

# Compassionate Conservatism

By Marvin Olasky

Compassionate conservatism. Many reporters see it as a sugary concoction, word candy for a political campaign. But that conventional wisdom is wrong. Compassionate conservatism is neither an easy slogan nor one immune from vehement attack. It is a full-fledged program with a carefully considered philosophy. It will face in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century not easy acceptance but dug-in opposition from many influential quarters of American society. It will have to cross a river of suspicion concerning the role of religion in American society. It will have to get past numerous ideological machine-gun nests. Only political courage will enable compassionate conservatism to carry the day and transform America.

That's the thesis of my book, Compassionate Conservatism, which played a minor role in the presidential campaign since Governor George W. Bush was kind enough to write the foreword to it and give me credit for developing the concept. Lots of people deserve credit (or demerit, depending on your political perspective), but I was able to help by writing in 1990 The Tragedy of American Compassion, which presented a history previously hidden in the stacks of the Library of Congress. That book showed how a century ago, before the federal government became involved, thousands of local, faith-based charitable agencies and churches around the country waged a war on poverty much more successful than our own. This history gave

readers hope because they realized, as had American GIs in World War II, that "we did it before and we can do it again."

The historical record suggested that what worked a century ago to bring people out of poverty would still work, because social conditions were oddly parallel. Americans a century ago had problems with crime, alcoholism, and drugs (opium rather than crack cocaine). Rates of illegitimacy and divorce were far lower then, but more orphans roamed the streets because parents were sometimes carried away in epidemics. Faced with such difficulties, faith-based groups a century ago helped millions out of poverty and into homes. Local organizations had the detailed knowledge and flexibility necessary to administer the combination of loving compassion and rigorous discipline that was needed.

As I researched the book I started giving speeches that attempted to define what I was calling "conservative compassion." The goal was to move from complaining about spending to thinking about lives: "Conservative politicians have been complaining for years about a spendthrift modern welfare state -- but they have been

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stating the problem backward. The major flaw of the modern welfare state is not that it is extravagant, but that it is too stingy. It gives the needy bread and tells them to be content with that alone. It gives the rest of us the opportunity to be stingy also, and to salve our consciences even as we scrimp on what many of the destitute need most -- love, time, and a challenge to be 'little lower than the angels' rather than one thumb up from monkeys."

I hoped to see welfare transformed, as much as possible, from government monopoly to faith-based diversity, from the impersonal to the personal. "The government of a pluralistic society is inherently incapable of tending to spiritual needs," I emphasized, "so the more effective provision of social services will ultimately depend on their return to private and especially to religious institutions." But The Tragedy of American Compassion, after being turned down by a major publisher, finally appeared in 1992 from a small house with a pea-sized marketing budget. The book fell into the giant puddle of words between overlooked covers and disappeared with hardly a ripple – but some thoughtful folks, such as Bill Bennett and Karl Rove, became aware of it. Bennett introduced the book and its concepts to Newt Gingrich, and Karl Rove did the same for Governor Bush.

The Washington story of how then-Speaker Gingrich repeatedly told Republican congressmen, and everyone else throughout 1995, that they had to read The Tragedy of American Compassion, has been told a number of times, but the Texas story is little-known. George W. Bush and I first discussed the concepts in 1993, and I could see that the ideas were similar to his own. That wasn't surprising, both because of former President

Bush's earlier interest in the "thousand points of light" and because of George W. Bush's own personal faith conversion in 1986. It nevertheless took a particular incident to move him to an embrace of religious groups and the eventual decision to make compassionate conservative approaches the cornerstone of his campaign.

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That incident came in 1995, Governor Bush's first year in office. One state agency tried to shut down a Christian anti-drug organization that was effective despite (or because of) its refusal to obey state requirements that counselors have extensive classroom training in conventional anti-addiction techniques. When three hundred of the group's drug-free alumni demonstrated with great Texas resonance at the Alamo, and I was able to write articles about the event in *World* and the *Wall Street Journal*, cards and letters poured into Governor Bush's office asking him to call off his regulatory dogs. He did, and then proposed (and in 1997 succeeded in having enacted) legislation to pen them up permanently.

Governor Bush did other things as well during the two years before his 1998 reelection campaign. He issued an Executive Order making Texas the first state to establish the option of using private and religious charities to deliver welfare services. He set up a level playing field for both religious and nonreligious groups for Texas social service contracts, abstinence education grants, and poverty-fighting initiatives. He made Texas the first state to permit a state

prison unit to be operated by a ministry. He established alternative licensing procedures for many faith-based programs. He created a pilot program establishing Second Chance group homes for unwed teen welfare mothers run by faith-based and other private groups. He proposed and signed a Good Samaritan law that gives liability protection to health professionals who donate charitable care to needy Texans. He recommended and signed a law requiring governmental agencies to develop welfare-to-work partnerships with faith-based groups in a way that respects those groups' unique religious character.

None of those initiatives received much attention from the press, nor were they viewed as part of the major restructuring of government-societal-religious interaction that "compassionate conservatism" is beginning to connote. In part, the lack of press interest came from unfamiliarity with inner-city faith-based organizations. Most urban reporters know city hall and the way to crime scenes, while "charities" are often seen as fluff assignments for the staff sentimentalist. Those politicians and journalists did not know or understand the decade-long development of the concept and the fact that its conservative usage had iron in its spine. Bush did, and he did not back off; last year he cited some tough-minded programs and noted that "Sometimes the idea of compassion is dismissed as soft or sentimental. But those who believe this have not visited these programs. Compassion is not one of the easy virtues. At Teen Challenge -- a national drug treatment program -- one official says, 'We have a rule: If you don't work, you don't eat.' This is demanding love -- at times, a severe mercy."

Last summer my son and I, under the auspices of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, spent time with faith-based groups in seven inner cities and saw the life-changing effects of severe mercy. Journalists now often ask me for a list of the principles that the compassionate

conservatives who back such groups generally embrace. I emphasize to them the importance of getting out and reporting firsthand what is going on in inner cities, but I often do offer seven principles in alphabetical order.

## ASSERTIVE

The preamble to the Constitution speaks of government promoting the general welfare but not providing it. Alexis de Tocqueville was astounded to see Americans forming associations to fight poverty and other social ills rather than waiting for government to act. Such assertiveness surprised Europeans well into the twentieth century. This quality is depicted well in one of my family's favorite movies, *The Great Escape*. In it, captured pilot Steve McQueen refuses to kiss up to the prison camp commandant, who asks, "Are all American officers as ill-mannered as you are?" McQueen breezily responds, "About 99 percent, yeh." Recently, however, many Americans have become better mannered, meekly paying taxes and expecting a paternalistic government to fight poverty. Compassionate conservatism is the opposite of a wimpy doctrine; it emphasizes a renewal of the citizen assertiveness that so impressed the first great foreign journalist to come here, de Tocqueville.

## BASIC

Compassionate conservatives choose the most basic means of bringing help to those who need it. The goal is to look within the family first; if the family cannot help, maybe

an individual or group within the neighborhood can; if not, then organizations outside the neighborhood but within the community should be called upon. If it is necessary to turn to government, compassionate conservatives typically look first to municipal, then to county, then to state, and only then to federal offices. At each governmental level, the basics should be in order before proceeding to the more complicated stages. For example, a group that protects teenage ex-hookers from pimps should have adequate police protection. Good Samaritan laws should be enacted so that a person who helps a mugging victim does not have to fear a lawsuit. When such basic protection is in place and counterproductive regulations have been replaced, the next goal is to improve information flow concerning an organization and to facilitate contributions. Then it is time to bring in questions of direct grants, tax credits, and so forth, always looking to the most basic level of government that can act efficiently on a particular problem.

## CHALLENGING

The tendency of many affluent Americans has been to turn poor people into pets, giving them food and an occasional pat on the head but not pushing them to be all they can be. Over time, bad charity has tended to drive out good, because people given a choice of pampering or needed pressure generally take the easy route. But those who consider the good of others as more important than their own satisfaction challenge clients (and themselves) to stretch self-perceived limits. Hard, character-building work is often particularly important in this process. Compassionate conservatives do not merely give the poor a safety net that may turn into a hammock; they provide a trampoline. The goal is to have the affluent stretch their limits also. It's easy to write a check but hard to check pride and

arrogance at the door when dealing with those who don't get much respect, or to travel to a part of town that is outside the middle-class comfort zone.

## DIVERSE

Since the 1960s, the vast majority of agencies to which those in trouble are supposed to turn have all had similar three-step approaches. First, take a number. The egalitarian goal is to ensure that everyone is treated exactly alike so that no one has any legal standing to complain. Second, take your money. Make sure that everyone entitled to benefits receives those benefits, even if the process enables people to stay in misery, instead of pushing them to become financially independent. Third, take your religious beliefs outside. God is supposedly banished from the premises. The compassionate conservative goal is to offer a choice of programs: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, athiest, secular. Some programs may emphasize education, some family, some work. Compassionate conservatives make sure that no one is placed in a particular type of program against his will, but they also try to make sure that religious people are free to communicate their values.

## EFFECTIVE

While understanding the severe limitations of government poverty fighting, compassionate conservatives do not assume that all private philanthropy is good and all government programs are automatically bad. Some private charities can be as bureaucratic,

unchallenging, and downright foolish as their governmental counterparts, so the goal is to ask tough questions. Does a program have a success rate that can be quantified? Is the amount a group spends per person sensible in relation to services offered and their outcome? Does a group mobilize community strengths by efficiently using volunteers? Does a program use the professional capabilities of those who volunteer? The two bottom lines of helping organizations -- lives changed, funds used efficiently -- need assessment. The quantity of people fed or bedded down is not as significant as the quality question: What happens to those human beings?

## FAITH BASED

Judging by the historical record and contemporary testimony, well-managed, faith-based programs are more effective in fighting poverty, on the average, than their nonreligious counterparts. Research studies show that church attendance tracks closely with lower dropout rates, less drug use, and fewer crimes committed. Faith-based organizations have shown that the best way to teach self-esteem and respect for law is to teach that we are esteemed by a wonderful God who set out for us rules of conduct that benefit society and ourselves. For civil rights reasons also, the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of religion should not be taken to mean freedom *from* religion. Therefore, for both pragmatic and philosophical reasons, compassionate conservatives insist that the Bible (or the Koran for that matter) should not be excluded by judicial fiat from any anti-poverty work, including that financed by government, as long as individuals have a choice of programs.

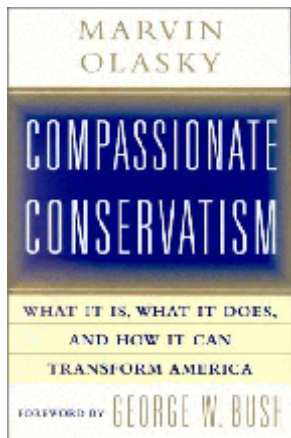
## GRADUAL

The pragmatism of a compassionate conservative suggests carefully checking what works and what does not, each step of the way. A typical process (to use a Texas example) would be to start with one faith-based prison program, check results, and then expand it if graduates of that program have a reduced rate of recidivism. Similarly, to see if tax credits will increase the resources of non-governmental anti-poverty groups in a way that benefits society, the plan is to start with a limited program and then expand it if the pluses outweigh the minuses. The goal throughout is gradual, sustainable change, tested at each step of the way, rather than a revolution that could be quickly followed by counterrevolution. Those are seven useful principles – but I do not want journalists merely to describe a theory; I want them to be exposed to gritty, street-level reality. In Dallas, they should visit the Carters at the Sunny Acres community center and learn how they give a second chance to young men caught in the drug industry. They should meet Jackie Mixon, founder of the optimistically-named Ideal Neighborhood Association, and learn about her battle against crime. They should talk with Kathy Dudley of the Dallas Leadership Foundation and learn about yard lamps and about developing leaders who can light up a neighborhood. They should sit with gruff Ben Beltzer of the Interfaith Housing Coalition and hear his no-nonsense description of how homeless women can get their lives in order.

Journalists who want to understand compassionate conservatism should spend some time in Houston with people like Prince Cousinard and Curt Williams, young men who suffer with kids without dads and sometimes without moms as well. (The literal meaning of com-*passion* is *with-suffering*.) They should visit others in the third and fifth wards and see how hard it is, but how noble, to offer up lives for the saving of others. They should visit the Inner Change program at the Jester II prison southwest of Houston and see how lives of convicts are undergoing transformation there, one by one from the inside out. They should see how faith-based institutions, often low on resources but filled with a sense of calling, persevere amid the ups and downs. If they do, they will no longer think of compassionate conservatism as a sugar wafer; instead, they will see it as strong wine, bitter in the mouth but warm in the belly.

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