

## The Eternal Return of Compassionate Conservatism

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COMPASSIONATE IS NOT THE FIRST WORD that comes to mind when reflecting on the Republican party before the presidency of George W. Bush. Compassion was seen by most conservatives as a private virtue, insufferably woolly-headed as a guide to public action. To be conservative was to oppose the goals of liberalism—to point out the limits of government in narrowing inequality, to remind the country of the necessity of constitutional bounds, and to show that, after decades of expansion, the welfare state had already pushed well past them, with disastrous results. Conservatives held out hope that this burgeoning modern welfare state would collapse of its own weight, or that another dose of electoral support would give conservative Republicans the power to reverse its trajectory.

A generation of conservative politicians also discovered, and then repeatedly deployed, a rhetoric of populism and resentment where the objects of Democratic compassion were concerned, using issues like affirmative action, welfare, crime, and urban disorder to divide a Democratic party that had only recently fused blacks into its older electoral coalition. Conservatives—both the shapers of the GOP's ideas and the crafters of its electoral appeals—attacked the concept of social justice, challenged the legitimacy of the modern administrative state, and rarely went out of their way to claim that conservative ideas could aid the nation's poor or racial minorities.

At first glance, the ideas that we have come to associate with “compassionate conservatism” seem to be in profound tension with these

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building blocks of the modern Republican party, and so are often seen as a break from its traditions. But in fact, compassionate conservatism was not so novel. It was not an alien force injected into Republican politics by George W. Bush, the religious right, or Republican moderates, lacking an intellectual foundation or a true conservative pedigree. On the contrary, compassionate conservatism is an authentic project of the conservative intellectual and political elite, but one that until recently has lacked muscular support among the Republican party's organized coalition partners.

Neither Senator John McCain's 2008 campaign nor the conduct of party leaders since suggests that Republicans are eager to embrace the idea of compassionate conservatism in the wake of the Bush years. If anything, Republicans seem eager to resuscitate the party's older, Reaganite orthodoxy. That said, the basic instinct behind compassionate conservatism will not go away as the Bush administration recedes into memory. It will re-emerge, for the same reasons it has time and again in the past. But history suggests that when it does, it will also face the same obstacles and constraints. To see why, we must trace the story of compassionate conservatism, and of its intellectual predecessors. It is a story of conservative adaptation to social and political realities, of the tension between a conservatism of ends and a conservatism of means, and of the complex relationship between conservative thinkers and Republican interest groups.

#### WHAT IS COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM?

Before we can identify the roots of compassionate conservatism, we must establish its meaning. The man who brought the term and the idea to their greatest prominence is, of course, former President George W. Bush. And the person who has invested the greatest energy in putting meat on the bones of the idea is former Bush speechwriter and adviser Michael Gerson, who helped give voice to Bush's philosophy in the White House and has since argued, most notably in his 2007 book *Heroic Conservatism*, for its continuing significance.

Whatever else it might be, compassionate conservatism is a political appeal, a claim that a crucial voting bloc can be reached by a new set of ideas. Just as President Bill Clinton's "Third Way" helped change the public profile of the Democrats, compassionate conservatism was an attempt to rebrand the Republican party. While the party was seen by voters as embodying hawkishness on defense and fiscal restraint, few voters associ-

ated it with concern for the poor and minorities. Compassionate conservatism calls for raiding liberalism's political turf—and stealing Democratic voters—by challenging liberal dominance over certain constituencies, and by directly subverting the public's understanding of which party holds ownership of which issues and values.

Compassionate conservatism's version of triangulation retains, but in a radically transformed manner, the anti-elitism injected into the party in the Nixon era. Republicans had previously used affirmative action, welfare, busing, housing, and crime to identify Democrats as elitists who took the side of enlightened opinion against working-class whites, without themselves suffering the economic consequences. By contrast, compassionate conservatism encouraged Republicans to present themselves as allies of the poor and minorities, and to insist that “liberal elites” in the Democratic party were the defenders of ineffective bureaucracies and a morally debased culture. Instead of embracing racial resentment, compassionate conservatism preached, Republicans should rebrand themselves as the party of racial solidarity—the allies of the moralizing agents of the inner cities.

Making this racially encompassing anti-elitism plausible demanded that Republicans reconsider their image as the party of tough, unsentimental, anti-government realists. Whereas previous Republican orthodoxy focused on defining constitutional limits on government and constraining spending, compassionate conservatism accepted the premise of broad governmental responsibility and sought to switch the conversation to questions of efficacy and results. “Republicans who feel that the ideology of Barry Goldwater—the ideology of minimal government—has been assaulted are correct,” Gerson writes.

Compassionate conservatism is, consequently, an effort to shift the basic axis of partisan debate from the inputs of government (how much spending, how much taxing) to the outputs: from means to ends. This, again, was an effort at triangulation, directed as much at “Goldwaterism” as liberalism. Gerson explains: “We were focused on outcomes for individuals—African American children in failed schools, and addicts in need of treatment—not just procedures, like Senator Dole's attempted revival of the Tenth Amendment; on effective government, not on cutting government.”

As a substantive matter, therefore, compassionate conservatism sought to advance traditionally liberal ends by conservative means. In

defining these means, compassionate conservatives looked to Catholic social teaching for guidance, and sought to combine subsidiarity (the principle that power should be held by institutions as close to the individual as is feasible) with a version of solidarity (the idea that a society must be measured by how it treats its weakest and neediest members). As Bush argued during his acceptance of the Republican nomination in 2000, “the alternative to bureaucracy is not indifference. It is to put conservative values and conservative ideas into the thick of the fight for justice and opportunity.” While compassionate conservatism shares traditional conservatism’s pessimism about the capacity of bureaucracies to effect social transformation, it is optimistic about the ability of smaller-scale social institutions to do so. It combines the Clintonian idea that government should “steer not row” with a faith that local (and especially religiously inspired) service providers can handle the oars.

This combination of optimism about social reform, impatience with conservatism’s traditional insistence on constitutional and principled limits on government, and the deep moral imperative of social justice sharply distinguishes compassionate conservatism from the Reaganite philosophy it sought to replace. But the most striking departure from the inherited Reaganite orthodoxy is compassionate conservatism’s identification with the cause of civil rights, putting the emancipation struggle of African Americans at the center of the American narrative.

Gerson makes clear that compassionate conservatism embraces the “anti-subordination” interpretation of the civil-rights story: the claim that the legacy of segregation and slavery imposes a moral obligation on society to remedy the damage done. Compassionate conservatism accepts the argument that behavioral problems like crime and single parenting can be traced to a legacy of state action. Poverty and its attendant disorder are, therefore, matters of social justice rather than simply individual responsibility. Gerson encourages conservatives to see themselves in deep “solidarity” with African Americans, even those whose behavior they consider profoundly immoral. Tellingly, he observes that “it is impossible to imagine Bush attacking ‘welfare queens’ as Reagan did. Governor Bush uniformly talked about the poor, addicts, and even illegal immigrants in sympathetic ways. . . . That was certainly not true of the Reagan era.”

And yet, for all that it sought a break from some earlier iterations of conservatism, compassionate conservatism was actually very much

a product of work done in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s at the very core of the conservative intellectual movement — work that for years had been slowly making its way into conservative politics.

#### POLITICAL ORIGINS

Politicians judge any idea by asking two questions: Will it expand our ability to win elections? And will it help achieve our fundamental policy goals? Compassionate conservatism came to prominence because party leaders recognized that the existing Republican platform was deficient in both dimensions. The Nixon/Reagan electoral strategy had not produced a true realignment, especially when the party was faced with candidates (like Clinton) unwilling to serve as hapless victims of the Republican campaign playbook. And even when elected to office in large numbers, conservatives repeatedly found themselves unable to halt the growth of the state. Compassionate conservatism became attractive because it offered a credible solution to a problem that both electoral strategists and working politicians recognized.

The place of race in Republican politics played a central role in this evolving understanding. From its founding before the Civil War until the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, the Republican party was the natural home of black Americans; even as late as the 1960s, Republican candidates for president attracted a third or more of the black vote. It was Barry Goldwater who famously abandoned the idea of a Republican electoral strategy based on retaining the support of African Americans, observing in 1961: “We’re not going to get the Negro vote as a bloc in 1964 and 1968, so we ought to go hunting where the ducks are.” Goldwater concluded that Nixon lost in 1960 due largely to his support for civil rights, and that the Republican party’s earlier efforts to build support in the South among racial moderates had been a failure. In 1964, the Republican share of the black vote plummeted to single digits, and has remained there ever since.

Richard Nixon built on Goldwater’s strategic shift by taking the Southern Strategy north, exploiting issues like crime, welfare, neighborhood racial change, and school busing to help Republicans compete for traditionally Democratic working-class voters. By the end of the 1970s, the Republican party had become almost exclusively white, the natural home of such aggressive practitioners of racial politics as Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond. Thinly veiled racial appeals had become part of the conventional toolset of Republican congressional campaigns.

This much of the story is well known. Less widely noted by students of racial politics, however, is that many Republicans had long recognized the costs of directly appealing to racial animus. Especially in competitive non-Southern states, spotting the Democrats the entire black (and, increasingly, Hispanic) vote made it extremely difficult for Republicans to achieve long-term partisan realignment. A segregated party could not be a majority party, something that even Nixon recognized. So while he was openly appealing for Southern segregationist support in his judicial nominations, Nixon experimented with support for “black capitalism” through affirmative action in government contracting and small-business programs. He also sought to attract Hispanic voters by adding a new category to the 1970 census and supporting bilingual education. These measures were unsuccessful in both policy and electoral terms, but they represented an instinct that Republicans would flirt with on and off for the next quarter-century, culminating with the Bush campaign in 2000.

In the mid-1970s, a young Republican congressman from Buffalo, Jack Kemp, sought to succeed where Nixon had failed, bringing conservative outreach to the poor and racial minorities into the mainstream of party thinking. Unlike Nixon’s effort to out-liberal liberalism, Kemp argued that Republicans could attract votes from racial minorities through authentically conservative policies such as enterprise zones, school vouchers, and selling public housing to tenants.

Just as important as the policy substance was the political body language that Kemp urged on his party. Republicans would never get a hearing from traditionally liberal groups until they stopped thinking about them as aliens to the conservative movement: “No one cares what you think until they think you care,” he was fond of saying. To demonstrate that Republicans “cared,” Kemp went so far as to lobby President Reagan to pass a range of empowerment measures before he took the scalpel to federal spending (which he stressed should attack middle-class entitlements first) or passed tax cuts. But while Reagan gave lip service to Kemp’s ideas, he never put the political capital behind them that the Buffalo congressman’s electoral optimism required.

Through the 1980s and ’90s, a small but growing group of Republicans urged the party to bring the Kemp message closer to the core of its electoral appeal. President George H. W. Bush’s appointment of Kemp to be secretary of Housing and Urban Development was one sign that this message might become part of the party’s mainstream platform. Another sign that

empowerment was moving further away from the margins was the exceptionally brief mania for what Bush White House staffer James Pinkerton called the “New Paradigm.” As Pinkerton argued at the time, “the conservative movement is close to becoming a majority coalition, combining the power of family-oriented evangelicals and libertarian supply-siders. The ultimate victory coalition, however, will be even more heterogeneous: blacker, browner, more female.” To appeal to women and minorities, Republicans needed to move beyond simply opposing liberal attempts to expand the state and adopt a “forward-leaning” strategy designed to use conservative means to satisfy citizens’ (generally liberal) expectations of governmental responsibilities.

The New Paradigm, which some saw as a flaky post-partisan gambit, in fact summed up the beliefs and the political judgment of the most conservative faction of the conservative movement. As Pinkerton colorfully recalls, “Paul Weyrich, the Heritage Foundation, they were all for it. The people who were against it were the Darman people who had their own idea, and just your normal trust-fund nitwit, of whom there are [more than] a few in the Republican ranks.” Office of Management and Budget Director Richard Darman famously ridiculed the New Paradigm, denying Kemp the chance to give the idea a trial run at HUD and going so far as to ban the use of the term “empowerment” in the George H. W. Bush White House.

In the wake of the Los Angeles riots in 1992, Kemp argued that the Republican party had a historic opportunity to transform its racial reputation. Bush supported some of Kemp’s agenda in the last year of his administration, but Republican strategists were unconvinced of its electoral potency. As the Heritage Foundation’s Stuart Butler recalls:

There were people who were involved in policymaking...who thought of “our” issues and “their” issues... They misunderstood the long-term political gain from building a coalition beyond what they would call the base... When someone like Jack Kemp said that if we commit ourselves to a conservative welfare policy, empowerment, we can draw in these people, African Americans, Hispanics. The counter-argument was, “they will never vote for us.”

The standard campaign-strategy orthodoxy of the time dictated directing attention to the issues voters associated with Republicans (crime,

national security, taxes, abortion), and away from those (like racial equality, social services, urban policy, and social insurance) that they did not. Beyond simple campaign calculation, this strategy reflected a conservative inferiority complex, a worry that empowerment would simply hand Democrats an opportunity to push policy in a more liberal direction.

This strategic orthodoxy was undermined by three lessons Republicans learned in the 1990s. First, the Clinton campaign's success in seizing conservative issues for liberal purposes — most effectively by pairing welfare reform with “making work pay” — pointed to the end of an era in which each party stuck to its own turf, signaling that Republicans needed to become more entrepreneurial in their issue selection and campaign rhetoric. Second, the failure of the Gingrich Congress to roll back the growth of the welfare state, followed by Clinton's re-election in 1996, suggested the effective limits of anti-statism as a governing strategy. Third, while Republicans in Washington were failing to push back the frontiers of the state, Republican governors — in particular Tommy Thompson in liberal Wisconsin — were demonstrating that conservatives could devise creative strategies for using government, rather than just cutting it, and gain considerable political advantage in the process.

No Republican seemed to have learned the lessons of the 1990s better than George W. Bush. In his 1994 campaign for governor of Texas, Bush put education front and center. And at a time when fellow Republicans — like Dole in his 1996 presidential campaign — were seizing on immigration restriction, Bush embraced immigrants and aggressively campaigned for Hispanic votes. Bush avoided Republican hot-button issues like affirmative action, supporting an alternative that allowed for substantial minority representation in hiring and school admissions. Bush openly sold his policies as being in the interests of the state's minority voters, distancing himself from the rhetoric of race “blindness” that was making a bid for party orthodoxy. When Republicans in Congress sought to cut the Earned Income Tax Credit, Bush accused them of trying to “balance the budget on the backs of the poor.”

Bush's approach was a sharp contrast to that of his own brother — who, when asked at a voter forum during the 1994 Florida gubernatorial campaign what he would do for African Americans, stated: “It's time to strive for a society where there's equality of opportunity, not equality of results. So I'm going to answer your question by saying: probably noth-



ing.” While Jeb Bush’s answer may have been principled, it fed into the party’s long-term image problem, which his brother in Texas seemed intent on correcting.

George W. Bush’s re-election as governor in 1998 signaled to empowerment-oriented Republicans that the political strategy they had been urging for two decades might finally have arrived. Bush won a quarter of the black vote and half of the Hispanic vote—remarkable results for a party whose support from blacks regularly dropped into the single digits, and which was worried that the Hispanic vote was headed in the same direction.

Advocates of empowerment treated these results as proof that Kemp had been right all along. Michael Joyce, then president of the Milwaukee-based Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, argued at the time that Bush’s compassionate conservatism was the key to “reach[ing] out to minority voters—especially the rapidly expanding Hispanic electorate in key states like California, Texas, and Florida—on terms that do not compromise core conservative principles.” Even more important, Joyce wrote, Bush’s ideas pointed to how conservatives could “appear (and more important, *be*) more compassionate—a critical factor as we seek to bridge the gender gap that is beginning to take a serious toll in the Republican suburban base.” Joyce understood, as many empowerment advocates had, that conservatives’ image problem on race and related issues was hurting them not only with minorities but with women as well.

The 2000 Republican National Convention was the setting for Bush to take the compassionate-conservative electoral strategy mainstream. The first night of the convention was labeled “Opportunity With A Purpose: Leave No Child Behind.” In her speech that evening, Laura Bush stressed her husband’s commitment to education as a strategy for reducing inequality. Colin Powell addressed the need for Republicans to consistently appeal to African Americans. George W. Bush’s acceptance speech later that week was devoted largely to introducing the country to the concept of compassionate conservatism, and he followed it up with events emphasizing his commitment to education and faith-based strategies for fighting poverty.

The Republican convention only scratched the surface of Bush adviser Karl Rove’s ambitious political strategy. His approach built on Kemp’s appeal to traditional Democratic constituencies by using government

affirmatively for a wide range of domestic concerns: money for faith-based social services, prescription-drug coverage under Medicare, education reform, more liberal immigration policies, and Social Security privatization.

This strategy aimed to give the party enough support to pass legislation that would cut into the heart of the Democratic coalition. Faith-based services and education vouchers would pit African Americans and Hispanics against Democratic governmental-provider interests, and transform inner-city churches and private- and charter-school operators into a lobby for conservative policies. Social Security privatization would weaken one of the Democrats' strongest electoral weapons, and create a new generation of conservative voters by directly connecting their financial interests to the stock market. This would gradually expand into a full-blown vision of an "ownership society," substituting connections between citizens and private markets for the Democrats' electoral logic of cementing connections between citizens and government programs. Rove argued that on this basis a long-term Republican majority could be built, as strong as that created by McKinley in 1896, and as enduring as that which Roosevelt established for the Democrats in 1932.

The strategy that Reagan refused to embrace when it was associated with Jack Kemp, and that George H. W. Bush had spurned when it was rechristened the New Paradigm, had become the party's electoral orthodoxy under the name of "compassionate conservatism."

#### INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS

As successful as they had been electorally, conservatives up through the 2000 election had been unsuccessful in reversing the public's acceptance of some of liberalism's key goals, such as the use of government to combat racial and economic inequality, and to provide social insurance against economic risks. So compassionate conservatism was, in part, a recognition that for conservatives to be successful, they would have to convince the public that those very *goals* of liberalism were now in direct conflict with liberal *means*. Just as the Third Way was an effort to justify liberal means in terms of conservative ends, compassionate conservatism came out of the need to generate a rhetoric that could legitimate conservative means in terms of liberal ends.

This, too, was an approach long in the making. The earliest conservative effort to turn liberal goals against liberal programs, and the one

with the most durable effect, was the American Enterprise Institute's Mediating Structures Project. The project's most important publication was *To Empower People*, written by Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus and published in 1977; its first lines stated the basic insight that would later go by the name of empowerment and compassionate conservatism (and which had roots in the neoconservatism of *The Public Interest*). "Partisan rhetoric aside, few people seriously envisage dismantling the welfare state," Berger and Neuhaus wrote. "The serious debate is over how and to what extent it should be expanded. . . . We suggest that the modern welfare state is here to stay, indeed that it ought to expand the benefits it provides — but that alternative mechanisms are possible to provide welfare-state services." These "alternative mechanisms" would reconcile social justice with the prevention of aggrandized professional power at the expense of citizen self-government.

*To Empower People* was critical to the development of conservative thought and action, and especially to the effort to foster a new way of thinking about race among conservatives. It pointed to an approach that was "backward compatible" with other conservative commitments on racial issues, such as opposition to affirmative action, school busing, and aggressive housing desegregation, while also making the argument that these liberal strategies were ineffective at actually producing social justice. *To Empower People* also suggested an alternative way of understanding conservatism, one that could speak to the shared interests of white ethnics and racial minorities. William Bennett would later observe that while liberals saw blacks as clients, conservatives saw them as aliens. The approach sketched out by *To Empower People* was a conservative attempt to "dealienize" African Americans, to help conservatives see blacks as sharing their values and thus as potential supporters. It also suggested that conservatives could appeal to the poor and racial minorities on their own terms, without mimicking the approach of liberals.

As Michael Horowitz argued in a widely circulated report in 1980, conservatives would never gain a hearing for their ideas unless they embraced the moral imperative of the civil-rights ideal and the need to appeal directly to the interests of black Americans. Conservatives, Horowitz argued, should seek out "poor clients such as ghetto school children affirmatively interested in the maintenance of internal school discipline" and "ghetto public housing residents" who wished to "re-establish order in their neighborhoods."

This strategy, Horowitz claimed, would force liberals on the defensive, exposing how they “essentially ignored the victims of ghetto disorder in defense of the intended subjects of public sanction.” Where conservatives had previously taken the side of whites in zero-sum conflicts with African Americans, taking the side of blacks in conflicts with liberal interests would allow conservatives to claim that they were the true inheritors of the civil-rights mantle—and that the modern administrative state had become an obstacle to the advancement of African Americans.

The most important figure in putting meat on the bones of the strategy pointed to by Berger, Neuhaus, and Horowitz was Robert Woodson, who had previously been part of the mainstream civil-rights establishment as the head of the Urban League’s Administration of Justice Program. In *A Summons to Life*, Woodson examined Falaka Fattah’s House of Umoja in Philadelphia, an unabashedly Afrocentric organization that sought to reduce crime and encourage neighborhood development where government had failed. In the same year that he published the book, Woodson founded the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise to draw attention to empowerment solutions, especially those efforts led by African Americans. The most important of these was Kimi Gray’s campaign to establish tenant ownership of Washington’s Kenilworth-Parkside public housing complex. Gray would become a cause célèbre among Beltway conservatives, evidence that empowerment had authentic roots in the black community and that the idea held the key to dividing blacks from liberalism.

Yet despite the growing interest in the empowerment approach among D.C.-based conservatives, William Schambra (who served in the second-term Reagan Justice Department) recalls that “almost all of the Republican party’s position on race was just opposition to affirmative action.” The Reagan team’s efforts did slow the expansion of the civil-rights legal regime, but they came at a considerable political cost. The administration’s work to restore the tax-exempt status of segregationist schools, for example, sent a message quite the opposite of what advocates of empowerment were encouraging. While the issue drew support from conservatives like Mississippi congressman Trent Lott (who argued that it was a bedrock issue for Republicans’ Southern and Christian conservative supporters), it put the administration squarely on the side of the remnants of Southern segregation. And without an alternative

civil-rights vision, supporters of the administration's moves couldn't get a hearing for what they believed was a principled legal argument. This pattern would replay itself repeatedly over the next decade.

While empowerment had a limited impact on the Reagan and Bush administrations' agendas, its support in conservative think tanks grew throughout the 1980s. The Heritage Foundation took a special interest in the idea, which became the pet issue of one of the think tank's most creative thinkers, Stuart Butler. Butler brought to the movement familiarity with Margaret Thatcher's programs of enterprise zones and efforts to sell off public housing in Britain: evidence that conservatives could compete with liberalism on the terrain of social policy. While bureaucratically administered programs cement citizens' connections to the state (and thus the party associated with it), Butler argued that privatizing service delivery would socialize citizens into the logic of the market and civil society. For conservatives to gain a hearing from the poor and racial minorities, Butler argued, they needed to speak the language of social justice, to make the case for their alternatives by arguing that existing programs were counterproductive by liberal standards, and to prove their seriousness by putting their alternatives into action.

The empowerment movement attracted a powerful ally in 1986, when Michael Joyce took the helm of the Bradley Foundation. Joyce believed deeply that conservatives could convince the victims of bureaucracy to be their allies, a belief rooted in his working-class background in Cleveland. He combined a sincere commitment to engaging African Americans and the poor with a fierce resentment of professionalized liberalism and a desire to expose what he saw as its hypocrisy and self-interest. Joyce looked to people like Robert Woodson (a recipient of the foundation's support) for advice on how to find African Americans who were, in their own way, already living the empowerment approach in their communities.

With an annual budget of more than \$30 million, Joyce had the power to make others in the conservative movement listen. From that platform, he argued that conservatives needed to add a sociological vision to compensate for the limits of the movement's message. In early 1996 Joyce told Republican members of Congress that focusing exclusively on spending limits and cutting the size of government was insufficient and would "play right into liberalism's caricature of us as heartless, uncaring conservatives." Echoing the arguments Horowitz made a decade and a half earlier, Joyce told conservatives:

The impoverished mother who struggles against the public school bureaucracy to put her child in a private school where discipline and values prevail; the street vendor who battles licensing and zoning boards in order to make an honest living; the middle class family that braves the ridicule of the social service professionals in order to challenge the distribution of condoms in school; the public housing tenant who seeks to govern his own project, in spite of an enervating maze of regulation — let us make their stories, our stories.

For conservatives to succeed, they needed to see the poor and African Americans as objects of solidarity, rather than resentment.

Joyce's argument was echoed by Clint Bolick, who would go on to help found a libertarian public-interest law firm, the Institute for Justice. In his 1990 book *Unfinished Business*, Bolick rejected the idea that the civil-rights tradition was the exclusive property of liberalism. He argued that "a strategy that consists mainly of resisting the civil rights establishment's agenda is by nature a losing strategy... a reactive posture allows the other side to define civil rights in terms of its own agenda and to claim the moral high ground." Bolick understood that in civil rights, perhaps more than in any other area, an image of good will was a precondition for having conservatives' intellectual arguments taken seriously. Simply opposing civil-rights policies without offering an alternative, he argued, "leaves us in the untenable position of arguing either that all of our nation's civil rights problems have been solved or that the major civil rights issue of our time is the plight of white firefighters victimized by reverse discrimination." Bolick claimed that the conservative case on civil rights was better served by identifying blacks as its beneficiaries rather than whites, and that accepting inherited liberal standards of victim status was the only way for conservatives' philosophical arguments to receive serious consideration.

When it first came to prominence under Woodson and Kemp, this approach was considered by conservatives to be quixotic at best. But by the time it was rechristened as compassionate conservatism, the main components of empowerment had become the orthodoxy of a significant portion of the Republican establishment. No issue illustrates this transformation of Republican governing philosophy as clearly as education.

THE EDUCATION DEBATE

Until the mid-1950s, conservatives in both political parties did not have much trouble limiting the federal role in education, given that even most Democrats thought the issue to be constitutionally within the exclusive purview of the states. Up through the 1990s, many conservative Republicans were still calling for the abolition of the Department of Education. While conservatives supported vouchers and tuition tax credits, these were intended to be universal and primarily oriented toward supporting existing students in religiously oriented schools—in other words, their constituents.

The failure of conservatives to reverse the nationalization of education resulted in an alternative approach to education policy that resonated with the logic of empowerment. This new conservative approach, which rose to prominence in the late 1990s, accepts some federal role in education, and seeks to use it to advance conservative objectives like school choice and high standards.

It was conservatives' confrontation with contemporary liberalism's educational regime that made education reform the centerpiece of compassionate conservatism. The new approach to education accepts the "anti-subordination" vision of racial equality, and treats the pursuit of parity in educational *outcomes* along racial lines as a fundamental moral obligation. Conservatives have moved away from an insistence on universal vouchers and focused instead on targeted support for low-income students to attend private schools and other alternatives to district schools, like charters. Thus conservatives have increasingly accepted the moral logic of liberal education policy and the centralization that comes with it, but have attempted to turn those goals against liberal Democratic means. In the process, they have shifted from a reactive political strategy—designed primarily to reverse existing or stall proposed liberal programs—to a proactive strategy of advancing their own vision of education policy.

Liberalism's educational regime was built by connecting the issue first to Cold War competition, and then to racial equality. When combined with shrewd legislative entrepreneurship, these two elements produced the landmark National Defense Education Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. As Patrick McGuinn argues in his contribution to the recently published *Conservatism and American Political Development* (which Brian Glenn and I edited), the categorical

grant structure of ESEA helped spawn the hydra-headed collection of dozens of education groups, unions, and bureaucracies that conservatives came to call “the Blob.” For more than a quarter-century after the passage of ESEA, conservatives would try to undermine the power of the Blob by cutting it off at the root: converting categorical aid to block grants, and eliminating the Department of Education. These efforts were, almost without exception, miserable failures. This was partly the result of the Blob’s extraordinary power in every state and congressional district in the country, but it also represented a failure of rhetoric. Democrats successfully argued that Republicans were “anti-education” in a political environment in which voters — especially swing suburban voters — had come to believe that education was an appropriate function of the national government. This became especially clear during the Clinton administration, when the embattled president made education one of the three core issues on which he drew a line in the sand with congressional Republicans.

This record of failure created an opening for conservatives who believed that education was vulnerable to a more circuitous, longer-term strategy. This strategy was driven by the insight that the public’s expectations for national government action had been durably transformed by decades of liberal political victories. Therefore, conservatives needed to bracket fundamental questions of social justice and the size and scope of government, in order to get a hearing on how government could vindicate its stated goals. This new approach would seek to change the public’s perception of the problem by demonstrating that the education establishment was failing on liberalism’s own terms, and use that criticism as a basis for a new approach based on standards, charters, and choice.

Beginning with the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report, conservatives began redirecting education policymaking away from inputs — the glue that held the Blob together — and toward student-achievement outputs. A few years after *Nation at Risk* was published, Chester Finn — a key assistant to William Bennett at the Department of Education — challenged the reigning conservative orthodoxy on the issue, arguing: “It is time to consider, once again, the possibility that the federal government could be the ally of good education. . . . For conservatives to abandon the effort at systemic inquiry into education or the dissemination of sound educational ideas is to leave the field firmly in the possession of



the colleges of education, the NEA, the American Association of School Administrators, and other bastions of liberal establishmentarianism.” While Finn’s argument was fairly exotic when he made it, more than a decade of failed attacks on the Blob would convince many conservatives that Finn had been right.

The movement for achievement standards swept through the states, and provided the example a decade later for the No Child Left Behind Act, which mandated standards and imposed federal penalties for states that did not meet them. A focus on outcomes gave conservatives an opening—allowing them to claim that the interests of the poor and minorities were not identical with the Blob’s, but rather with the interests of those seeking to inject competition into the system.

The most important, and to this day the most successful, opportunity for conservatives to transform education politics has been in the area of charter schools. While conservatives found that the Blob would throw all of its resources behind defeating private-school choice, charter schools provided a competitive alternative that, because it was usually supported by liberal and Democratic education reformers, was harder to stop in its tracks. Conservatives could jump on someone else’s bandwagon, creating the coalitions of strange bedfellows that strategists like Butler associated with successful reform efforts. As Jeff Henig argues in *Conservatism and American Political Development*, “in order to muster legislative majorities, conservatives needed to accept provisions that they found objectionable. . . . Rather than defend a purist model and go down to defeat, key strategists determined to pursue a long-term plan to get something into place, use that initial wedge to further legitimate the idea of market-oriented policies, and count on the fact that the programs would gradually spawn a new constituency of their own.”

As existing providers sought to create new schools, as excluded parents pushed for spaces for their children, and as the performance of charters embarrassed public schools operating in the same area, open conflict would become inevitable. These conflicts—between urban blacks, conservatives, and New Democrats—would isolate local school bureaucracies and teachers’ unions. Conservatives would then be able to take the side of urban blacks and Hispanics and provide an opening for other forms of cooperation—in the process changing conservatism’s racial reputation, while improving the educational opportunities available to some of the most underserved communities in America.

The equation of educational reform with civil rights, and the depiction of the Blob as an obstacle to the rightful interests of African American children, is now the common rhetorical property of school reformers. When George W. Bush embraced education reform — including explicit race-based goals for minority achievement — as a way to pursue racial justice, he was engaging in an act of incorporation, not innovation.

That is not to say that all conservatives are pleased with this approach. Some see it as violating core conservative commitments. American Enterprise Institute scholar Rick Hess, for example, has recently attacked No Child Left Behind, saying that “it is a stretch to argue that the [Bush] administration’s K-12 reforms reflect conservative impulses. NCLB involved Washington in defining teacher quality, embraced an accountability system that labels children by race, made closing racial achievement gaps a central tenet, and turned bragging about education spending into a bipartisan sport.”

While Hess is clearly right that NCLB reflected a dramatic shift away from *one* vision of conservative education policy, it stretches the historical record to treat the law’s embrace of strong national government and the anti-subordination tradition of civil rights as wholly alien to conservatism. For good or for ill, the last two decades have seen the emergence of a conservatism for which these ideas are second nature.

#### THE LIMITS OF COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM

Today, compassionate conservatism seems like an idea whose time has come — and gone. A wide range of Republican activists has concluded that the idea some once saw as a way of devolving power away from Washington, and of reducing the size of government, has instead weakened the party’s immune system against assault from the virus of big government. Even some of compassionate conservatism’s most faithful advocates concluded that the Bush administration fumbled its execution so badly that it became warped beyond recognition.

On a list of suspects in the demise of compassionate conservatism, electoral calculations would have to be foremost. After George W. Bush’s election in 2000, campaign pollster Matthew Dowd found that only 7% of the electorate was truly up for grabs. Until 2006, the number of competitive seats in Congress seemed quite small, and the Republicans’ ability to translate small margins in Congress into large legislative accomplishments seemed considerable. Consequently, expanding the

base through outreach to new groups—the key feature of compassionate conservatism as a political strategy—seemed less important than attracting existing party supporters to the polls. The attacks of September 11, 2001, also provided the party with a very different strategy for reaching swing voters than that offered by compassionate conservatism, in the form of a return to tough-minded national-security conservatism. Compassionate conservatism again became an answer to an electoral question no one was asking.

Compassionate conservatism also failed because it was an idea without a constituency. While compassionate conservatism and its predecessors attracted strong support among conservative policy elites, it never captured the commitment of the party's core factions, and was viewed skeptically by many of them. Whereas tax cuts, regulatory relief, gun rights, and opposition to abortion have large, mobilized interests able to enforce party orthodoxy through credible threats of electoral retribution, compassionate conservatism does not.

Compassionate conservatives are, therefore, at best junior members of the conservative coalition. In a close parallel to what Steven Erie discovered in the dynamics of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century urban machines, such junior partners are likely to be given “circuses” (rhetorical support) rather than “bread” (a willingness to expend political capital to deliver on their priorities). So long as compassionate conservatism has no political cost, conservative politicians are happy to support it; but when delivering requires a zero-sum trade-off with other party commitments, it loses every time. Put another way, compassionate conservatism may be loved, but it is not feared. Gerson himself notes that, while he could advance a compassionate-conservative proposal when it was “raised to the highest level of decision,” the “vice-president's office—which was conventionally and narrowly conservative—opposed it.” What Gerson calls “conventional” and “narrow” is still where the real power in the conservative movement resides.

Could this change in the future? Perhaps, by one of three possible pathways. The first is for compassionate conservatism to become a non-negotiable demand for one of the Republican coalition partners. The fact that the presidential campaign of former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee was framed around an openly compassionate form of conservatism—combined with signs of changes in the priorities of younger evangelical Christians—may indicate that such a shift

in priorities is indeed happening. Still, until the generation of politically mobilized evangelicals for whom abortion and the family are paramount is succeeded by a generation for whom poverty is at least as important, compassion will remain for most of organized conservative Christianity a private virtue, not a political philosophy.

Compassionate conservatism could also return to prominence if the idea proves its mettle in the real world of electoral politics. In the United Kingdom, Conservative party leader David Cameron has staked his challenge to the Labour government on a “modern, compassionate conservatism.” In New Jersey, Republican gubernatorial nominee Christopher Christie has actively campaigned in poor neighborhoods in the state and—with the support of a wide range of racial minority groups—made an aggressive school-voucher program a key part of his challenge to incumbent governor Jon Corzine. If Cameron and Christie were to win at a time when conservatives seem desperate for a way out of the political wilderness, other Republicans might seek to replicate their ideological formula.

The most likely pathway back to influence for compassionate conservatism, however, may not run through party politics at all. Rather than attempt to use the Republican party as a battering ram to reform the welfare state, compassionate conservatism might return to its more ideologically ambiguous roots, seeking to advance itself through strange bedfellows rather than party-line coalitions. Compassionate conservatives could rebuild their linkages with reformist Democrats, changing policy slowly by reshaping the conventional wisdom in both parties. The future of compassionate conservatism may, like progressivism before it, depend on attracting “respectable people” across the political spectrum through a slow process of experimenting, organization-building, and seeking out allies. History suggests that this will be a more durable strategy for compassionate conservatism than capturing the Republican party, which has at best been its fair-weather friend.