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FAITH, COMPASSION, AND THE WAR ON POVERTY[†]

GEORGE W. BUSH*

I am pleased to send warm greetings to readers of the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*. America's public institutions have great potential to improve the lives of our citizens. However, government alone is not the answer to all of our society's problems. As a nation, we must promote effective and intelligent solutions to our most pressing concerns by also looking to faith-based organizations, charities, and community groups that have shown the ability to help those in need.

My 2001 commencement address to Notre Dame graduates, reprinted in this publication, lays out my vision for empowering the efforts of caring Americans who strive to fight problems such as poverty. As such, it complements the mission of the *Journal* in which timely questions of law and policy are examined from religious and ethical perspectives.

I commend the *Journal's* staff and contributors and the Thomas J. White Center on Law and Government for providing a unique and refreshing voice in the realm of public debate. Their efforts reinforce high standards of legal analysis and academic scholarship and contribute to the development of laws and public policy that advance a more just society.

Notre Dame, as a Catholic university, carries forward a great tradition of social teaching. It calls on all of us, Catholic and non-Catholic, to honor family, to protect life in all its stages, to serve and uplift the poor. This university is more than a community of scholars, it is a community of conscience—and an ideal

[†] Virtually all of this text was delivered as a speech during the 2001 University of Notre Dame Commencement Exercises in Notre Dame, Indiana on May 21, 2001. The President's references to this *Journal* were contained in a letter from the President to Joseph J. Shimek, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* dated July 27, 2001 and incorporated into this article with permission.

* President of the United States of America.

place to report on our nation's commitment to the poor, and how we are keeping it.

In 1964, the year I started college, another President from Texas delivered a commencement address talking about this national commitment. In that speech, President Lyndon Johnson issued a challenge. He said, "This is the time for decision. You are the generation which must decide. Will you decide to leave the future a society where a man is condemned to hopelessness because he was born poor? Or will you join to wipe out poverty in this land?"

In that speech, Lyndon Johnson advocated a War on Poverty which had noble intentions and some enduring successes. Poor families got basic health care; disadvantaged children were given a head start in life. Yet, there were also some consequences that no one wanted or intended. The welfare entitlement became an enemy of personal effort and responsibility, turning many recipients into dependents. The War on Poverty also turned too many citizens into bystanders, convinced that compassion had become the work of government alone.

In 1996, welfare reform confronted the first of these problems, with a five-year time limit on benefits, and a work requirement to receive them. Instead of a way of life, welfare became an offer of temporary help—not an entitlement, but a transition. Thanks in large part to this change, welfare rolls have been cut in half. Work and self-respect have been returned to many lives. That is a tribute to the Republicans and Democrats who agreed on reform, and to the President who signed it: President Bill Clinton.

Our nation has confronted welfare dependency. But our work is only half done. Now we must confront the second problem: to revive the spirit of citizenship—to marshal the compassion of our people to meet the continuing needs of our nation. This is a challenge to my administration, and to each one of you. We must meet that challenge—because it is right, and because it is urgent.

Welfare as we knew it has ended, but poverty has not. When over 12 million children live below the poverty line, we are not a post-poverty America. Most states are seeing the first wave of welfare recipients who have reached the law's five-year time limit. The easy cases have already left the welfare rolls. The hardest problems remain: people with far fewer skills and greater barriers to work, people with complex human problems, like illiteracy and addiction, abuse and mental illness. We do not yet know what will happen to these men and women, or to their children.

But we cannot sit and watch, leaving them to their own struggles and their own fate.

There is a great deal at stake. In our attitudes and actions, we are determining the character of our country. When poverty is considered hopeless, America is condemned to permanent social division, becoming a nation of caste and class, divided by fences and gates and guards.

Our task is clear, and it is difficult: we must build our country's unity by extending our country's blessings. We make that commitment because we are Americans. Aspiration is the essence of our country. We believe in social mobility, not social Darwinism. We are the country of the second chance, where failure is never final. And that dream has sometimes been deferred. It must never be abandoned.

We are committed to compassion for practical reasons. When men and women are lost to themselves, they are also lost to our nation. When millions are hopeless, all of us are diminished by the loss of their gifts.

And we are committed to compassion for moral reasons. Jewish prophets and Catholic teaching both speak of God's special concern for the poor. This is perhaps the most radical teaching of faith—that the value of life is not contingent on wealth or strength or skill. That value is a reflection of God's image.

Much of today's poverty has more to do with troubled lives than a troubled economy. And often when a life is broken, it can only be restored by another caring, concerned human being. The answer for an abandoned child is not a job requirement—it is the loving presence of a mentor. The answer to addiction is not a demand for self-sufficiency—it is personal support on the hard road to recovery.

The hope we seek is found in safe havens for battered women and children, in homeless shelters, in crisis pregnancy centers, in programs that tutor and conduct job training and help young people when they happen to be on parole. All these efforts provide not just a benefit, but attention and kindness, a touch of courtesy, a dose of grace.

Mother Teresa said that what the poor often need, even more than shelter and food—though these are desperately needed, as well—is to be wanted. And that sense of belonging is within the power of each of us to provide. Many in this community have shown what compassion can accomplish.

Notre Dame's own Lou Nanni is the former director of South Bend's Center for the Homeless—an institution founded by two Notre Dame professors. It provides guests with everything

from drug treatment to mental health service, to classes in the Great Books, to preschool for young children. Discipline is tough. Faith is encouraged, not required. Student volunteers are committed and consistent and central to its mission. Lou Nanni describes this mission as “repairing the fabric” of society by letting people see the inherent “worth and dignity and God-given potential” of every human being.

Compassion often works best on a small and human scale. It is generally better when a call for help is local, not long distance. Here at this university, you have heard that call and responded. It is part of what makes Notre Dame a great university.

This is my message today: there is no great society which is not a caring society. And any effective War on Poverty must deploy what Dorothy Day called “the weapons of spirit.”

There is only one problem with groups like South Bend’s Center for the Homeless—there are not enough of them. It is not sufficient to praise charities and community groups, we must support them. And this is both a public obligation and a personal responsibility.

The War on Poverty established a federal commitment to the poor. The welfare reform legislation of 1996 made that commitment more effective. For the task ahead, we must move to the third stage of combating poverty in America. Our society must enlist, equip and empower idealistic Americans in the works of compassion that only they can provide.

Government has an important role. It will never be replaced by charities. My administration increases funding for major social welfare and poverty programs by eight percent. Yet, government must also do more to take the side of charities and community healers, and support their work. We have had enough of the stale debate between big government and indifferent government. Government must be active enough to fund services for the poor—and humble enough to let good people in local communities provide those services.

So I have created a White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives. Through that office we are working to ensure that local community helpers and healers receive more federal dollars, greater private support, and face fewer bureaucratic barriers. We have proposed a “compassion capital fund,” that will match private giving with federal dollars.

We have proposed allowing all taxpayers to deduct their charitable contributions—including non-itemizers. This could encourage almost \$15 billion a year in new charitable giving. My

attitude is, everyone in America—whether they are well-off or not—should have the same incentive and reward for giving.

And we are in the process of implementing and expanding “charitable choice”—the principle, already established in federal law, that faith-based organizations should not suffer discrimination when they compete for contracts to provide social services. Government should never fund the teaching of faith, but it should support the good works of the faithful.

Some critics of this approach object to the idea of government funding going to any group motivated by faith. But they should take a look around them. Public money already goes to groups like the Center for the Homeless and, on a larger scale, to Catholic Charities. Do the critics really want to cut them off? Medicaid and Medicare money currently goes to religious hospitals. Should this practice be ended? Child care vouchers for low income families are redeemed every day at houses of worship across America. Should this be prevented? Government loans send countless students to religious colleges. Should that be banned? Of course not.

America has a long tradition of accommodating and encouraging religious institutions when they pursue public goals. My administration did not create that tradition—but we will expand it to confront some urgent problems.

Today, I am adding two initiatives to our agenda, in the areas of housing and drug treatment. Owning a home is a source of dignity for families and stability for communities—and organizations like Habitat for Humanity make that dream possible for many low income Americans. Groups of this type currently receive some funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The budget I submit to Congress next year will propose a three-fold increase in this funding—which will expand homeownership, and the hope and pride that come with it.

And nothing is more likely to perpetuate poverty than a life enslaved to drugs. So we have proposed \$1.6 billion in new funds to close what I call the treatment gap—the gap between 5 million Americans who need drug treatment, and the 2 million who currently receive it. We will also propose that all these funds—all of them—be opened to equal competition from faith-based and community groups.

The federal government should do all these things; but others have responsibilities, as well—including corporate America.

Many corporations in America do good work, in good causes. But if we hope to substantially reduce poverty and suffering in our country, corporate America needs to give more—and to give better. Faith-based organizations receive only a tiny percentage of overall corporate giving. Currently, six of the ten largest corporate givers in America explicitly rule out or restrict donations to faith-based groups, regardless of their effectiveness. The federal government will not discriminate against faith-based organizations, and neither should corporate America.

In the same spirit, I hope America's foundations consider ways they may devote more of their money to our nation's neighborhoods and their helpers and their healers. I will convene a summit this fall, asking corporate and philanthropic leaders throughout America to join me at the White House to discuss ways they can provide more support to community organizations—both secular and religious.

Ultimately, your country is counting on each of you. Knute Rockne once said, "I have found that prayers work best when you have big players." We can pray for the justice of our country, but you are the big players we need to achieve it. Government can promote compassion, corporations and foundations can fund it, but the citizens—it is the citizens who provide it. A determined assault on poverty will require both an active government, and active citizens.

There is more to citizenship than voting—though I urge you to do it. There is more to citizenship than paying your taxes—though I would strongly advise you to pay them. Citizenship is empty without concern for our fellow citizens, without the ties that bind us to one another and build a common good.

If you already realize this and you are acting on it, I thank you. If you have not thought about it, I leave you with this challenge: serve a neighbor in need. Because a life of service is a life of significance. Because materialism, ultimately, is boring, and consumerism can build a prison of wants. Because a person who is not responsible for others is a person who is truly alone. Because there are few better ways to express our love for America than to care for other Americans. And because the same God who endows us with individual rights also calls us to social obligations.

So let me return to Lyndon Johnson's charge. You are the generation that must decide. Will you ratify poverty and division with your apathy—or will you build a common good with your idealism? Will you be a spectator in the renewal of your country—or a citizen?

The methods of the past may have been flawed, but the idealism of the past was not an illusion. Your calling is not easy, because you must do the acting and the caring. But there is fulfillment in that sacrifice, which creates hope for the rest of us. Every life you help proves that every life might be helped. The actual proves the possible. And hope is always the beginning of change.

