

George W. Bush and Domestic Policy: The Faith-Based Office at its Most Personal

"The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done but cannot do at all, or cannot so well do, for themselves - in their separate, and individual capacities. In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, government ought not to interfere." - Abraham Lincoln

"I pledge our nation to a goal: when we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side." -George W Bush, first inaugural

Despite the material prosperity America was enjoying when President George W. Bush came to office in January 2001, the attendant moral and social decay was concerning. America's social fabric was fraying. Too many marriages ended in divorce; the out of wedlock birth rate was high; the destruction of the American family in some quarters was frightening, as was the level of some social pathologies. The number of hopelessly drug- and alcohol-addicted Americans was high. The net result was significant levels of poverty, homelessness, a growing prison population, and a general brokenness in the lives of too many Americans.

What would the new president say about this? How would the new Bush administration address America's most pressing social problems?

My dear friend and former colleague Stanley Carlson-Thies has given us a terrific and expert overview of the history of the federal government's faith-based work in the contemporary era. His marvelous essay has given me the opportunity to look back 20 years and recall my own up-close and personal observations and involvement of the faith-based effort during the George W. Bush era through two administrations.

I was honored to play a minor role in all of this during my nearly 8 years in the White House working for George W. Bush as a special assistant to the president and the deputy director of the White House office of public liaison. In that role, I was tasked with helping to set up the new faith-based office soon after the new president's inauguration. To prepare myself, I spoke with some of the men and women who had worked with and impacted the new president's policy direction in the late 1990s.

As governor of Texas, President Bush was impacted by the work of two important scholars, the University of Texas's Marvin Olasky and the Manhattan Institute's Myron Magnet. Both thought deeply about how civil society, not primarily government, should be empowered to address these pressing social problems. Their books, Olasky's *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, and Magnet's *The Dream and the Nightmare*, a social history of the 1960s Great Society programs,

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documented and illustrated the often-deleterious effects of more government involvement in trying to address serious social problems.

In one of his first major speeches after coming to office, President Bush was invited to deliver the May 2001 commencement address at Notre Dame University. The speech is now largely forgotten but it deserves to be remembered as one of the president's most insightful and prescient. Its historic importance is in direct challenge to President Lyndon Johnson's famous 1964 University of Michigan speech commencing the Great Society's war on poverty.

President Bush said repeatedly during his campaign that a new emphasis on faith-based solutions to some of America's most entrenched social problems would be an important element of his domestic agenda. Over eight years in office, he kept that promise.

The president said one of his priorities, the one closest to his heart in fact, would be a specific directive to knock down institutional barriers in the federal government to the funding of religiously-based social programs whose work was having a successful impact helping those who are hurting. Those who kept those walls high erroneously believed that there was a constitutional prohibition on the funding of such programs, the new president asserted.

In that Notre Dame speech, the president set out the intellectual, constitutional, and policy basis for the creation of his new faith-based and community-based office at the White House, and he illustrated what would come to be known as his 'compassionate conservative' agenda. Juxtaposing the failure of much of the Great Society's welfare provisions with a new way forward, rooted in a burnished partnership among faith- and community-based groups with government, the president said that while the Great Society *"had noble intentions and some enduring successes ... the welfare entitlement became an enemy of personal effort and responsibility, turning many recipients into dependents."* Government, he illustrated, had incentivized break-down and not build-up. He said the war on poverty turned *"too many citizens into bystanders convinced that compassion had become the work of government alone."*

President Bush believed neither an all-big government nor a libertarian, hands-off approach to addressing America's most entrenched social decay was the way forward. Instead, boldly, he called on the country and the new Congress to "revive the spirit of citizenship, to marshal the compassion of our people to meet the continuing needs of our nation." He said he would do this by creating a new partnership between faith and community groups and the federal government, which he successfully accomplished. He said he would give the private sector wider latitude to address and resolve some of the most pressing needs of the country. It was a practical commitment to compassion, rooted in the best of Judeo-Christian social thought, with an especial emphasis on a narrative of Catholic social teaching that the president believed in deeply -- a kind of restored and renewed subsidiarity for a new era. Government would have a role, he said, but the historic brick wall of discrimination between government grants and contracts to faith-based groups would be exposed and dismantled.

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The important thing to know about that era is that President Bush believed that without religious liberty and conscience as the centerpiece of domestic policy, all the other liberties were insecure. He favored religious freedom at every level of American life, including the ability of those charities to apply for government funding.

The president made his intentions clear from the outset of the creation of the faith-based office at the White House -- no money for proselytizing but available funding for effective compassion. What he did not want was government-funded religion, and he made this clear on several occasions. Rather he envisioned funding to support the good works that religious groups were doing in every community in America to help what his first director of that office, John J. Dilulio, Jr., rightly and powerfully referred to as helping *"the least, the last, and the lost."* Dilulio's legacy was borne of sweat equity on the streets of Philadelphia and as one of the nation's most important public intellectuals of that era.

President Bush had a deep heart for the poor, the needy, the destitute, the lonely, the orphans, the prisoners, and the widows. In addition, he wanted American taxpayers to be able to deduct their charitable giving, which in turn would create a new pool of nearly \$15 billion a year in private funding. Also, he regularly called upon corporate America to do its part. The most important thing to say is that President Bush's personal faith was the genesis of these policies -- a robust, deeply felt faith that taught duty to others was more important than duty to self; that serving a neighbor in need gave every life deeper meaning and purpose.

The president believed that every person was made in the image of God. He said, *"the same God who endows us with individual rights also calls us to social obligations,"* and he boldly offered a challenge to the sea of young people before him that day in South Bend at Notre Dame University: *"You're the generation that must decide. Will you ratify poverty and division with your apathy? Or will you build a common good with your idealism? Will you be a spectator in the renewal of your country, or a citizen?"*

The president wanted the rising generation to build a common good by working to fight poverty and to battle against the social destruction that had descended upon America. In the decade after that speech, a new generation of evangelicals, Catholics, Jews, and those of other faiths made helping the poor and desperate a foundational part of the way they saw their faith.

In his presence on multiple occasions, I heard people ask the president what he considered the most important parts of his domestic agenda. He always listed the faith-based program first or second, whether the group he was speaking to or meeting with was a religious group or not. The heart and soul of this new set of initiatives was his Christianity, and the role his own abiding faith played in American history to make people's lives better. He knew from first-hand experience that effective faith-based programs could save lives, marriages, and families, and he talked about this openly and frequently on several occasions.

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As the president's legacy is reviewed with more depth in the years ahead, I feel confident historians and scholars will conclude that this part of President Bush's time in office has been underappreciated. The faith-based set of policies was foundational and fundamental to the president at a deeply personal level in those years -- it is a profound study in how the personal becomes policy at the highest levels of the day-to-day workings at the White House.

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