



**Current
Issue**

Compassionate Conservatism: The Rhetorical Reconstruction of Conservative Rhetoric

Archives

Jim A. Kuypers, Megan Hitchner, James Irwin, and
Alexander Wilson [\[1\]](#)

**Editorial
Info**

Printer-friendly [PDF version](#)

Dr. Jim A. Kuypers
Director of Speech
Dartmouth College
6046 Bartlett Hall
Hanover, NH 03755
(603) 646-2065
jim.kuypers@dartmouth.edu

Search

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to investigate the fundamental structure of the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism. We approached this subject in four specific ways: (1) an exposition of the rhetorical constraints informing compassionate conservatism; (2) an investigation into ten rhetorical themes found throughout a variety of high profile speeches from those embracing compassionate conservatism; (3) a comparison of the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism to the principles of traditional conservatism; and (4) a conjecture about the future impact of compassionate conservatism upon the political landscape. We found that the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism draws heavily upon traditional conservative principles; however, it also advances a new rhetorical style which alters those traditional principles for consumption by contemporary American audiences.

Interact

[copyright](#) 2003, ACJ

America's movement into the twenty-first century has been electrifying. Our nation is dealing with new issues and problems that call forth remarkable words. The political oratory of today has created a new department of Homeland Security, could mend our fragile economy, and has guided us through a recent war. After

September 11, 2001, American citizens needed words that were both firm and caring, that stood resolute in the conviction of their orator, while remembering those who were bereaved with tremendous loss. Judging by his surge in popularity, President Bush's words resonated in the souls of our nation's citizens. His language showed him grieving both those lost and those suffering, yet never sacrificing his fundamental belief in justice. His speech tapped into a common rhetorical theme used throughout his candidacy and early presidency: compassionate conservatism.

The success of compassionate conservatism as a rhetorical construction has been shaped by the exigency of the recent American circumstance; President Bush's public approval, conversely, has risen largely because of his mastery of the principles of this fascinating rhetorical strategy. To the passing observer, President Bush rose effortlessly to the sobriety and horror of 9-11, while further study demonstrates that the constraints that governed his carefully chosen words were in place well before 9-11. It would seem, therefore, that there is great value in the study of the evolution of compassionate conservative rhetoric.

Although many of the principles embedded within the notion of compassionate conservatism have existed since before Edmund Burke penned [Reflection on the Revolution](#) in France, the term and its present day connotations did not enter common usage until George W. Bush won reelection as Texas governor in 1998. The idea of compassionate conservatism became the centerpiece of Bush's 2000 presidential campaign; its success as a rhetorical construction comes in part from its ability to provide a way to moderate between the Congressional Republican conservatives and the liberal Clintonian "politics of meaning." David Frum wrote that the "phrase itself is wonderful. [It has broad appeal because] 'it combines the left's favorite adjective with the right's favorite noun' creating an almost irresistible popular appeal." ² Its unique popular appeal, combined with its emergence in a rather unique historical moment, allowed the notion of compassionate conservatism to develop into a successful rejoinder to the Third Way politics of President Clinton. ³

Following President Clinton's 1992 presidential victory, the Republican party was hard pressed to develop a collective rhetorical narrative that would bridge the gap between traditional conservatives and the socially-liberal swing voters. Following Republican defeats of 1996 and 1998 that highlighted the inability of the party to connect with voters, the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism aimed to broaden popular support and bridge the party divisions that had prevented election success. It then evolved as a response to both the successes and shortcomings of Clinton's presidency and the deeply felt need for a contemporary conservative message in a post-Cold War and post-welfare reform political landscape. Compassionate conservative rhetoric succeeded because it married fundamental moral and religious

values with a moderate-sounding social and political agenda assembled upon the successes of the recent legislatures.

The successes and failures of the conservative legislature and the Clinton Presidency have framed the political exigencies that face contemporary conservative politicians. ⁴ The purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate the rhetorical construction of compassionate conservatism and how its successes have shaped the America of our day. We approach this subject in four specific ways: first, we examine the rhetorical situation encompassing compassionate conservatism; second, we investigate ten rhetorical themes found throughout major speeches of the compassionate conservative movement, with a particular focus on President Bush's oratory; third, we compare the ten rhetorical themes with the principles of traditional conservatism; and finally, we offer a conjecture about the future impact of compassionate conservatism on the political landscape of our nation.

The Rhetorical Construction of Compassionate Conservatism

Poor Media Image

In 1994 the Republican party became the majority party in Congress for the first time in forty years. Acting on the call for action announced with the [Contract with America](#), Republicans undertook the *traditionally* conservative and very ambitious agenda of reforming and downsizing the government. Proposals for cuts as dramatic as the elimination of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the elimination of entire Cabinet departments and Congressional Caucuses led to the media generated image of Republicans being heartless and cold administrators. *Time* magazine even caricatured Newt Gingrich as the "Gingrich Who Stole Christmas" on its 19 December 1994 cover, and framed its story in such a way that the Republican proposed spending limits were depicted as intentionally targeting the poor and not the government waste emphasized by the Republicans. Furthermore, the media in general ascribed the success of the Republicans in 1994 to the voting patterns of the now debunked concept of the "angry white male." Congressional Republicans consequently battled this successfully created, negative media image for most of the 1990s. ⁵

A Co-opted Political Agenda

The Clinton administration's ability to successfully take political credit for the reform ideas of Congressional Republicans proved to be a thorn in the side of the Republican party. After the 1994 Congressional elections, for example, President Clinton self-consciously defined his "[New Democrat](#)" pose as an adoption of conservative positions; for example, the co-opted issue of welfare reform was described as an attempt to reconcile the welfare state with market economics. The

practical example of this can be found during the 1996 presidential election when President Clinton finally signed a Republican initiated welfare reform bill that he had twice vetoed. The President's self-proclaimed centrist agenda implied that, for the rest of his presidency, the legislative agenda would be largely initiated by the Republicans in Congress. However, although President Clinton adopted much of the Republican agenda, he still managed to isolate them politically because he was able to successfully draw a sharp distinction between the media generated character and motivations of the Republicans and himself. He painted the Congressional Republicans as hard-hearted and obstructionist, while simultaneously developing a sympathetic sounding rhetoric referred to as the “[politics of meaning](#).” [6](#)

The Oprah-ization of America

President Clinton's famous statement, “I feel your pain” embodied his rhetorical legacy of caring, sympathy, feelings and emotions. [7](#) His political mastery rested upon being in touch with a public mood since referred to as the “Oprah-ization” of the American public. The success of this rhetoric based upon emotions and empathy devastated the Republicans who had been [characterized as cold and uncaring](#). President Clinton's mastery of this type of rhetoric provided a lesson to future conservative politicians that policy must be handled with a verbally demonstrated empathy for America’s citizens.

The State of Social Welfare

For several decades conservative commentators have voiced concerns that the modern Welfare State was not helping America's poor, rather it was actually tearing apart the social fabric of the country. This general criticism was two-pronged. First, since the introduction of the welfare programs of the 1960s, American society has experienced both moral and social decline. William J. Bennett and Jack F. Kemp’s organization [Empower America](#) made a report of the “[Leading Cultural Indicators](#),” which mimicked the Leading Economic Indicators. This report argued the moral decline of American society since the 1960s based on the increasingly negative measures of crime, poverty, illegitimacy, and SAT scores, among other social statistics. Second, the modern Welfare State promoted intermediary institutions as more capable providers of welfare. For example, [Marvin Olasky](#) published [The Tragedy of American Compassion](#), a book read by many Congressional Republicans. Olasky concluded that the civic institutions that existed prior to the implementation of government welfare programs, often “local, faith-based charitable agencies and churches,” were more successful than government programs in addressing the problems of poverty. [8](#) Olasky's argument proved influential; the support of intermediate organizations instead of the welfare state became a cornerstone of compassionate conservative rhetoric and the policy goals of George W. Bush.

A Vacuum in Moral Leadership

Despite exuding empathy, President Clinton was a failure as a moral leader for the United States. While earning consistently high approval rating for his job performance, Americans also consistently stated that they had little respect for his personal behavior. ⁹ This loss of faith reached its height during the impeachment trials. Nevertheless, Americans also consistently voiced concerns with the Republican handling of the impeachment, and soon cynicism became the prevailing attitude of numerous Americans. In his analysis of the Clinton legacy, Arlie Russell Hochschild wrote, “has [Clinton] actually reduced [young American’s] idealism? Surely part of the answer lies in Clinton’s personal moral lapse with Monica Lewinsky. But more important was his sin of omission--his failure to embrace a moral cause beyond popularity.” ¹⁰ Many Americans were disgusted by both President Clinton’s overriding political ambition and the response it elicited from his opponents. To successfully engage voters in future elections, politicians needed to restore faith in politics as a whole, which would necessitate far more than legislation alone.

Redefining Post-Cold War Conservatism

Compassionate Conservatism redefined the conservative agenda in a post-Cold War, post-welfare reform world. The Cold War was the major binding force for the conservative movement through 1991; it provided the rhetorical glue that allowed the binding together of traditionalists and libertarians. ¹¹ After the victory over the Soviet Union, the energies used to fight the politics of the Cold War were refocused on the welfare state. With the passage of welfare reform, conservatives won a policy victory but lost an issue on which to run given President Clinton's usurpation of the victory credit for the reform. This left many conservatives bitter and without consensus on a new agenda. As Ramesh Ponnuru opined, “if our victories are all victories that Clinton can applaud or at least accept, to say that we are winning is, in a way, to say that we are all Clintonites now.” ¹² Conservatives according to Ponnuru, were viewed as playing “Wile E. Coyote to the president’s Road Runner.” ¹³ Additionally, a booming economy prevented conservatives from focusing on economic issues, traditionally a successful conservative tactic. All of this culminated with a rather rude awakening for conservatives with the 1998 elections. Congressional Republicans nearly lost their majority and Speaker Gingrich felt obligated to resign his speakership. Nonetheless, on the same election night that conservatives suffered losses in Congress, Texas reelected Governor George W. Bush with an eye-popping 70% of the vote. This landslide victory indicated that Bush's message of compassionate conservatism was resonating with Texan voters. The compassionate conservative strategy was quickly adopted by Republicans nationwide in the years leading up to the 2000 election.

In addressing the weaknesses of the conservative image and re-articulating goals in

contemporary political rhetoric, compassionate conservatism defines a new and unique Post-Cold War and Post-Welfare Reform agenda for Republicans and conservatives. It remakes the popular image of conservatism by undermining the impression that conservatives have little concern for the poor, or are exclusively anti-government. The compassionate conservative's message effectively uses the language of feeling and emotion to reorient traditional conservatism.

Compassionate conservatives speak with empathy, using words such as “caring,” “civility,” “hope,” “ideals,” and, of course, “compassion.” Compassionate conservatism redefines the Welfare State in new terms as well; instead of railing against government, compassionate conservatives “promote active benevolence in all sectors of civil society and to institute results-driven competition within social-welfare bureaucracies, federal, state, and local.” [14](#)

The compassionate conservatives aspires to numerous practical goals: they espouse prudence by supporting channeling federal money toward the most effective programs; they espouse variety by supporting giving the public the ability to choose among several programs; they aim to restore faith in our national institutions; finally, they provide moral leadership. Throughout his campaigns and presidency, George W. Bush realized that “he must invoke a sense of national purpose loftier than material wealth.” [15](#) This realization, mixed with the practical goals listed above, allows the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism to simultaneously achieve three ends: one, articulate a new conservative agenda applicable to and popular in today’s world; two, demonstrate that conservatives do care about the poor and less fortunate; and three, help restore our faith in a civil society and moral leadership. The remainder of this paper will explore how compassionate conservatism attempts to meet its rhetorical goals. Specifically, we advance ten themes that underpin conservatives use of the rhetorical construct of compassionate conservatism. Next we speak to the effect this conservative rhetoric might have upon political rhetoric in America.

The Rhetorical Themes of Compassionate Conservatism

The purposes of compassionate conservatism--the creation of a new conservative agenda, the demonstration that conservatives do care about the less fortunate, the restoration of a virtuous society--are achieved via a shift in conservative political rhetoric and policy. This rhetorical shift is an especially rich source for the analysis of compassionate conservatism because it marks the purposeful as well as public advancement of a new political communication strategy. Moreover, the ideals of compassionate conservatism are better able to be determined since at this point of analysis the conservative vision remains untouched by the compromise inherent in actual policy-making.

It is our purpose in this paper to determine the themes inherent within compassionate conservatism. We believe these rhetorical themes are enacted within the speeches of compassionate conservatives, especially President George W. Bush. Specifically, we examine the major addresses of George W. Bush from July 1999 to February 2001. In addition we examine several other major conservative addresses during this period. The themes we have identified were not necessarily specifically stated, but rather were demonstrated by the manner in which conservative speakers articulated their new vision. ¹⁶ Moreover, through these rhetorical themes one can see the enactment of new principles that respond to the exigencies of the contemporary political landscape. The recurrent themes, outlined below, are an articulation of the values of compassionate conservatism and a reflection of the underlying traditional conservative principles upon which compassionate conservatism was founded.

When one examines the overall content of the speeches given by those using compassionate conservative rhetoric, one finds embedded throughout the discourse fragments of themes that act as grounding for new historical/political knowledge. These themes are not articulated fully in any single speech or new sound bite; rather, they act collectively to reflect the new dimension of conservative rhetoric. ¹⁷ In a sense, they set a tone for proper discourses, providing a template for other compassionate conservatives to use. The rhetoric of compassionate conservatives speak through ten themes: justice and fairness; entrepreneurship; universal opportunity; freedom of choice; responsibility; character; tolerance; faith; moral leadership; and American idealism. Following this analysis, we will show how these themes grow from and expand upon the more traditional conservative discourse.

Justice and Fairness

One theme underpins in some way much of the discourse on compassionate conservatism: fairness. This is separate from the idea of justice, which is a hallmark of conservative rhetoric in itself. Justice refers to balanced, considered, and unbiased standards and decisions before the law. Fairness, however, refers to those conditions of society that, while inside the bounds of legality, strain the social fabric by creating systems of benefits that are disproportionately distributed. “First, we must change an oppressive tax system that punishes workers on the lowest rung of the economic ladder. Picture a single mother with two children, working full-time . . . just as she moves up and starts making more money, the federal government takes away nearly half of every dollar she earns through overtime and pay raises. She is punished for working her hardest hours. This is unfair. It is unjust. And it must be ended.” ¹⁸

The idea of a "fair society" may seem to some an unusual conservative ideal. The

uses of terms such as "unequal" or "being left behind" seem to refer to inequality of condition, which--as previously mentioned--is not the traditional rhetorical turf of conservatives. President Bush once wrote, "I worry that we are being divided into two nations, separate and unequal: one nation with the tools and the confidence to seek the American dream; another nation that is being left behind." ¹⁹ However, from the full text of this quote one's attention is called to the fact that the references to equality speak to equality of "tools and confidence"--opportunity--rather than equality of wealth or condition. Compassionate conservatism, then, seeks to use the government to *guarantee* justice, but to *promote* fairness. Another example include Governor Bush's Acceptance Speech, "It is to put conservative values and conservative ideas into the thick of the fight for justice and opportunity. This is what I mean by compassionate conservatism. And on this ground we will govern our nation." ²⁰

Entrepreneurship

Perhaps few ideas are as wedded to conservative philosophy and rhetoric as entrepreneurship. Conservatives, longstanding champions of the free market, routinely emphasize the importance of entrepreneurship in the creation of a prosperous economy. The bedrock of this conviction is the belief that proprietary rights constitute the source from which all other rights spring; as Joseph J. Jacobs noted, property rights "are the very foundation of human rights. You simply can't have one without the other. The right to own property is the hallmark of the difference between slavery and freedom." ²¹

Such is the case, too, with compassionate conservatism since it draws upon the familiar conservative plea for low-taxes and little regulation. As President Bush stated: "The next century will be a time of incredible prosperity--if we can create an environment where entrepreneurs . . . can dream and flourish. A prosperity sustained by low taxes, unleashed by lighter regulation, energized by new technologies, expanded by free trade." ²² President Bush also spoke to this theme of entrepreneurship in a 1999 speech on his then proposed tax cut: "My [tax] plan will encourage entrepreneurship--the path to prosperity taken by so many minorities, women and young people. . . . One basic problem: many of these hard-working risk-takers find that government expects to be a partner in their success--sharing none of the risks, but nearly half the profits." ²³

While emphasizing the need for individual initiative by the "hard-working risk takers," compassionate conservatives moderate their position by expressing acceptance and understanding for the positive role that the government can play in generating economic prosperity. Thus, Bush shared: "I know the role of government is not to create wealth, but to create an environment where entrepreneurs and small businesses and producers are willing to risk and dream and

build.” ²⁴ The distinction being made here is subtle, yet vital. Far from decrying government as the perennial enemy of the economy, compassionate conservatism argues instead that the government is a partner in growth, and that it can provide the opportunities upon which enterprising individuals might seize to kindle economic growth.

Furthermore, the notion of entrepreneurship is expanded beyond the realm of the economy. For example, a major thematic shift in compassionate conservatism is the extrapolation of the idea of entrepreneurship into the social sphere; this "social entrepreneurship" is the conservative alternative to the Welfare State-- and it reflects a desire among compassionate conservatives to address the nature of a virtuous society through conservative means. Above all, social entrepreneurship applies the rhetoric of business efficiency to the public sector. In a press conference announcing his education proposal, President Bush stated that “we must focus the spending of federal tax dollars on things that work. Too often, we have spent without regard for results, without judging success or failure from year to year.” ²⁵ The notions of innovation, initiative, and competition associated with the concept of entrepreneurship is observable in President Bush's support of charter schools as well: "Charter schools encourage educational entrepreneurs to try innovative methods. They break up the monopoly of one-size-fits-all education. These diverse, creative schools are proof that parents from all walks of life are willing to challenge the status quo if it means a better education for their children." ²⁶ Compassionate conservatives argue that education is improved by risk-takers, by innovators, and other's with business acumen--in sum, by social entrepreneurship.

Universal Opportunity

Compassionate conservatism demonstrates a strong commitment to universal opportunity. Traditionally, conservatives have been defined by a commitment to equality of rights; as Russell Kirk indicated, “the only true forms of equality are equality at the Last Judgement and equality before a just court of law.” ²⁷ For traditional conservatives, concomitant with this commitment to the equality of rights is an aversion to government forced equality of circumstance or end results. In this respect, compassionate conservatism is no different. Much of the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism, however, has focused on expanding opportunities to groups that historically have not had equality of circumstance: minorities and the poor. For example, Governor Bush stated, “As president, I will be committed to the advancement of all Americans--including those who struggle.” ²⁸ Along these same lines at the 2000 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Bush stated: “ Our nation must make a new commitment to equality and upward mobility for all our citizens.” ²⁹

The ideal of universal opportunity manifests itself most clearly in conservative

discourse about education reform. President Bush has stated publicly numerous times that education is his most important priority, and his speeches are rich with reference to the subject. With this in mind, one can see how his speeches make a conscious link between the issue of education and the goal of equal opportunity: "The purpose of prosperity is to make sure that the American dream touches every willing heart. The purpose of prosperity is to leave no one out--to leave no one behind. This noble goal will remain a distant goal until our nation fulfills a solemn pledge: to educate every child." ³⁰ As this example demonstrates, President Bush begins with a sentence on universal opportunity to share in the blessings of prosperity, and follows it directly with one on the importance of education, thereby establishing a rhetorical link between the two.

As a concept, educational opportunity is articulated through the adoption of the rhetorical buzzwords of the Left. In *A Charge to Keep* Bush stated that "reform of our public schools must begin with the mindset that all children can learn. Some say it is discrimination to require anything less. I refuse to condemn children to the soft bigotry of low expectations." ³¹ The words "discrimination" and "bigotry" are conspicuous adaptations of the rhetoric often used to promote an equality circumstance; however, here they are applied to a conservative definition of equality of opportunity. It is implied that through providing a good education for all children there is a promise of opportunity in the future. The inclusive nature of this language of opportunity, "every child will be educated and no child will be left behind," ³² complements the feel-good nature of this speech and incorporates a sense of universality and fairness into the language.

Freedom of Choice

Conservatives have long held that flexibility is a crucial element of any free society. This is why conservatives oppose, as a general rule, enlarging the Federal bureaucracy; it impinges on the freedom that, in itself, conservatives view as a virtue (states rights, individual action, etc.). Such is the case, too, with compassionate conservatives. Compassionate conservatism emphasizes freedom of choice as emphatically as traditional conservatism. However, compassionate conservatism additionally emphasizes the good that accrues from a flexible approach to the uses of the Federal government. Freedom of choice, for both states and individuals, is not argued as an end in itself; rather, it is seen as the best means for achieving a virtuous society.

Rhetoric referring to the ideas of freedom, flexibility, and choice is prevalent in the arguments made for policy changes in a broad range of areas: education, welfare, taxes, for example. As an alternative to federal government programs, compassionate conservatives use the idea of freedom of choice to argue for deferring control to state and local governments as well as to support the use of

competition and private market provision of goods. As President Bush argued in terms of education reform, “we should pass authority and flexibility from the federal government to the states. . . . We must recognize the central role of competition in achieving better schools.” [33](#) He later stated in the speech inaugurating his education program that “if local schools do not have the freedom to change, they cannot be held accountable for failing to change.” [34](#) A rhetorical link is drawn between the policy of choice and the provision of quality and beneficial public services. In the simplest of terms, “One size does not fit all when it comes to educating our children, so local people should control local schools.” [35](#)

A similar point of view is extended with charitable giving. Here compassionate conservatism argues that flexibility promotes beneficial behavior. In this case the language speaks not just to what produces results, but also assigns a normative value to the process of choice--choice facilitates the selection of those programs that are doing the most good. As Olasky suggested, "Many conservatives argue for simply reducing taxes and allowing individuals to spend the money as they see fit. . . . [But] when people see the good that small, struggling faith-based organizations do, and how much more they could do with greater resources, they tend to answer the question ‘And why not do more?’ with an imperative: we must find a way to do more." [36](#) Thus, compassionate conservatives do not simply argue that flexible tax codes are right, as would any other conservative. They also argue that flexible tax codes are good, and that they divert funds to those elements of society--notably, not government organizations--that are perceived to be capable of creating more good than anyone else.

Finally, the theme of choice linked to freedom and variety can be seen most readily in President Bush’s [faith-based initiative](#). On this point, Olasky stated that the "compassionate conservative goal is to offer a choice of programs. Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, atheist. 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." [37](#) This faith-based initiative, compassionate conservatives argue, offers both flexibility and choice to the needy. The concept of choice in this area is linked to a notion of freedom and individual preference; it is made clear through the language that to compassionate conservatives choice means both the freedom to choose a program and the freedom to provide services in a wide variety of manners. Or as Governor Bush stated: “Government can and should make life better for every citizen. But it helps best when it gives people the tools and confidence to make their own decisions, to chart their own course. Government should expand opportunity, and trust people with responsibility.” [38](#)

Responsibility

As seen in the last quote, the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism draws on the traditional conservative emphasis upon personal responsibility. Used by conservative politicians and pundits for decades in their criticism of the results of the Great Society, personal responsibility has long been used as a stick with which to beat the dependency on government that conservatives believe the welfare state has created. Compassionate conservative rhetoric certainly continues this practice. President Bush, in his fullest description of his view of compassionate conservatism in *A Charge to Keep* writes that, "As government did more and more, individuals were required to do less and less," and that "People became less interested in pulling themselves up by their bootstraps and more interested in pulling down a monthly government check." ³⁹ This is a classic pro-responsibility, anti-welfare state argument. Compassionate conservatives, however, have expanded this strategy into a far fuller conception of how both government and American society should operate.

Working from the basis of the old approach, compassionate conservatives have developed a broader theme of the responsibility. This conception includes not only the idea of individuals for themselves and their own actions, but also of government to the people (in the form of strict accountability) and of people to each other (in the form of charity, volunteerism, and community service). This rhetorical theme runs throughout compassionate conservative discourse. The conceptual expansion from the purely negative thematic uses of personal responsibility by traditional conservatives to the constructive version espoused by compassionate conservatives is also clearly on display in *A Charge to Keep*: "I want to usher in the responsibility era, an era when every American knows with certainty that each of us is responsible for our actions, that each of us is responsible for our family and our community, that each of us is responsible for loving a neighbor as we would like to be loved ourselves." ⁴⁰

Individuals are responsible not only for themselves, but for each other. In this sense, compassionate conservatives tell Americans that government cannot solve your problems for you, but you are not alone with them either. Your neighbors, your community, are there to help you, just as you should be there to help them. This theme is prevalent well beyond the immediate Bush circle. In a speech to the National Rifle Association, J. C. Watts spoke in the same vein: "We have not . . . reached out to the many lonely and direction-less kids in our communities, or even to our own kids." ⁴¹ That kind of outreach, according to Watts and other compassionate conservatives, is the only way to solve the problems of our society.

This rhetoric focuses the role of government to support those taking responsibility for their communities. Government is meant to be a *resource* for social

improvement not its *director*; the solution of last resort, not the first. This basic understanding is clearly presented by Olasky when he wrote: "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 on. 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." [42](#) By linking personal, communal, and governmental responsibility, compassionate conservatism has forged a powerful and coherent rhetorical appeal. Unlike most previous efforts concerning the theme of responsibility by conservatives, it articulates a rhetorical structure that both incorporates social institutions and governance and offers a constructive and supportive vision for the role of both.

Character

The basic assumptions of compassionate conservatism's focus on responsibility also inform its focus on character as an essential component both of American society and of its leaders. A respect for values (held in common and individually) and the character of the members of our society, are essential to our success as a nation. As with the call for all Americans to take up responsibility, the theme of character is as much a plea to Americans to adopt these attributes as it is a prescription for governance: "it's our wealth of social capital--the values citizens possess and the linkages we make through churches, civic clubs, fraternal organizations, and other volunteer associations--that has made this country exceptional." [43](#)

The need for shared conservative values serves a crucial rallying cry of compassionate conservatism. Just as it calls out for people to dedicate themselves to charity and community service, it explicitly ties the success of these services to the character of the citizenry. At his inauguration, Bush said, "Our public interest depends on private character; on civic duty and family bonds and basic fairness; on uncounted, unhonored acts of decency which give direction to our freedom." [44](#) Mutual assistance within a community is not possible without individuals of high values.

Conservatives bemoan the lack of morally-upstanding citizens to justify the reform of the educational system just as much as they decry such lack as an explanation for social ills. To this point Ward Connerly, speaking in 1999 at Hillsdale College, said there has been "profound weakening of our national character. Yet we see no connection between this and the culture that has evolved from that erosion of national character." [45](#) As such, the instillation of moral values in our citizens is essential: "For our children to have character, they must be taught certain moral principles. And we are cheating them when we fail to teach those principles." [46](#) Or, as Bush stated, "Each citizen is responsible for loving the children he or she

brings into this world--to love them and teach them right from wrong. The character of our children is the destiny of our country." [47](#)

One particular aspect of character focused on by compassionate conservatives is that of civility. Through the notion of civility, compassionate conservatives extend a willingness to listen to those who hold views different from their own. Respect for others and for their views, especially when they disagree with one's own, is crucial to society as whole. Bush focused on this particular form of character at his inauguration: "America, at its best, matches a commitment to principle with a concern for civility. A civil society demands from each of us good will and respect, fair dealing and forgiveness. . . . We must live up to the calling we share. Civility is not a tactic or a sentiment. It is the determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos. And this commitment, if we keep it, is a way to shared accomplishment." [48](#) According to the compassionate conservative, only by valuing one another enough to listen to each other can we as a nation reach our full potential.

This expectation is held to be particularly important for leadership. As evinced by the heavy use of such rhetoric, compassionate conservatives consider the ability to respectfully disagree without personal animus a necessary component for the proper functioning of government and political success. President Bush focused on this aspect of compassionate conservatism in great detail throughout his presidential campaign, promising to change the tone in Washington. What he was offering, both to the federal government and the country was the return to the type of civility he spoke of during the National Day of Prayer Breakfast: "It teaches us not merely to tolerate one another, but to respect one another--to show a regard for different views and the courtesy to listen. This is essential to democracy . . . civility [means] that our public debate ought to be free from bitterness and anger, rancor and ill-will." [49](#)

Tolerance and Inclusion

Hand in hand with character and civility goes another rhetorical theme, that of tolerance and inclusiveness. Far more than traditional conservative rhetoric, compassionate conservatism stresses the need for bringing people together. A constant refrain of compassionate conservatives is the need to end friction between different groups of Americans, and to recognize the similarities that bind us, rather than the differences that set us apart. Representatives Jennifer Dunn and Steve Largent said in response to President Clinton's 1999 State of the Union Address:

in one of his last sermons in 1968, Dr. King warned that, while the world is a closer neighborhood, we are experiencing less brotherhood. That's just as true today. It is no longer the aggression

from without that is America's greatest threat, but alienation from within; alienation at every level--husband from wife, mother from father, parent from child, black from white, Republican from Democrat, liberal from conservative. [50](#)

Compassionate conservatives stress the idea that this problem of alienation is as important as other economic, social, or foreign policy, and that only by closing the nation's fault lines can it be addressed.

President Bush, in his 2000 speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, plainly articulated the necessity to close those fault lines: "We cannot afford to have an America segregated by class, by race or by aspiration. America must close the gap of hope between communities of prosperity and communities of poverty." [51](#) Instead of that segregation, compassionate conservatism offers for the nation a similar rhetoric to that offered by Bush for Washington: unification not division. It uses historical narratives to proclaim that the similarities of all Americans far outweigh their differences. As Bush wrote, "We are united by a common bond of history and citizenship. President Lincoln reminded us that America is not just a collection of states or individuals. We are a single, moral community, with obligations to one another. We are America." [52](#) Compassionate conservatism takes a traditional theme of national unity, broadens the responsibility of dealing with social divides to all Americans, and thus moves beyond addressing only those who are alienated. In this respect, the rhetorical effort is in itself a policy prescription, and attempts to provoke the very healing that it asserts is needed.

In his *New Prosperity Initiative*, Bush hammered this theme home:

In our society, it is easy to be secluded in success, in gated communities and separate schools. Yet our growing nation must not be allowed to grow apart. Since Lincoln, our national task has been to build a single nation – to cross boundaries of class and race and region. We have accepted a moral obligation to bring every American into the mainstream of opportunity. Because no one is a stranger. Because everyone is a neighbor and a citizen and a child of God. I am reminded of Teddy Roosevelt's words: 'For well or for woe we are knit together, and we shall go up or down together; and I believe that we shall go up and not down, that we shall go forward instead of halting and falling back, because I have an abiding faith in the generosity, the courage, the resolution and the common sense of all my countrymen.' It will be said of our times that we were prosperous. But let it also be said of us that we used our wealth wisely. We

invested our prosperity with purpose. We opened the gates of opportunity. And all were welcomed into the full promise of American life. [53](#)

Faith

As with traditional conservatism, the influence of religious faith regularly colors the general discourse of those using compassionate conservative rhetoric, and also emerges as a coherent theme in the arguments they present. In this respect compassionate conservatives reflect, yet remodel, the effects of the 1980s and 1990s cultural conservative movement; they reemphasize religion as a unique and important force for good within America. In President Bush's words, "Government can spend money, but it cannot put hope in our hearts or a sense of purpose in our lives. This is done by churches and synagogues and mosques and charities that warm the cold of life." [54](#) Faith provides benefits to individuals and society as a whole that government is not capable of duplicating. Speaking to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons, Bush said: "Government can spend money, but it cannot put hope in someone's heart or a sense of purpose in their lives. This is done by caring communities--by churches, synagogues, mosques and charities that serve their neighbors because they love their God. Every day they prove that our worst problems are not hopeless or endless. Every day they perform miracles of renewal." [55](#)

The compassionate conservative articulates that faith is an integral component of the solution to social and even economic ills. Olasky, in his history of compassionate conservatism, asserted that, "The group found that poverty around the world is a spiritual as well as a material problem: most poor people don't have the faith that they and their situations can change." [56](#) Although compassionate conservatism does not evangelize for any particular religion, it does promote religious faith in general, or at least believes it must be welcome in all facets of our society, especially in the public sphere. For compassionate conservatives, faith can be the engine of progress and justice. Bush made this rhetorical link clearly when he said, "There's a good reason why many in our nation embrace the faith tradition. Throughout our history people of faith have often been our nation's voice of conscience." [57](#)

Compassionate conservatives also link faith to their themes of responsibility and charity, holding it to be highly complimentary to the success of those aims. This theme was well illustrated when Bush stated: "Faith remains important to the compassion of our nation. Millions of Americans serve their neighbor because they love God. Their lives are characterized by kindness and patience and, service to others." [58](#) Faith provides the most common inspiration for socially responsible behavior: "Men and women can be compassionate without faith, but faith often

inspires compassion. Human beings can love without faith, but faith is a great teacher of love." ⁵⁹ For compassionate conservatives, failure to support religious belief while promoting responsibility and community service is self-defeating, and they openly assert the benefits of religion for society. ⁶⁰ The two are too interanimated to be ignored. Compassionate conservatives, therefore, frequently speak of the two together when addressing audiences open, and even some not so open, to a faith-based message.

Moral Leadership

Faith also informs another theme of compassionate conservative rhetoric, that of moral leadership. It is in the use of this theme that compassionate conservatives are fundamentally one with traditional conservatives. President Bush's statement at the 2000 Republican National Convention exemplified this link: "To lead this nation to a responsibility era, a president himself must be responsible. And so, when I put my hand on the Bible, I will swear to not only uphold the laws of our land, I will swear to uphold the honor and dignity of the office to which I have been elected, so help me God." ⁶¹ The point emphasized is clear, not only in its thinly veiled references to President Clinton's indiscretions, but in the standard set for future leadership. These standards dictate that a leader should not only promote the moral values of the nation but also exemplify them. Compassionate conservatives see this as an essential characteristic of effective leadership. John Ashcroft, encouraging Americans to reflect on these facts before voting in the 2000 elections, stated that, "Americans have an opportunity again to express themselves in elections to say that they want individuals who can not only govern, but individuals who have the moral integrity, the commitment and dedication to lead." ⁶² Bush spoke forcefully to this point when he stated: "a leader upholds the dignity and honor of his office. In my administration, we will ask not only what is legal, but also what is right--not just what the lawyers allow, but what the public deserves." ⁶³ To compassionate conservatives, moral integrity and fine leadership cannot be divorced from one another.

Compassionate conservatives break with the traditionalists in their expanded definition of moral leadership. While traditional conservatives have tended to confine this notion to adherence to basic Judeo-Christian ethical standards, compassionate conservatives explicitly define a broader set of characteristics. A comparison of Bush's words on the subject in his "Nomination Speech" and his "Inauguraal Address" make this clear. Whereas in the former he confined himself to the traditional "honor and integrity" model, at his inauguration he expanded upon it: "I will live and lead by these principles: to advance my convictions with civility; to pursue the public interest with courage; to speak for greater justice and compassion; to call for responsibility, and try to live it as well. In all these ways, I will bring the values of our history to the care of our times." ⁶⁴

In this definition, civility and compassion, a set of values often absent from the traditional conservative mantra of moral leadership, are brought to the fore. Much as compassionate conservatism as a whole has expanded on key conservative themes, its approach to moral leadership in particular is broader than that of the rhetoric of the past. While this places a greater personal burden on all our leaders, compassionate conservatives believe that by espousing this model of leadership they will be better able to gain the American people's faith in government.

American Idealism

To a greater extent than liberal politicians and commentators, conservatives have appealed to patriotic themes and emotions in much of their rhetoric, with the idea of American exceptionalism running throughout conservative rhetoric. Perhaps the best known exponent of America's uniqueness is Ronald Reagan. From his reference to John Winthrop's "shining city on a hill," to his speech honoring the fortieth anniversary of the D-Day invasion, Reagan's speeches are filled with references to America's greatness. Similarly, these patriotic and optimistic views of American society are deeply embedded in the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism; it pays tribute to the uniqueness of America and the American people, and to our role as a model for the rest of the world:

Our world, shaped by American courage, power and wisdom, now echoes with American ideals. We won a victory, not just for a nation, but for a vision. A vision of freedom and individual dignity – defended by democracy, nurtured by free markets, spread by information technology, carried to the world by free trade. The advance of freedom – from Asia to Latin America to East and Central Europe--is creating the conditions for peace. [65](#)

The rhetoric of compassionate conservatism invokes these uniquely American qualities as the bedrock on which policy initiatives are founded.

The traditional and unique characteristics of American society--traditions such as a system of laws and ethics firmly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, volunteerism, and capitalism--are frequently touched upon themes. President Bush rallied support for community initiatives in his Inaugural Address by proclaiming that "Americans are generous and strong and decent, not because we believe in ourselves, but we hold beliefs beyond ourselves." [66](#) In his speech at the 2000 Republican National Convention, Colin Powell looked to "good old American innovation, good old American competition to help give our children the best education possible." [67](#) John Ashcroft quoted Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote, "The Americans' regard for themselves, constantly prompts them to assist one another and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property

to the welfare of [others].” ⁶⁸ Compassionate conservatism aims to tap into the historical precedent of competition and charity to support the community initiatives it proposes.

Idealized perhaps more strongly than many other American ideals is the “American Dream.” The belief in the ascendant American Dream echoes throughout compassionate conservative rhetoric, and one will frequently hear statements similar to that of Condoleezza Rice: “In America, with education and hard work, it really does not matter where you came from--it matters where you are going.” ⁶⁹ Or as John Ashcroft put it, “We have ascending opportunity, each generation having things better and a greater and broader potential. . . . [America is] defined conceptually by the idea that the best is yet to come” rather being defined purely geographically or demographically. ⁷⁰ Compassionate conservatives use the rhetoric of American exceptionalism to justify placing community responsibility on a local level because American citizens individually possess these qualities of potential and ability. This rhetoric marginalizes as anti-American those who support government intervention--individuals who fail to believe in the unique abilities and qualities of the American citizen and the promise of the American Dream.

Given that the idea of compassionate conservatism emerged during the prosperous 1990s, it is not surprising that much of the rhetoric is focused on moving beyond wealth and material accomplishments toward a “renewal” of community and morality. In his “Duty of Hope” speech--which was written with the advisement of Marvin Olasky and Mayor of Indianapolis Steve Goldsmith--President Bush acknowledged that “we are wealthy nation,” but also urged that “we must also be rich in ideals--rich in justice and compassion and family love and moral courage.” ⁷¹ Much of the idealistic language in these speeches deals with children. Bush repeatedly says that the duty of every American citizen is to show that the American Dream is open to all children, no matter what their background. Colin Powell claims that children “are America’s promise” but it is the burden of the adults to “give them what they need to be successful in life.” ⁷² This is accomplished through teaching children that “everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born.” ⁷³

Compassionate conservatives have redefined the ideal American from that of a “rugged individualist” of accomplishment and wealth towards a person concerned for generosity and community. In his “Duty of Hope” speech, Bush directly places this idea in context:

Yet this is not who we are as Americans. We have always found our better selves in sympathy and generosity--both in our lives and in our laws. Americans will never write the epitaph of idealism. It emerges

from our nature as a people, with a vision of the common good beyond profit and loss. Our national character shines in our compassion. We are a nation of rugged individuals. But we are also the country of the second chance--tied together by bonds of friendship and community and solidarity.

Through this passage, Bush shapes a new, compassionate image of conservatives. He challenges Americans to question, "what good is our society if our only desire is to be left alone?" Instead, the individual should be the driving force behind the renewal of American society. As Steve Largent said, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Condoleezza Rice takes American idealism to a global level because the "unique American experience provides a shining beacon to peoples who still suffer in places where ethnic difference is a license to kill." Colin Powell echoes this feeling by saying that "the world is watching to see if all this power and wealth is just for the well-to-do, the comfortable, the privileged, or are we a nation that can make our dream real for all Americans so that all share in what we have been given by a generous God?" In such a manner, compassionate conservatives enact traditional patriotism when they elevate American ideals to be a model and world standard.

Compassionate Conservatism: A Continuation of and Departure from Traditional Conservatism

Compassionate conservative rhetoric enacts the above rhetorical themes through the continued application of traditional conservative principles, mild adoption of new themes, and the advancement of radical stylistic changes in their rhetorical strategies. The above analysis sheds light on the intricacies of these ten themes as developed throughout the body of speeches by compassionate conservatives. The nuances that differentiate this rhetoric from traditional conservative rhetoric are in a process of rhetorical flux. This simply means that compassionate conservative rhetoric has yet to find its way with the American people; its ultimate form, ultimate acceptance or rejection, has yet to be determined. At this point in time, however, a broad overview of the collective similarities and differences between compassionate conservative themes and traditional conservatism principles is one way in which to define and understand the new rhetoric unique to compassionate conservatism.

To fully understand compassionate conservatism one must first understand the political context that preceded it. This context needs to be understood not only through the constraints it addresses, but also through the understanding of contemporary political exigencies. One can assume that the rhetoric of traditional conservatism failed to address current political constraints and exigencies adequately. Otherwise, compassionate conservatism would not have arisen. A

comparison between traditional conservatism and compassionate conservatism, then, is vital.

Compassionate conservatism is both a rhetorical shift and a policy shift. The rhetorical shift is clear; in his speeches, President Bush adopts some of the rhetoric of the Left. When he speaks of “leaving no child behind,” or of enlisting “armies of compassion,” he is using rhetoric that has not traditionally been associated with conservative rhetoric. The rhetorical tone of compassionate conservatism is, essentially, the rhetoric of a kinder, gentler conservatism. Most striking, however, is the degree to which compassionate conservatism embodies the very ideals of traditional conservatism. Compassionate conservatism is emphatically not a moderate conservatism. Rather, it is a shift in rhetoric and policy emphasis necessitated by the exigencies of political circumstance. In terms of principles, compassionate conservatism is quintessential conservatism. What truly sets it apart from more traditional conservative rhetoric is that it is also a pro-active actualization of conservative principles in American political history.

The themes of compassionate conservatism, as outlined above, are in some respects modernized versions of the traditionally accepted principles of conservatism. Prominent conservative writer [Russell Kirk](#) has outlined ten conservative principles which are excellent articulations of the values held within traditional conservatism; moreover, these principles seem to inform fully the themes of compassionate conservatism to such an extent that few would argue that they have been abandoned by compassionate conservatism. Kirk’s ten principles are found in his book, *The Politics of Prudence*. Briefly, they are as follows:

1. Enduring Moral Order. There are essentially two norms of order: that of the soul and that of the commonwealth. According to Kirk, human nature is constant and moral truths are permanent.
2. Adherence to Custom, Convention, and Continuity. Custom is that which allows citizens to live together amicably. Convention allows us to avoid disputes about our different responsibilities. Continuity is the manner in which different generations are linked together. These practices are the result of centuries of trial and error, and should not be lightly thrown away in the name of progress.
3. Prescription. We are where we are today because we were able to stand upon the foundations established long ago by others; that is, on practices and ideas accepted through immemorial usage. Today we are unlikely to advance any “brave, new discoveries.”
4. Prudence. Simply put, prudence dictates that public policy should be determined not by short term results, but rather by potential long-term consequences.
5. Variety. Different orders and classes of citizenry are necessary for a healthy civilization. If one attempts to level society or artificially redistribute resources to achieve an idealistic sense of equality, only social stagnation will result. As Kirk

stated, “The only true form of equality are equality at the Last Judgment and equality before a just court of law.”

6. Imperfectability. Humans are imperfect by their very nature as humans. We are restless, and because of this any attempt at imposition of a utopia by a government would result in rebellion. “All that we can expect is a tolerably ordered, just, and free society, in which some evils, maladjustments, and suffering will continue to exist.”

7. Freedom and Property are Closely Linked. Once private property is separated from private ownership the Government will become master of all. Private property leads to a stable and productive nation. The more widespread the greater the positive results.

8. Voluntary Community. Collectivism is abhorred by conservatives. Community decisions ought to be made by those most affected: local community members operating within a free environment. The greater the number of decisions made by a centralized government, the less control individual citizens will have over their own lives.

9. Prudent Restraints on Power and Human Passions. Conservatives believe human nature contains the seeds for both good and evil, thus conservatives do not trust the goodwill of those in power. As Kirk stated, “Constitutional restrictions, political checks and balances, adequate enforcement of the laws, the old intricate web of restraints upon will and appetite—these the conservative approves as instruments of freedom and order.”

10. Permanence and Change Must be Reconciled in a Vigorous Society. Society is in a constant state of change, and conservatives are not opposed to improvements in society. However, conservatives do not trust in a general notion of Progress. On this point Kirk stated: the “intelligent conservative endeavors to reconcile the claims of Permanence and the claims of Progression.”

By simply touching upon these principles one can see the underlying similarity with the themes articulated within compassionate conservative rhetoric. For example, Kirk’s principle of voluntary community, which states that “in a genuine community, the decisions most directly affecting the lives of citizens are made locally and voluntarily,” is an underlying assumption for the compassionate conservative themes of faith and freedom of choice. Others are easily found and need not be stated here. Kirk, however, is not the only conservative writer that has identified these traditional conservative principles. What Robert Nisbet terms the “dogmatics of conservatism” also suggests compassionate conservatism’s continuity with more traditional conservative rhetoric. For instance, Nisbet’s themes of religion and morality find clear parallels in the themes of compassionate conservatism, most notably the themes of faith, character, and moral leadership. Viewed in the light of traditional conservatism as outlined by writers such as Kirk and Nisbet, one can surely conclude that compassionate conservatism abandons few of its conservative foundations.

If the themes of compassionate conservatism resonate so well with the generally accepted principles of traditional conservatism, what is it that distinguishes between the two? As previously noted, the visible changes have been shifts in policy and style, not ideational shifts. But the net effect is indicative of a strategic shift in the future of conservative politics: conservative politics no longer defines itself by what it opposes; rather, identification comes now from that which it embraces.

Conservatism ascendant, then, necessitates a change in outlook. In light of the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism, conservatives can no longer imagine themselves to be the defenders of those Permanent Things that are under attack, be it from totalitarianism or liberalism. To maintain viability, conservatives must now pursue an aggressive, pro-active program. This is the charge of compassionate conservatism; it is conservatism on the offensive.

The ultimate aim of compassionate conservatism is the reconciliation of the free society with the virtuous society. During the [Cold War](#) the main threats faced by conservatism's idea of liberty came in the form of totalitarianism and liberalism. In both the late Cold War and post-Cold War world, however, conservatives believed that threat was increasingly being directed not at liberty, but at virtue. The rise of a grass roots religious right in the late 1970s and the 1980s reflects this belief, as surely as the advent of compassionate conservatism does so today. To this end, the compassionate conservative program can be seen as a new conservative response to the continuation of the Great Society. Compassionate conservatives argue that with freedom safeguarded, the health of our nation's soul must be ensured. However, in creating a virtuous society, those very liberties we fought so hard to preserve must not be destroyed.

The traditional conservative principles that underlie the new rhetoric of compassionate conservatism emphasizes the distinction between conservative *thought* and conservative *speech*. This is to say that the intellectual writings of conservatives have been enacted now in such a manner that the new sensitivities of the American public are taken into account. The character of compassionate conservative thought may well be traditional, but the nuances of its thematic rhetoric are tailored to cater to a public sensitivity to the tone and content of political address.

The care and attention given to shaping the dominant rhetoric of each political party is evidence of the sensitivity of the public to political rhetoric. In recent years, the public has witnessed the narrowing of the spectrum of politically viable rhetoric. Both political parties have consciously moved towards a more *moderate-sounding* rhetoric in pursuit of broad electoral appeal. Consequently, although the moderation of conservative rhetoric was not necessarily intended to affect conservative thought, compassionate conservatism has shaped the political landscape from which it

emerged.

The Effect of Compassionate Conservative Rhetoric on Current and Future Political Rhetoric

The political circumstances that shaped the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism have been fundamentally altered by its success. The themes upon which it rests have been adopted both by conservatives in general and the Republican Party in particular as key rhetorical touchstones, driving out more traditional expressions of the conservative philosophy. This became clear as early as the fall of 1999. In an October interview in that year, then-Texas Governor Bush criticized the direction of the party leadership of the time, claiming that “too often my party has focused on the national economy to the exclusion of all else . . . there are human problems that persist in the shadow of affluence. . . . [T]oo often, my party has confused the need for limited government with a disdain for government itself.” A Gallup poll conducted on the subject of this criticism among registered Republicans showed that 55% believed Bush should control the Party, compared to 35% for the more traditional Republican leadership.

In responding to these assertions by Bush, then House Majority Leader Dick Armey, a paragon of traditional conservatism, acknowledged the need for a new rhetorical approach: “We have made it easy for others to characterize us as being conservative because we don’t care, rather than be willing to step out and share that we are conservative because we do care.” The need to move beyond the standard rhetoric of traditional conservatism has driven the party to adopt the themes of compassionate conservatism. As David Corn proclaimed: “Every conservative is now a compassionate conservative.”

The supremacy of compassionate conservatism as the rhetorical strategy of the Right has been cemented by the significant extent to which that message has resonated with the American electorate. The nature of Bush’s victory in the 2000 presidential election reflects the effectiveness of compassionate conservative rhetoric in addressing the concerns of voters over the perceived mean-spiritedness of conservatism. Polling done on the two major presidential candidates indicates that voters viewed Bush as being equal with Al Gore in his concern for the disadvantaged in American society (long an electoral problem for Republican candidates), while maintaining traditional conservative advantages in character and moral leadership. Gallup polls from before the election show Bush with a 46% to 39% advantage on the question of who “is someone you would be proud to have as president,” while pulling even with Gore at 43% on who “cares about the needs of people like you.”

The ready acceptance of Bush's compassionate conservative rhetoric by the electorate is even more clearly demonstrated in pre-inauguration polls. Even following the bitterness of the Florida recount, 58% of Americans believed that Bush would govern in a way that is "truly compassionate." Moreover, although it is impossible to determine the exact causes of the Bush electoral win in 2000 (especially given 1.5 million uncounted absentee/overseas ballots), his victory over a sitting vice-president amidst good economic conditions, and following a disastrous mid-term election for congressional conservatives, cannot be divorced from the appeal of compassionate conservatism. The notable exception to this appeal is, of course, among black voters across the nation, who turned out even more heavily for Gore in 2000 than they had for Clinton in 1992 and 1996. Compassionate conservatism's potential to make future inroads into the black voting block may well be a major factor in its continued success.

Political question marks such as these make it impossible to determine the long-term effect of compassionate conservatism with any degree of certainty. It has emerged as a coherent movement only since the 1998 gubernatorial election in Texas, and as a national phenomenon only with the presidential campaign of 2000. Its fortunes closely tied to those of President Bush, his electoral success would appear to be essential for its continuation. The Republican congressional losses in the 2000 election also leave doubts as to the effectiveness of compassionate conservatism when invoked by politicians other than Bush himself. It is impossible to tell whether those losses represent a fundamental flaw in the rhetorical strategy, or rather a lack of use by the congressional leadership. Which of these interpretations is ultimately accepted will be essential, as conservatives will inevitably discard a rhetorical approach that seems to pay dividends to Bush alone.

For the immediate future, however, compassionate conservatism has caused a major shift in conservative rhetoric. More than a simple strategic adoption of compassionate conservatism, this shift constitutes a new constraint on conservatives, rendering many of the rhetorical themes used in the past off limits. Due to the climate created by compassionate conservatism, it is impossible to have electoral success with a conservative rhetorical strategy that does not express concern for the disadvantaged or for those groups traditionally labeled as disadvantaged by the Left. Where once the lack of rhetorical fixation on those groups would result in electoral difficulties among a certain percentage of moderate voters, who viewed the omission as heartless and mean-spirited, the current embrace of compassionate conservatism has ensured that nearly all moderate voters, and probably many conservatives, will take that view. With the leadership of the conservative movement effectively acknowledging that a lack of rhetorical focus on the less fortunate may imply a lack of concern, traditional conservatives who choose to reject the compassionate approach will find it next to impossible to avoid creating the impression of such a lack among the electorate. The old, purely

rational conservative rhetoric is therefore defunct for the time being.

In this respect, the actions of the Bush administration and the congressional Republicans during the recent financial scandals are notable. While they certainly differed with the Democrats on the specific policies that should be adopted, the rhetoric of the two was often indistinguishable. Republicans and Democrats competed to see who could spew more vitriol on the business executives involved and express more sympathy for their employees and small investors. Traditional conservative defenses of the free market and warnings of the dangers of government over-regulation were effectively drowned out, just as traditional liberal attacks on the evils of wealth concentration were drowned out by Democrats seeking to appear as pro-business as they were anti-corruption.

The latter point leads to another area that may be affected by compassionate conservatism: the rhetoric of the Left. Thus far, few changes are evident, and liberals remain in essentially the same rhetorical model as before the rise of compassionate conservatism, the one that resulted from the success of Bill Clinton's "Middle Way." Despite the Bush victory in the 2000 election and all the indications that compassionate conservatism is having a significant positive impact on the voters, Democrats have yet to develop a meaningful rhetorical counterstrategy. No doubt this may be due in large part to recent events. The War on Terror has naturally focused attention on foreign rather than domestic concerns, which have entirely different rhetorical structures for both sides of the political spectrum. The financial scandals, on the other hand, have led Democrats to focus less on confronting compassionate conservatism than on attacking Republicans for not turning their back on it in favor of blind support for Big Business. Whatever its short term utility, this is not a meaningful rhetorical response to compassionate conservatism.

In the absence of such a response from the Left, and combined with the shift in Democratic rhetoric engineered by Clinton in the 90's, the new rhetorical constraints compassionate conservatism has imposed on the Right have created a highly unusual situation. They have, at least for the moment, led to the narrowest spectrum of politically viable rhetoric in decades. Conservatives, as did liberals before them, have discarded most of those rhetorical strategies that were most electorally unappealing, and the result, unsurprisingly, is that they now primarily occupy the same rhetorical space. The rhetorical differences between conservatives and liberals no longer thematic for the most part but are simply questions of where to place the emphasis.

This situation is in marked contrast to previous periods. From the 1960's on, if not before, there have been stark rhetorical divisions between the parties. There was never any question that Nixon and McGovern, Carter and Reagan, or Bush and

Dukakis were working from entirely different rhetorical playbooks. In the 90's, Clinton changed the playbook for the Democrats, eliminating the most politically damaging portions regardless of their ideological validity. With the adoption of compassionate conservatism, the Right has now replicated his achievement. The result is a rhetorical landscape in which sharp distinctions are absent and major differences between the parties are routinely blurred. This limitation of serious politicians to much the same narrow rhetorical territory is very likely to be the single most significant effect of compassionate conservatism on the American political system.

Endnotes

[Back to Top](#)

[Home](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Archives](#) | [Editorial Information](#) | [Search](#) | [Interact](#)

Endnotes

1. An early version of this essay developed out of a special senior level seminar at Dartmouth College: Criticism of Conservative Rhetoric in America: Post World War II. Contributors at that time also included Ryan Clark, Sujan Patel, Lee Roach, and Margaret Smoot.
2. Charles R. Kesler, "The Dilemmas of Compassionate Conservatism," The Claremont Institute: Publications (18 November 1999). Kessler quoting David Frum, no citation provided.
<http://old.claremont.org/publications/kesler991122.cfm>.
3. For an interesting analysis of Third Way politics applied to British politics see: John Blundell, "The Third Way: New Philosophy or Politics as Usual?" The Heritage Foundation Heritage Lectures, No. 659 (5 April 2000). <http://www.heritage.org/Research/PoliticalPhilosophy/hl659.cfm> . See too, http://www.ppionline.org/ppi_ka.cfm?knlgAreaID=128
4. We follow the work of rhetorical theorist Lloyd F. Bitzer in our use of the terms rhetorical constraints and exigencies. For a complete bibliography and an outstanding review of the work of Bitzer see Marilyn J. Young, "Lloyd F. Bitzer: Rhetorical Situation, Public Knowledge, and Audience Dynamics," Twentieth-Century Roots of Rhetorical Criticism. Jim A. Kuypers and Andrew King, eds. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).
5. Other examples of ad hominem attacks against House Speaker Gingrich may be found at <http://www.mediaresearch.org/realitycheck/1998/fax19981112.asp>
6. The politics of meaning is not necessarily a new concept. However, it received wide spread attention after first lady Hillary Clinton used the phrase during her 1993 Health Care adventure. For copies of the First Lady's speeches, see http://clinton2.nara.gov/WH/EOP/First_Lady/html/general-index.html. For an oppositional analysis of the politics of meaning see Ronald J. Pestritto, "The President of Wonderland," The Claremont Institute: Publications (no date). <http://old.claremont.org/publications/pestritto2.cfm>
7. The statement, "I feel your pain," was uttered 26 March 1992 by then candidate Clinton at a political rally. After being interrupted by heckling AIDS activists, Clinton retorted in part: "I feel your pain, I feel your pain, but if you want to attack me personally you're no better than Jerry Brown and all the rest of these people who say whatever sounds good at the moment. If you want something to be done, you ask me a question and you listen. If you don't agree with me, go support somebody else for President but quit talking to me like that. This is not a matter of personal attack; it's a matter of human wrong." "The 1992 Campaign: Verbatim; Heckler Stirs Clinton Anger: Excerpts From the Exchange," The New York Times (28 March 1992): A9. For an interesting commentary on President Clinton's use of the "caring" metaphor see, Richard M. Levine, "I Feel your Pain: How to Host the Presidency in 12 Steps," Mother Jones (July/August 1993). http://www.motherjones.com/mother_jones/JA93/
8. Marvin Olasky, Compassionate Conservatism (New York: The Free Press, 2000) 3.
9. Gallop Poll, "Presidential Job Approval: Bill Clinton's High Ratings in the Midst of Crisis," (4 June 1999). <http://www.gallup.com/poll/fromthead/ed9906.asp>
10. Arlie Russell Hochschild, "A Generation Without Public Passion: Clinton's Chief Legacy to the Young Was to Drain Politics of Idealism," The Atlantic Monthly (February 2000).
<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/02/hochschild.htm>
11. For commentary on this relationship see, George H. Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America. (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996).

12. Ramesh Ponnuru, "State of Conservatives: We Are All Clintonites Now," National Review (22 November 1999). Original found at <<http://www.nationalreview.com/22nov99/ponnuru12299.html>>
13. Ponnuru.
14. John I. Dilulio, "The Political Theory of Compassionate Conservatism," The Weekly Standard (23 August 1999). Original found at <http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/_weekly_standard-the_political.htm>
15. Kesler.
16. We did not begin the analysis looking for particular themes. Instead, we read each speech (or book) looking for themes expressed repeatedly by the speakers. We found these themes both reflected traditional conservative principles and advanced new ideas as well. In particular we looked for new articulations of traditional conservative principles. In total, we examined 25 books and speeches published and delivered during the three year period of 1999 and 2001. 14 of these were by President George W. Bush.
17. This analysis is similar to the method employed in Jim A. Kuypers, Marilyn J. Young, and Michael K. Launer, "Composite Narrative, Authoritarian Discourse, and the Soviet Response to the Destruction of Iran Air Flight 655," Quarterly Journal of Speech 87.3 (2001): 305-320.
18. George W. Bush, "New Prosperity Initiative," Cleveland, OH , 11 April 2000
19. George W. Bush, A Charge to Keep (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1999): 228.
20. George W. Bush, "Governor Bush's Acceptance Speech," Philadelphia, PA. 3 August 2000.
21. Joseph J. Jacobs, The Compassionate Conservative: Assuming Responsibility and Respecting Human Dignity (Oakland: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 2000) 180.
22. George W. Bush, "No Child Left Behind," Delivered to The Latino Business Associations Luncheon, Los Angeles, California (2 September 1999). <http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewEducation.asp?Page=>
23. George W. Bush "A Tax Cut With A Purpose," Des Moines, Iowa (1 December 1999).
24. Bush, A Charge to Keep, 236.
25. George W. Bush, "Press Conference with President George W. Bush and Education Secretary Rod Paige to Introduce the President's Education Program," Washington, D. C., The White House (23 January 2001). <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/01/20010123-2.html>
26. Bush, A Charge to Keep, 233.
27. Russell Kirk, The Politics of Prudence (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998) 20.
28. George W. Bush, "New Prosperity Initiative."
29. George W. Bush, "Speech at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Annual Convention," Baltimore, Maryland (10 July 2000). Video at <http://www.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/07/12/campaign.wrap/>
30. Bush, "No Child Left Behind."
31. Bush, A Charge to Keep, 233.
32. Bush, A Charge to Keep, 232.
33. Bush, A Charge to Keep , 233.
34. Bush, "Press Conference . . . to Introduce the President's Education Program."
35. Bush, George W. "Gov. George W. Bush's Acceptance Speech," Republican National Convention, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (3 August 2000). Video at <http://www.c->

span.org/campaign2000/gwbushspeeches.asp

36. Olasky, 189.

37. Olasky, 19.

38. George W. Bush, "Barnstorm for Reform Tour," (23 October 2000).

39. Bush, A Charge to Keep, 229.

40. Bush, A Charge to Keep, 230.

41. Watts, J.C. Jr. "Teaching Individual Self-Restraint: Taking Responsibility For Your Children's Actions," The National Rifle Association Annual Convention, Keynote Address, Charlotte, North Carolina (20 May 2000). http://www.thevanguard.org/thevanguard/other_writers/watts.shtml

42. Olasky, 17.

43. Okasky, 173

44. Bush, George W. "President George W. Bush's Inaugural Address," White House: Washington, D.C., (20 January 2001). <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/inaugural-address.html>

45. Connerly, Ward. "Heroes for a New Generation," Hillsdale College's Shavano Institute for National Leadership Seminar, Costa Mesa, California (11 October 1999). See additional Connerly speeches at <http://www.acri.org/>

46. Connerly.

47. Bush, George W. "Responsible Leadership," Pittsburgh, PA. (26 October 2000).

48. Bush, "Inaugural Address."

49. George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President at National Prayer Breakfast," [also called, Faith of our Nation: Promoting Civility,] Office of the Press Secretary: White House (1 February 2001).

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20010201.html>

50. Jennifer Dunn and Steve Largent, "The United States: Individual Liberty, Free Enterprise, and Limited Government; Response to the State of the Union Address." (19 January 1999).

<http://www.house.gov/dunn/pr/sou.htm>

51. Bush, "Speech at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Annual Convention,"

52. Bush, A Charge to Keep, 228.

53. Bush, "New Prosperity Initiative."

54. Bush, A Charge To Keep, 232.

55. Bush "Speech at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Annual Convention."

56. Olasky, 3.

57. Bush, "National Prayer Breakfast."

58. Bush, "National Prayer Breakfast."

59. Bush, "National Prayer Breakfast."

60. See William E. Simon, "Why America Needs Religion," Heritage Lectures (26 September 2000)

<http://www.heritage.org/library/lecture/hl687.html> and Patrick F. Fagan, "Why Religion Matters: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability," The Heritage Backgrounder 1064 (25 January 1996). <http://www.heritage.org/library/categories/family/bg1064.html>

61. Bush, "Bush's Acceptance Speech"

62. John Ashcroft, "Technology and Values in the New Millenium," Allegheny Institute for Public

Policy Fundraiser, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (26 March 1999).

<http://www.alleghenyinstitute.org/index.php>

63. Bush, "Responsible Leadership, "

64. Bush, "Inauguration Address."

65. Bush, George W. "A Period of Consequences" The Citadel, SC. (23 September 1999).

66. Bush, "Inauguration Address."

67. Colin Powell, "Speech at the Republican Convention," Republican National Convention, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (31 July 2000). Video at [http://www.c-](http://www.c-span.org/campaign2000/gop_archives.asp)

[span.org/campaign2000/gop_archives.asp](http://www.c-span.org/campaign2000/gop_archives.asp)

68. John Ashcroft, "The De-colonization of Welfare," Vital Speeches of the Day. 61.19 (15 July 1995): 600-606.

69. Condoleezza Rice, "Speech at the Republican National Convention," Republican National Convention, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1 August 2000). Video at [http://www.c-](http://www.c-span.org/campaign2000/gop_archives.asp)

[span.org/campaign2000/gop_archives.asp](http://www.c-span.org/campaign2000/gop_archives.asp)

70. John Ashcroft, "Technology and Values."

71. George W. Bush, "Duty of Hope," Delivered, Indinnapolis, Indiana, July 22, 1999. [http://www.c-](http://www.c-span.org/campaign2000/gwbushspeeches.asp)

[span.org/campaign2000/gwbushspeeches.asp](http://www.c-span.org/campaign2000/gwbushspeeches.asp)

72. Powell.

73. Bush, "Inauguration Address."

74. Bush, "Duty of Hope."

75. Dunn and Largent.

76. Rice.

77. Powell.

78. Kirk, 17-25.

79. Kirk, 22.

80. Robert Nisbit, Conservatism: Dream and Reality (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 68-75.

81. Although this trend among Democrats may be coming to an end as we approach the 2004 elections, especially considering the election of Nancy Pelosi to House Minority Leader.

82. Gallup Poll, (13 October 1999). Found at <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr991013.asp>>.

83. Gallup Poll, (13 October 1999). Found at <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr991013.asp>>.

84. Jon Frandsen, "Army: It's The Demeanor, Stupid," USA Today (14 October 1999)

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/e98/e459.htm>

85. David Corn, "Right With Bush," The Nation (12 March 2001) 1.

<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20010312&s=corn>

86. Gallup Poll, (3 August 2000). Found at <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr000803.asp>>.

87. Gallup Poll, (19 January 2001). Found at <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr010119.asp>>.