schools are able to do it.

However, there are concerns over the ultimate result of these standards. The national government cannot handle every child directly and follow whether he is doing well or the local and states government are doing well in abiding by the standards. Critics say because the local and state governments have too much latitude to choose the test, there will be no coherent results. In addition, the outcome of the test might be the comparison with other children rather than how much knowledge children have. Democrats and liberals cast doubts over such education requirement suggested by Mr. Bush. The critical response from the Democrats is that Americans need a common school system to instill a common civic culture into children.



President George W. Bush and
U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige

In addition, Democrats argue that Mr. Bush does not follow his campaign promise because he does not set aside enough money to implement such a policy^{141 [19]}. Analysis of the Bush education budget by the House Education and Workforce Committee shows "the

President's budget cuts initiatives in The No Child Left Behind Act by a net total of \$90 million." [House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Democratic staff, The Bush Budget: Shortchanging School Reform, 2/12/02] Senator Ted Kennedy asserts that

^{141[19]} "And so the new role of the Federal Government is to set high standards, provide resources, hold people accountable, and liberate school districts to meet the standards. ... We're going to spend more on our schools, and we're going to spend it more wisely," Mr. Bush said. (Remarks on Signing the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 1/8/02)

few weeks after President Bush signed the education bill into law, he cut the funding. According to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Democratic staff, the Bush's education budget is the smallest increase in seven years, just by 2.8 percent or approximately \$1.4 billion.

MEDICARE REFORM

Medicare reform and prescription drug issues should be dealt with properly to ease the difficulties of medical services to seniors and uninsured patients. Compassionate conservatives argue that government has a responsibility to provide funds to uninsured individuals. Their option is to provide refundable tax credits so that individuals can purchase policies in the insurance market because customer competition is believed to improve efficiencies in the provision of services. Medicare and prescription drugs face the same problems. Their suggestion is the solution through the individual's choices of various insurance options.

President Bush promised to provide prescription drugs to 39 million Medicare recipients in the presidential election.

"Approximately 10 million seniors and persons with disabilities have no prescription drug coverage."..."This proposal is expected to lead to coverage for up to 3 million Medicare beneficiaries who would otherwise not receive coverage until the Medicare drug benefit is fully implemented, which will require several years," the White House revealed. According to CBO Director Crippen, *"the total number of participants*

in the [Bush] program would gradually rise from about 900,000 in 2003 to 2.4 million by 2007; participants would constitute about 6 percent of all Medicare beneficiaries."
[CBO Testimony, Projections of Medicare and Prescription Drug Spending, 3/7/02
(emphasis added)]

All told, Democrats strongly criticize that Mr. Bush does not fulfill his pledges. They denounce such policies as broken promises.^{142[20]}

5. CRITICAL AND DIFFERENT VIEWS BETWEEN THE LIBERALS AND THE CONSERVATIVES ON COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM

Many conservatives^{143 [21]} hail this philosophy as a good way to overcome conservatism's unconcern for the disadvantaged. They believe it can yield a breakthrough in assisting the poor in an effective way. Meanwhile, some liberals believe compassionate conservatism is simply liberalism with a different name. Liberals share the fundamental views of caring for the poor with compassionate conservatives. Many liberals do not oppose the intentions of compassionate conservatism.

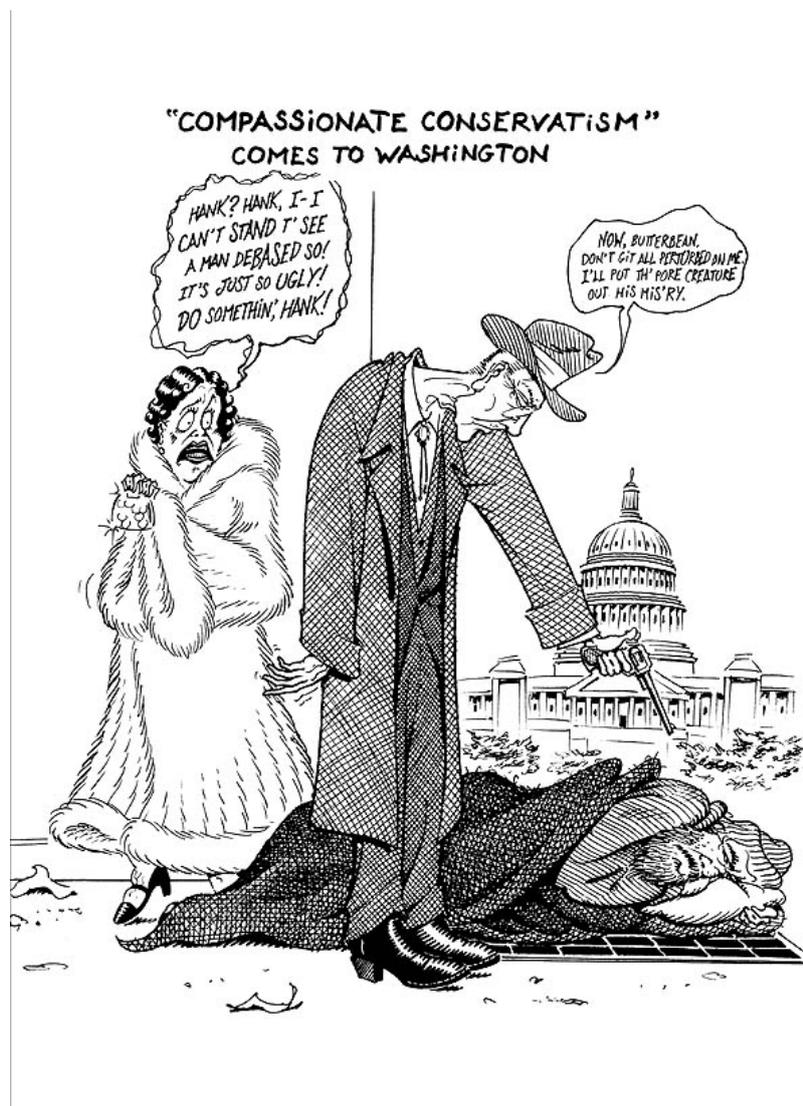
^{142[20]} www.democrats.org

^{143[21]} There are two arguments on the relationship between the political economy and the welfare state *in sharp opposition to each other*. George Gilder and Charles Murray argue that progressive state expansion of welfare and liberal intellectual indifference to normative standards have undermined the black family.(Gilder 1979; Murray 1984) The other argument is that a more contradictory relationship of welfare state expansion and contraction. Neo-Marxists regard the welfare state's roles as primarily supportive of capitalist accumulation, but also intervening at critical junctures to offer life-sustaining aid to the working class, the elderly, and the poor. Social Security and unemployment insurance are examples of the latter; liberal tax deductions for high-income taxpayers are an example of the former.(James O`Connor, Ian Gough, and Fred Block)

Instead, with regard to the means of social welfare concerning the poor, there are fundamentally different views between the liberals^{144 [22]} and the compassionate conservatives. Liberals believe in the redistribution of income as well as the creation of new wealth and new opportunities for investment to help the poor. Compassionate conservatives argue the liberals' position can drive the poor into being dependent on the lethargic bureaucrats to deliver the services directly to those in need. The liberal establishment does not believe compassionate conservatism can solve societal ills.^{145[23]}

^{144 [22]} Historic liberals had root of political and ideological posture on social welfare after the late 1970's. President Johnson launched the War on Poverty with the assumption that government had a central role to play in maximizing the social affluence of America so that all could enjoy it. However this rhetoric did not mean a long-term victory for liberal ethics and was defeated and condemned by Republicans and finally was backed away from liberal social policy positions.(Alex Waddan, *The Politics of Social Welfare*, Edward Elgar, 1997)

^{145 [23]} <http://www.au.org/press/pr12901.htm>



However, critics have doubts about compassionate conservatism. They are skeptical about a governmental role for faith-based institutions^{146[24]} because this can erode the distinction between religion and state.^{147[25]}

Critics say that Bush's plan will place a burden on people who receive government benefits. They fear that people might go to a church they may not believe to get help

^{146[24]} *Faith-based institutions, Compassionate Conservatism? The Economist*, February 16-22nd 2002

^{147[25]} A United Church of Christ minister and an attorney Barry W. Lynn said, "*Bush's plan is the single greatest assault on church-state separation in modern American history...The First Amendment was intended to create a separation between religion and government, not a massive new bureaucracy that unites the two.*"

from the government. A United Church of Christ minister and an attorney Barry W. Lynn points out that it can pose a threat to employment on religious grounds. For instance, a religious group may receive public tax dollars to pay for a job, but money pays for a job that people cannot have because of religious beliefs. That is not compassionate conservatism, but blatant bigotry, Mr. Lynn said. Critics also argue that it will jeopardize the independence and integrity of church-run social service programs. According to Mr. Lynn, the government always regulates what it funds and once churches, temples, mosques and synagogues are funded by the public, some of their freedom will be imperiled by the governmental regulation to follow. Mr. Lynn added that contributions to religious groups must come from voluntary supporters, not be forced by the government. <http://www.au.org/press/pr12901.htm>



Despite the president's argument that religious charities are better than state bureaucracies to help the poor, he faces some doubts. Among others, money is a headache. Proponents say there is pent-up demand for social programs by faith-based charities. The Senate predicted more charitable giving due to tax breaks of about \$10 billion in the next two years. However, the unexpected impact of 9.11 on charities has been to decrease contributions to the religious charities. Another is that churches, mosques and synagogues may not be in accord with Mr. Bush's agenda of encouraging voluntary service.^{148[26]}

DNC National Development Chair Maynard Jackson dubs Mr. Bush's compassionate conservatism "*dispassionate neglect*" because there is much rhetoric but with no substantial and practical actions. He says that compassionate conservatives persist to cut government and social programs that help minorities living in urban areas. He denounces President Bush and the Republicans' decision to end the Public Housing Drug Elimination Program which indicates their continuing neglect of and insensitivity to those living in public housing. Jackson criticizes President Bush's decision to expel drug dealers from public housing in order to solve crime and drug problem in the inner cities. He said that it cannot be an alternative for the government's social responsibility to create safe environments for children. Cutting social programs cannot be a solution for government waste. The report says that President Bush proposed in his 2002 budget to allocate housing leaders half the \$310 million to the program for security, higher utility rates and other operational costs. It can be translated into an attempt to get

^{148[26]} *The Economist, Faith-based Institutions*, February 16-22nd, 2002

religious groups involved in neighborhoods. He condemns the Republican Party's calculated, deceptive two-sidedness about minorities and holding photo-ops that deliver the message *"I'm not against you."* while eliminating needed programs and sending the message *"I don't care."*

Generally, liberals and Democrats cast doubt on whether compassionate conservatism can be put into practice or can be realized, given the meager headway made by the Bush administration's policy-making. That's the key point of criticism of compassionate conservatism.

It is a little difficult to finalize the Bush's administration's policies, because a series of pending issues are still up in the air. As the satiric cartoons attached imply, truly compassionate conservatism has not been faithfully followed by Mr. Bush in the view of critics. Most critics denounce that Mr. Bush still remains conservative, not compassionate.

5. Conclusion

With its good-will intention to care for the poor with plausible tenets, compassionate conservatism is not just a one-time slogan, but a political philosophy. Republicans still face challenges politically like the polarization in the geographical distribution of the vote. President Bush and the Republicans had better try hard to gain some urban votes by using compassionate conservatism as a political strategy. At least in that sense, President Bush and the Republicans should not lose their pace to put compassionate conservatism into effect.

Apart from this political cause, Mr. Bush has reasons to stick to compassionate

conservatism. However, he has failed to put compassionate conservatism into practice by turning his back on his promises. His pledges during the presidential campaign fell flat in the cases of education reform and Medicare reform. There has been so much rhetoric but no substantial headway. Compassionate conservatism was once the mantra in Mr. Bush's presidential election, but critics raise the doubt about whether it is still sustainable or not. Most critics say the Bush administration has not fulfilled the philosophy of compassionate conservatism. Given the administration's sluggish implementation of pledged policies, critics and liberals' arguments that compassionate conservatism is just empty words seem to gain ground.



"Truely, an American tragedy...a family too impoverished to contribute to my presidential campaign."

Is compassionate conservatism still important? Is it a well-intended gimmick or a real

method to overcome societal ills? Compassionate conservatism like the previous rhetoric of liberals or other politicians seems to be empty and grind to a halt with no practical measures after the election. The cartoon below is my conclusion about the back-pedaling on compassionate conservatism. Mr. Bush and the Republicans should put policies on the right track to keep their promises and to be truly compassionate.



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