

Dubya-ism: The logic of "compassionate conservatism"

by [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [September 13, 2000](#) issue

*Compassionate Conservatism: What It Is, What It Does, and How It Can Transform America*, by Marvin Olasky

According to George W. Bush, Marvin Olasky is "compassionate conservatism's leading thinker." A professor of journalism at the University of Texas, Olasky has been a Bush adviser since 1993 and for the past decade a fixture in the network of well-endowed foundations, policy institutes, and publications that sustains this country's conservative intellectuals. He writes regular newspaper columns for the *Austin American-Statesman* and edits a weekly magazine, *World*, that claims 103,000 subscribers and offers "practical commentary on current events and issues from a perspective committed to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God."

Olasky's prominence among American conservatives rests on a series of books he has written over the past ten years. Most notable among these was *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, published in 1992. In this volume, Olasky celebrated what he termed the "Early American Model of Compassion" of strictly voluntary, private, local, moralizing, "faith-based" charity. Chief among its virtues was a sharp distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor and a coupling of the receiving of charity with shame and an obligation to repair whatever failings might have led to poverty and degradation. Olasky favorably contrasted this model of compassionate social policy with the 20th-century American welfare state, in which secular state bureaucrats replaced faithful local neighbors as the agents of compassion and proceeded to screw things up. Put in place by reform elites (of both parties) over the course of the century, the American welfare state took its most disastrous turn in the 1960s when the War on Poverty took shape as a "war on shame" in which reformers taught the poor to regard public assistance as an entitlement rather than a confession of moral failure and a down payment on reformation. "Suddenly," he wrote, "it became better to accept welfare than to take in laundry." There followed a collapse of responsibility in the precincts of the poor and an explosion there of illegitimacy, drug abuse, crime and the other pathologies of a now hopeless "underclass."

The lesson of this history was clear. In the interests of true compassion, the modern American welfare state must be dismantled and replaced with something akin to its early American predecessor which had “waged a war on poverty much more successful than our own.” Olasky proposed to “put welfare entirely in the hands of church and community-based organizations.”

Few historians took note of *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, and those who did attacked it for a romanticization of early American social welfare practices and a less than evenhanded account of the contemporary welfare state. It might be fairly said that Olasky’s history, here as elsewhere, has been less wrong than extraordinarily tendentious. As fellow conservative David Brooks said in a review of a more recent Olasky book, *The American Leadership Tradition* (1999), “Olasky’s historical judgments are so crude and pinched that one suspects his main effect will be to buttress the stereotypes of those who are prejudiced against religious conservatives.”

Brooks may be correct, but among those inclined to the opposing stereotypes and prejudices, Olasky’s tendentiousness has served him well. His books have come bearing forewords by the likes of Newt Gingrich and Charles Murray (of *Bell Curve* infamy), and Gingrich made *The Tragedy of American Compassion* required reading for the Republican revolutionaries who swept to power in Congress in 1994. “Our models are Alexis de Tocqueville and Marvin Olasky,” Gingrich declared. “We are going to redefine compassion and take it back.” Supported by the Heritage Foundation and other conservative institutions, Olasky has won for himself an attentive and enthusiastic audience on the right. Not least among this crowd is George W. Bush. Olasky was introduced to Dubya by Karl Rove, his chief adviser, and although Bush admits to having read little of Olasky’s work, the two have consulted and prayed together since Bush’s first term as governor of Texas. Olasky currently chairs Bush’s campaign subcommittee on religion.

I suspect that Olasky’s own journey to compassionate conservatism has lent added moral authority in these quarters to his arguments. Born in 1950 into a Jewish family in the suburbs of Boston, he abandoned Judaism at a young age. After college at Yale in the late ’60s, where he was something of an activist, he took the improbable step of joining the Communist Party in 1972, one of the few Americans to succumb to the blandishments of Leonid Brezhnev. But his romance with American communism proved short-lived. Plagued by doubts about doubts about God in the fall of 1973 while a graduate student at the University of Michigan, he abandoned

the party and drifted toward evangelical Christianity. Replacing Marx with Calvin, Olasky eventually joined the orthodox Presbyterian Church of America, and in 1994 he helped found the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Austin, where he now serves as an elder. His wife, Susan, has said that Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* was an important book for Olasky, and he has traced the same path to Christ from the secular "God that failed" that Chambers, long a hero to the American right, pioneered.

Olasky has also acted on his convictions, which gives him a leg up on many other compassionate conservatives and moral reformers. Unlike Gingrich and other conservatives whose hypocrisy has damaged their cause, Olasky has exemplified his principles, not simply by walking some of the meanest streets in America to see for himself what is happening there but also by launching local initiatives of his own, including a program for ex-convicts and a crisis pregnancy center, and by adopting a black child. Moreover, he has attacked the neosocial Darwinists among conservatives, who would dismantle the welfare state and leave the poor to their own devices. Welfare reform that does not replace the state with vigorous nonstatist alternatives, he has said, is akin to finding a man on the sidewalk with a knife in his back, removing the knife, and leaving him to bleed to death. One imagines that many of the well-dressed enemies of the welfare state in Olasky's audiences are squirming as he asks them if they have themselves of late undertaken any face-to-face rescue missions to the poor. Even Bush's most entertaining critic, Molly Ivins, admits that Olasky is "a nice man," though he "comes across as a dipshit guru."

Olasky's latest book, *Compassionate Conservatism*, is heralded by his publisher as "a blueprint of [George W.] Bush's philosophy of governance." And, indeed, it is less a book than an advertisement for Bush's presidential campaign, published to coincide with his anointing as the Republican nominee in Philadelphia this summer. It features a foreword by Bush, and Bush's important July 1999 speech sketching his own vision of compassionate conservatism is appended to the volume. Olasky heaps praise on Bush on repeated occasions, and attacks Al Gore several times. The star politician in the book is the former Republican mayor of Indianapolis, Steven Goldsmith, currently Bush's chief domestic-policy adviser, whose Front Porch Alliance Olasky salutes as a model for government cooperation with faith-based charities.

Much of *Compassionate Conservatism* is taken up by an account of local social service initiatives—most of them combining social welfare and evangelical

Christianity—in Texas, the Midwest and the East that Olasky and his 14-year-old son, Daniel, visited in the summer of 1999. These anecdotal accounts prove little, but many are arresting. Quite obviously, there are some extraordinarily dedicated, selfless, compassionate people at work in our cities struggling to “suffer with” (Olasky’s oft-repeated definition of compassion) their neighbors and better their lives. Many of Olasky’s informants are African American (including one advocate of “womanist, Afro-centric, liberation theology” who teaches the disconcerted Olaskys a lesson in “the pluralism inherent in compassionate conservatism”), and most believe that Christian conversion is central to their mission. To his credit, Olasky describes one successful, secular Houston charter school for poor Hispanic and African-American students, but he and Daniel agree that without religion this school is missing something, for all its apparent achievements. True compassion, Olasky argues, must fill the “hole in the soul” of the poor, and only charity that is “faith-based” in every respect can, he implies, do so.

On at least two counts, *Compassionate Conservatism* strikes me as an important campaign document. First, Olasky has moderated his profound distaste for the state, toning down his earlier calls to take welfare provision away from governments altogether and place it entirely in the hands of private organizations. For Bush this would be an untenable position, and he himself has declared that “government will not be replaced by charities, but it can welcome them as partners.” Olasky has, grudgingly, adopted this position himself, and one suspects not solely for strategic reasons. Many of the charitable organizations he visited are desperately strapped for resources, and he would like to see them get their hands on some government money if they can do so without sacrificing their principles. He is confident that Republicans could fund but not unduly constrain faith-based organizations, and he supports Bush’s proposal for “charitable choice” tax credits that would allow taxpayers to designate a portion of their state tax bills to a poverty-fighting group of their choice.

In this respect, Bush and Olasky are pointing not to a return to wholly nonstatist charity but to a more “subsidiarist” welfare state in which the state substantially funds and monitors social policy but contracts out its implementation to the institutions of civil society. There is nothing particularly conservative about this vision, and one can find liberal Democrats (Bill Bradley) and even radical democrats (Benjamin Barber) who share it. Moreover, it can be costly, as those states that are trying to do more for the poor than force them off the welfare rolls are discovering.

But if Bush and Olasky's modest embrace of subsidiarity—a notion identified closely with Catholic social thought—has enhanced their compassionate conservatism's centrist credentials, they are also eager, in the second place, to distinguish their subsidiarity from that of New Democrats such as Gore, who have also expressed a willingness to subsidize faith-based welfare organizations. Here Olasky argues for a clear difference between the two candidates. Gore would not provide government funding to religious organizations that proselytize, while Bush would provide funds to such organizations, though not for purposes of proselytizing. Gore's view necessarily discriminates against the evangelical activists whose program includes urging their clients to "make Jesus the center of life," while Bush would allow such ministrations as long as they were not conducted on the government nickel.

But since the evangelical organizations Olasky most admires have inextricably woven proselytizing into their provision of social welfare, Bush's distinction would seem an invitation to creative accounting and subterfuge, which Olasky as much as admits. He himself is more overtly impatient with the constraints imposed by worries about abridgments of the separation of church and state than candidate Bush can perhaps allow himself to be. Like many conservatives (and others as well), Olasky believes the First Amendment was designed not to create a wall of separation between church and state, but to prevent the establishment of a single faith. The public square, on this view, should not be free from religion but free for the participation of all religions. As long as the poor are given a choice between a plurality of faith-based services—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim—as well as a secular alternative, he and Bush sees no good reason why the government should not support those who would have the poor turn to Christ. This is not a bad argument in theory, but one might rightly worry about the capacity of the state to maintain an evenhanded pluralism, particularly in the hands of executive officers such as Bush, who recently designated June 10 as Jesus Day in Texas.

One may hope that Bush and Gore will engage these issues head on as the campaign progresses. It is probably too much to hope further that their debates over social policy will venture beyond competing claims to compassion. But it is worth noting that Olasky, like most conservatives these days, believes that the poor "are not suffering from thirst, hunger, or nakedness, except by choice, or insanity, or parental abuse." Such people there no doubt are, all too many. And they are due our compassion, however we may decide to convey it. Yet many more are the "working poor," whose poverty can be largely attributed to the inequities of industrial

capitalism and who elude compassionate conservatism, which might be said to be a program for transforming the “underclass” into the working poor.

The claim that the working poor have upon the rest of us is a claim less to compassion than to distributive justice. This is a claim to which Bush, Olasky and compassionate conservatives generally are deaf. “As a financial entity,” Ivins has said, “the state of Texas is a system of income redistribution that takes from the poor and gives to the rich,” and under Governor Bush this system has prospered. In February 1999, Bush submitted an emergency measure to the Texas legislature that provided \$86 million in tax breaks to major oil companies, while neglecting to do the same in order to expedite health-care coverage for 500,000 children of the state’s working poor. Therein lies a conservatism that compassion cannot temper.