

The Dangers of Compassionate Conservatism



George W. Bush has restored dignity and integrity to the White House. That is no small feat in the wake of the Clintons, and something for which we should all be grateful. He's made positive contributions on the policy front the likes of which we haven't seen since Ronald Reagan's first term. Some, such as his plan to partially privatize Social Security, weren't even proposed by Reagan. His no-explanation-needed dismissal of the American Bar Association's role in "vetting" judicial candidates was heroic. So, too, his rejection of the junk science Kyoto Agree-

ment on global warming. He knew he'd take endless heat from the establishment media for both and didn't flinch in doing the right thing.

That said, there is something deeply disturbing about the philosophy that underlies the Bush administration. "Compassionate conservatism," as defined by Bush during the presidential campaign and as proposed now as part of his legislative agenda, is a philosophy that says the federal government is going to be "strong and active"—in Bush's words—in involving itself in the lives of Americans. It is a philosophy that is closer to that of the New Democrats over at the Progressive Policy Institute than to the Goldwater-Reagan heritage of the GOP.

"In essence," says professional sound biter Marshall Wittman of the Hudson Institute, "what we're seeing is the triumph of big government conservatism. Everyone assumed devolution meant the absence of a government role. In fact, it means a continued presence." Bush's proposals for vastly increased federal spending on local education, his "faith-based" initiative to fund local religious charities, proposals for marriage counseling and teaching responsible fatherhood, Wittman told the *Washington Post*, all add up to "the death of libertarianism."

Well, Wittman's long-held enthusiasm for big government may blind him to the fact that libertarianism is a vibrant and growing part of the national debate these days. (Cato is, after all, the second most cited think tank in the nation.) Still, he has a point about this administration's representing a victory for big government in a *philosophical* sense. Bush's father was a big government man, but only in a kind of unthinking, ad hoc way. George W. Bush and his quite smart advisers are wrapping their proposed interventions in society in a framework that says the national government has the ability and the obligation to see how things are going locally and to fund what "works."

"It will be government that directs help to the inspired and the effective," Bush proclaimed on the campaign trail. That thought inspires neoconservatives who've never feared government power—

only those misguided individuals who ran it. It also inspires New Democrats like David Osborne, whose book, *Reinventing Government*, reads like a script for the Bush administration. Osborne writes, "Those who steer the boat have far more power than those who row it"—meaning the federal government need not do everything, just control everything. "Governments that focus on steering actively shape their communities . . . make more policy decisions. They put more social and economic institutions into motion. . . . They make sure other institutions are delivering services and meeting communities' needs."

So much, then, for constitutionally limited government and the concept of federalism. As Osborne notes, if the federal government is paying for something, it's calling the shots. It is possible that President Bush is simply naive about the consequences of compassionate conservatism—that he doesn't realize funding will be determined politically and not by merit. Or that even if it were by merit the recipient organizations would be corrupted by a growing dependence on federal funds. Or that those funds will inevitably come with strings attached.

The real danger lies in the casual acceptance of the idea that the federal government should have an "active" role in everyday American life, that if there's a problem, why, the federal government will find some worthy organization to solve it. This is bound to undermine what little principle remains in the Republican Party today. Education is a case in point. After decades in the wilderness, the GOP regained control of Congress in 1994 with a platform that called for abolishing the Department of Education. And why not? There is

not a word devoted to education in the Constitution, which means that under the Enumerated Powers Doctrine and the Tenth Amendment (for those too dense to understand the former) education is a responsibility of state and local government or, preferably, of no government at all.

That was then. This is now. Today we are faced with compassionate conservatism. So I was not surprised when I received a fax the other day from the Republican Policy Committee in the U.S. Senate boasting that "since Republicans took control of Congress in 1995, federal education spending has exploded." The headline: "GOP Outspends Democrats on Education."

—Edward H. Crane

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