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**George W. Bush's Rhetoric of Compassionate Conservatism
and Its Value as a Tool of Presidential Politics¹**

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Manuscript submitted for review at

Issues for Political Discourse Analysis

Abstract

This essay presents a situational analysis of George W. Bush's rhetoric of compassionate conservatism. It explores Bush's regular use of this discourse to address a number of political exigencies that confront all presidents, such as displaying personal character, framing issues, and energizing national values. I examine Bush's public discourse from the declaration of his presidential candidacy in 1999 to his 2002 State of Union address to illuminate the development of this rhetorical construct and identify how it was employed to address shifting rhetorical situations. While the language did not change over time, the purposes and meanings of compassionate conservatism were repeatedly altered in response to emerging exigencies. This suggests its value for Bush as a flexible, multidimensional tool of presidential rhetorical leadership.

Key Words: presidential rhetoric, George W. Bush, compassionate conservatism, presidential leadership, rhetorical situation, 9/11

In January 2002, President George W. Bush delivered his first State of the Union address since the events of September 11, 2001, in which he defined Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the “axis of evil.” Largely lost in the clamor over Bush divining the “true nature” of these regimes was that he also defined the “true character” of the United States that evening, which he claimed was reflected in the “courage and compassion, strength and resolve” of the American people (Bush, 2002).

Presidential rhetoric is a means to define political reality (see Zarefsky, 2004). By identifying Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the “axis of evil,” Bush sought to strengthen his hand in the foreign policy arena. Already having garnered popular and congressional support to prosecute the so-called War on Terror, the president’s discourse aimed to frame the boundaries of this conflict to include these rogue nations, despite the lack of evidence connecting them to the events of 9/11. Likewise, by holding up a mirror to the American people that flattered their self-image, the president sought to energize national values in support of his foreign policy. He and his advisors understood that the successful prosecution of this “long war,” as Bush described it, would demand courage, strength, and resolve from the American people. But Bush’s rhetoric invites the question: Why include compassion among these other qualities?

The answer involves the integral role that the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism played early in the Bush presidency. Compassionate conservatism has been dismissed as by critics on the right as “liberalism in disguise” and by those on the left as no more than meaningless political rhetoric. But an analysis of Bush’s repeated use of this discourse to address a number of political exigencies—including needs and opportunities to display personal character, set forth an agenda, frame public issues, reinforce public attitudes, buy time, and

energize national values—suggests an alternative interpretation that identifies compassionate conservatism as a flexible, multi-faceted instrument of presidential leadership.

This essay explores the significance of Bush's rhetoric of compassionate conservatism by interpreting it within the larger context of the president's public affairs and communications from his first campaign for the White House, officially launched in June 1999, to his State of the Union address in January 2002. Specifically, it examines Bush's development of this rhetorical construct through his public discourse and its use as a means to address shifting rhetorical situations, and do so in a way that augmented perceptions of his leadership. It finds that the language constituting the president's rhetoric of compassionate conservatism did not significantly change during this 31-month period, yet its purposes and meanings were repeatedly altered in response to the demands of emerging exigencies. Consequently, despite the conventional dismissal of Bush's compassionate conservatism as mere campaign rhetoric, this study highlights both the regularity with which the president returned to this rhetorical construct, as well as its flexibility as a multidimensional tool of presidential politics.

Analysis of the Rhetorical Situation

This situational analysis of Bush's rhetoric of compassionate conservatism is guided by the interpretive perspective that rhetoric is situational. This means that rhetoric exists as a response to a particular situation and that its meaning is constructed within the context of that situation. As Lloyd F. Bitzer (1968) argues, "it is the situation which calls the discourse into existence" (p. 2). In other words, the situation precedes the creation of rhetoric, invites its utterance, supplies it with meaning, and provides the context within which its success (as a fitting response to the situation) can be evaluated. The challenge for a rhetorical leader is to

develop and deploy language that effectively addresses the complexity of what Bitzer termed the “rhetorical situation,” which is constituted by “a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence” (i.e., need, urgency, opportunity), that demands a rhetorical response (1968, p. 6).

Martin J. Medhurst (2007) adds that the construct of the rhetorical situation provides a valuable starting point for studying presidential rhetorical leadership in that “it parallels the political situation faced by all presidents who must daily deal with people, events, objects, and relationships and the various problems or exigencies they present” (p. 61). A situational analysis of presidential rhetoric, therefore, is more specifically an analysis of a president’s ability to interpret and respond to these situations with appropriate rhetoric. Medhurst emphasizes that the exigencies, constraints, and audiences that constitute a rhetorical situation are “constantly shifting and evolving,” and therefore successful rhetorical leadership demands that presidents continuously adapt to meet these dynamic conditions (2007, p. 81). As a consequence, the president’s interpretive ability to “read” these developments and choose effective responses to them is essential.

This task is incredibly complex. The context within which a president acts is saturated with needs that must be rhetorically addressed. The presence of these exigencies is constant, their emergence is continuous, and their combinations are complicated. Additionally, in responding to them, a president must recognize the constraints that accompany the rhetorical situation. It follows that along with these interpretive demands, presidents must make wise choices regarding the selection of rhetorical abilities and resources at their disposal. These choices depend upon the particular audiences that must be addressed to satisfy the exigence (or exigencies) that define the rhetorical situation.²

This essay is particularly interested in the ways that Bush adjusted and deployed the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism to respond to a range of exigencies. These exigencies are rhetorical in nature, Medhurst argues, because they present situations in which “discourse not only *can* be used, but *must* be used” to address these needs (2007, 71 author’s italics). Therefore, as Medhurst explains, “[t]he exigence is the engine that drives the rhetorical action—the part of the situation that is in need of remedy or resolution” (1996, xv). The following analysis demonstrates how, over time, the trajectory of this rhetorical action shadowed the path of shifting rhetorical situations. And while the exigencies that defined these situations differed significantly from one another, in each case Bush opted for the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism to address them.

The Rhetoric of Compassionate Conservatism, Defined by Bush’s Presidential Campaign

From his first day on the campaign trail, George W. Bush strategically employed the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism. Officially announcing his candidacy for the presidency in Amana, Iowa, on June 12, 1999, Bush proclaimed: “I am proud to be a compassionate conservative. I welcome the label. And on this ground I’ll take my stand” (Bush, 1999a). In defining himself as a “compassionate conservative,” Bush introduced a rhetorical construct that he would return to regularly during the next 31 months. Yet, his clear declaration of personal character (“I am proud to be...”) represents only one important dimension of this rhetoric. Bush’s compassionate conservatism discourse also displayed a philosophical dimension (“...on this ground...”) and a policy-oriented dimension (“...I’ll take my stand”). Bush’s announcement of his candidacy reflects how these dimensions were presented in chorus, alongside a political dimension inherent to the exigencies that invite presidential rhetoric.³ In Bush’s discourse, these

personal, philosophical, policy-oriented, and political dimensions were weaved into a rhetorical construct, interpreted here as the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism, a heuristic for rhetorical leadership.

As a vehicle for defining personal character, this discourse was an unambiguous presentation of Bush's qualities—most simply, to “be a compassionate conservative” is to be both compassionate and conservative. According to Medhurst (2007), the general purpose of such a display is to reassure audiences that a rhetorical leader will ground decisions on principles derived from unwavering values.⁴ In the context of Bush's campaign it served complementary political purposes as an assertion of conservative credentials directed at his electoral base, while also distinguishing him as a “different kind of Republican,” sensitive to the plight of less fortunate in American society.

This rhetorical construct offered Bush an opportunity to not only project, but philosophically ground his values and beliefs in what he introduced as “a fresh start; a bold new approach” to governing (Bush, 1999b). In his “Duty of Hope” campaign speech on July 22, 1999, Bush outlined the foundational principles of compassionate conservatism as a governing philosophy. These principles were developed by Marvin N. Olasky (“compassionate conservatism's leading thinker,” according to Bush), as an alternative to what many conservatives consider the excesses and ineffectiveness of modern liberalism (see Olasky 1992, 2000). This governing doctrine fused two principal strands of modern conservatism long at odds with one another—the neo-liberal championing of the free market and a faith-based concern with moral values, self-discipline, and community—into a coherent and complementary whole. Politically, Bush's discourse sought to rhetorically unite these two key factions of the party under a new ideological tent and behind his candidacy.

However, this electoral strategy demanded Bush negotiate a very complex rhetorical situation, although typical of primary-season, by satisfying two distinct and periodically opposed audiences that acted as constraints on his discourse. If compassionate conservatism was to unite economic conservatives and their value-oriented counterparts, his rhetoric had to identify the shortcomings of each position while reassuring their respective advocates that he was indeed “one of them.” The “Duty of Hope” speech represents Bush’s attempt to navigate this challenge, as well as his most comprehensive presentation of compassionate conservatism’s philosophical underpinnings. Beginning again with a definition of self, Bush declared:

I am an economic conservative. I believe we should cut taxes to stimulate economic growth. Yet I know that economic growth is not the solution to every problem. The invisible hand works many miracles. But it cannot touch the human heart (Bush, 1999b).

To reassure economic conservatives, Bush directly self-identifies as one and then reinforces the attitudes and beliefs he shares with this audience by invoking both the language of tax cuts—drawing a clear contrast with his father’s broken “no new taxes” pledge—and a quasi-spiritual imagery of the market’s “many miracles.” And yet, Bush’s reference to the sort of miracles that are beyond the scope of the free market identifies the limitations of economic conservatism, suggesting a perceived need for a reframed conservatism that can also “touch the human heart.”

The idea of compassion underlying Bush’s language is a reflection of Olasky’s reframed 19th century notion of the concept, a faith-driven duty to serve the less fortunate. It is propelled by a belief in tough love, self-help, and individual responsibility.

The reality here is simple. Often when a life is broken, it can only be rebuilt by another caring, concerned human being. Someone whose actions say, 'I love you, I believe in you, I'm in your corner.' This is compassion with a human face and a human voice. It is not an isolated act—it is a personal relationship. And it works.

[I]n solving the problems of our day, there is no substitute for unconditional love and personal contact (Bush, 1999b).

The “human face” and “human voice” saying “I love you, I believe in you, I'm in your corner,” is literally that of the presidential candidate. As a self-defined man of compassion, Bush portrays his governing philosophy as both an extension of his personal character and the foundation of his leadership values. With the aid of modern media, the office of the presidency has transformed into the person of the president, *the* face and voice of the nation. Bush's display of character likewise suggests the promise of a compassionate conservative government, embodied in a personal president who sees “no substitute for...personal contact.”

The political dimension of this rhetoric of compassionate conservatism suggests a “personal relationship” between the candidate and the American people, the perception of which has proved to be of essential value to presidential campaigns. As an expression of a guiding governing philosophy, it additionally suggests a renewed, or at least reframed, image of the relationship between government and civil society. Bush's speech argues that compassionate leadership is guided by the conviction that government can play a role in aiding the neediest of society and, importantly, has a moral responsibility to do so. In contrast to the neo-liberalism of

economic conservatism, compassionate conservatism supposes an active rather than limited government. And yet, this doctrine's conservative motivations dictate that this government role should not be a direct one, but rather an approach that takes local and individual initiative seriously. In this same speech, Bush clarified:

This will not be the failed compassion of towering, distant bureaucracies. On the contrary, it will be government that serves those who are serving their neighbors. It will be government that directs help to the inspired and the effective. It will be government that both knows its limits, and shows its heart. And it will be government truly by the people and for the people (Bush, 1999b).

Government leadership that "directs help," but "knows its limits," is one that directs its resources and institutions toward the promotion and encouragement of compassionate attitudes and, importantly, compassionate behavior among others. This promotion and encouragement of behavior represents the policy-oriented dimension of Bush's rhetorical construct. Eschewing "towering, distant bureaucracies," compassionate conservatism represents a rhetorical commitment to pursuing a policy agenda that empowers the foundational, mediating institutions of civil society.⁵ It is these "personal" institutions, the neighborhood groups, faith-based organizations, and volunteer associations, whom Bush identifies as "inspired" and "effective" in "serving their neighbors."

Explaining the outline of this policy agenda, Bush promised that

...in every instance where my administration sees a responsibility to help people, we will look first to faith-based organizations, charities and community groups that have shown their ability to save and change lives. We will make a determined attack on need, by promoting the compassionate acts of others. We will rally the armies of compassion in our communities to fight a very different war against poverty and hopelessness, a daily battle waged house to house and heart by heart (Bush, 1999b).

This passage is a display of the candidate's commitment to this governing approach, motivated by the religious duty to "save and change lives" and a martial pledge to undertake "a daily battle waged house to house," "make a determined attack on need," and "fight a very different war against poverty and hopelessness." Bush's language stands Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty rhetoric on its head, while concurrently locating itself within the tradition of American discourse embodied by William James's notion of a "moral equivalent of war."

This promotion and encouragement of the "armies of compassion" presented a characteristic display of Bush's personal character, his philosophy of governing, and his policy orientation. During his first year in the White House, the president returned again and again to this rhetoric of compassionate conservatism, and particularly the language of promotion and encouragement, in efforts to negotiate various political contexts. While the rhetorical situations in which he found himself shifted with the emergence and decay of political exigencies, the following analysis demonstrates that Bush's reliance on this rhetoric construct did not.

Reframing the Faith-Based Initiative as Communities of Character

Once elected, the campaign rhetoric of compassionate conservatism was reframed as presidential rhetoric and transformed into a display of leadership in Bush's inaugural address on January 20, 2001:

Government has great responsibilities for public safety and public health, for civil rights and common schools. Yet compassion is the work of a nation, not just a government. What you do is as important as anything government does. I ask you to seek a common good beyond your comfort; to defend needed reforms against easy attacks; to serve your nation, beginning with your neighbor (Bush, 2001a).

In remarks at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building nine days later, Bush turned his focus to implementing his compassionate conservative agenda, starting with the controversial faith-based initiative that had been showcased during the campaign.⁶

It is one of the great goals of my administration to invigorate the spirit of involvement and citizenship. We will encourage faith-based and community programs without changing their mission.

I approach this goal with some basic principles: Government has important responsibilities...[y]et when we see social needs in America, my administration will look first to faith-based programs and community groups, which have proven their power to save and change lives (Bush, 2001b).

Along with reiterating the guiding principles of his governing philosophy, Bush declared his intention to send a legislative proposal to Congress to ensure that “when people of faith provide social services, [government] will not discriminate against them” and “faith-based and community groups will always have a place at the table in our deliberations” (Bush, 2001b). Utilizing another of his tools as legislator-in-chief, Bush issued his first executive order establishing the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and naming John J. DiIulio Jr., a self-defined born-again Catholic, Democratic political science professor, as its first director.⁷

After this initial flourish of action, however, the faith-based initiative was mentioned only once in the president's communications over the next six weeks, in an address to the Joint Session of Congress on February 21, 2001. In this speech, it was overshadowed by the administration's proposals for the No Child Left Behind education initiative and a major tax cut. In an interview three years later, DiIulio still seemed astounded by the reality that a president's agenda has room, at most, for two big issues “that are consuming the Oval Office, that are driving the president's schedule, that are driving the speechwriters” (DiIulio, personal communication, May 20, 2004). Slipping down to the third spot behind education reform and the tax cut, he said, was in essence like falling off the White House agenda entirely.

In fact, it took DiIulio straying from Bush's compassionate conservatism rhetoric in a controversial speech at the National Association for Evangelicals on March 7, 2001, to thrust the faith-based initiative back onto Bush's agenda. Although speaking as a political appointee, and therefore an official mouthpiece of the administration, DiIulio ruffled the feathers of a key electoral base by telling the Christian evangelical community to “get real” about helping the poor (DiIulio, 2001). He recalls that upon returning to the White House

...all hell breaks loose. But I knew when I got back [to the White House] that two things would be true: I would have a lot of people very angry at me in the West Wing, but that one of them would not necessarily be George W. Bush. And that the punch in the solar plexus with that issue would force everybody to say, "Doggone it, remember? Oh yeah, he ran as the Compassionate Conservative;" and this was key. "We just can't let the House Republicans keep running with this, we've got to do something, we've got to get back in the game, we've got to give some speeches" (DiIulio, personal communication, May 20, 2004).

Despite the president's proposals, however, there was no stopping the House Republicans from running with the faith-based issue. According to DiIulio, the so-called faith-based bill [H.R. 7, "The Community Solutions Act"] was largely crafted by House Republican staff members, with consultation "from somewhere in the West Wing," although he was never completely clear about who was involved. The draft bill was never sent to DiIulio for input, let alone approval. In fact, he never saw the bill until it became a public document in June 2001. He explained that this put him "in a very awkward situation." First, because aspects of the bill concerning the separation of church and state and discriminatory hiring were clearly unconstitutional and, second, there was no way that it would gain the support of the centrist Senate Democrats whom DiIulio had lobbied hard to bring into the process.

Once it was released publicly, however, its passage became a rallying cry among Christian Conservatives, whom Bush was not willing to cross. The president's discourse during this period gave no indication of the political struggles taking place between House Republicans

and his own Faith-Based Office. Instead, Bush continued to locate the initiative within his rhetoric of compassionate conservatism and its emphasis on promotion and encouragement. In a Rose Garden speech on July 9, 2001, the president told members of the volunteer organization America's Promise that

...there is no more important initiative than the faith-based program that I've submitted to the United States Congress. It's important because government can't make people love one another. But what government can do is stand side-by-side with those who do love, and those who are compassionate (Bush, 2001c).

Bush's rhetoric, however, also included two indications that he was aware that the faith-based bill was in dire straits. First was language that placed full responsibility for the legislative process on Congress, thereby creating a political scapegoat if the process collapsed.

I urge Congress to not get stuck in the process, but to think about the results, and to pass meaningful legislation that will allow and encourage and foster faith-based groups all across America to help people in need. I absolutely know that the great strength of the country lies in the hearts and souls of our citizens. And Congress must recognize that, by enabling such faith-based programs to flourish all across the country (Bush, 2001c).

This was followed by an effort to diminish the importance of securing legislation by reminding

Americans that it was not laws, but results in the form of changed behavior that mattered.

[H]ere in Washington we tend to think all we've got to do is pass a law and everything will be fine. But that's not how it works. Cultures and hope change as a result of our compassion in America (Bush, 2001c).

By identifying cultural change rather than passing legislation as the marker of success, Bush aimed to alter the standards and extend the timeframe according to which his initiative should be judged. This rhetoric also leaves the door open for the further promotion and encouragement of compassionate acts, regardless of what happened in Congress.

On July 19, the faith-based bill passed through the House on what was essentially a party-line vote, with only fifteen Democrats voting in favor, but it represented a significant political victory for Bush. In a White House statement released that evening, the president refocused the spotlight on his personal commitment by claiming "a victory for progress and compassion."

From small religious congregations to large foundations and faith-based charities, the real support for our work has come from people and groups that put first the injunction to love and serve a neighbor in need.

No one can love a neighbor as well as a loving neighbor, and we must unleash good people of faith and works in every community in our country. I commend the United States House and urge the United States Senate to act quickly to unleash this enormous force for good (Bush, 2001d).

Despite his attempt to move the bill, Bush's advisors knew that the House Republican's faith-based legislation, although freed of the offending unconstitutional provisions, was likely to be a nonstarter in the Democratically-controlled Senate. However, according to David Kuo, former Deputy Director of the White House Faith-Based Office, the prospect of this legislative failure did not damage the initiative's rhetorical value for the president.

[O]ver time it became clearer that the White House didn't have to expend any political capital for pro-poor legislation. The initiative powerfully appealed to both conservative Christians and urban faith leaders—regardless of how much money was being appropriated. The Faith-Based Office was the cross around the White Houses' neck showing the president's own faith orientation. That was sufficient (Kuo, 2005).

Supporting Kuo's interpretation of events was the organization of a White House senior staff retreat by Karl Rove's Office of Strategic Initiatives in late July 2001, immediately following the House vote on the faith-based bill. These meetings included an unambiguous discussion about how the Bush administration might emulate the popular leadership and rapid-response communications perfected by Bill Clinton's White House. The goal was to reestablish the public image that had served Bush so well during the 1999-2000 campaign—that of a leader of character with a deeply-held and unwavering commitment to compassion. According to *The Washington Post*, White House planning documents leaked after the retreat suggested that President Bush

...play down issues geared toward conservatives that dominated his first six months in office. Instead, the documents say, the president will stress themes that 'unite Americans by focusing on children, quality of life and universally appreciated values.' It illustrates the apparent recognition by the White House that...the president needs to build a record of accomplishment by pursuing policies that appeal directly to the American people and do not necessarily require congressional approval (Allen, 2001).

With no political interest in pushing the faith-based initiative aside and upsetting a powerful bastion of electoral support, or in spending more political capital in a losing effort, Bush aides sought to develop a rhetorical device that could reconceptualize the initiative for a wider secular audience. One of the proposed alternatives was referred to as Communities of Character which, according to DiIulio, "was sort of sprung out of nowhere" by then Counselor to the President and key communications strategist, Karen Hughes.

[Hughes] had seen a bunch of underage kids trying to get into an R-rated movie, and led by their soccer coach or something, and "that ought not to happen" and "there ought to be some way or some ways and means of enforcing community standards" and so forth. And this sort of notion of this phrase "Communities of Character" comes into being (DiIulio, personal communication, May 20, 2004).

The language of Communities of Character provided a rhetorical cover under which the

faith-based initiative could be relocated and reframed as a volunteer and community service mobilization component of compassionate conservatism. This would provide the White House with a secularized “way of communicating the president’s concern for community organizations,” according to DiIulio (personal communication, May 20, 2004), and a means to continue to deploy the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism without regard to the ultimate fate of the faith-based bill on Capitol Hill.

Bush first mentioned the phrase “communities of character” on August 14, 2001, in a speech at a YMCA picnic in Rocky Mountain National Park, situating it within the rhetorical construct of compassionate conservatism.

The spirit of America is found in the character of our citizens, the value base that makes America, I think, such a different kind of place...a country that values family and friendship; a place where people learn values and character. When I try to describe America to somebody who has never been here I say, we’re a country stitched together by communities of character.

[E]ach of us must be responsible for the decisions we make in life. And that’s a really important character and core value for our country. That we must have a responsible society; that government can’t do everything in a society. We’ve got to be responsible for loving a neighbor like we’d like to be loved ourselves (Bush, 2001e).

In his response to follow up questions that afternoon, Bush added that “[a]ll kinds of

communities have character around the country, and [the YMCA] is a unique community of character” (Bush, 2001e).

Four days later in a radio address from his ranch in Crawford, Texas, the president returned to the issue of the stalled faith-based bill, but his language now reflected the recent rhetorical turn toward Communities of Character.

This month in my travels around the country, I am talking about values that make communities strong and our nation unique. One of those essential American values is compassion.

The House of Representatives took a key step in leveling the playing field by passing my faith-based and community initiative... I applaud the bipartisan House vote and urge the Senate to pass that legislation (Bush, 2001f).

In this address, Bush also engaged in the strategy of going public, using the active leadership of public opinion to bring the American people into the policy-making process in hopes of gaining essential leverage in his negotiations with Congress (See Kernell, 1986).⁸ In this effort, Bush added:

If you agree, let your senator know if you see him or her during the congressional recess. Faith-based and community groups cannot replace the work of government, but with government's help, they can serve many more people. And my administration is committed to providing that help.

Compassion is one of the values that builds communities of character, because every community of character must be a community of service (Bush, 2001f).

The Communities of Character discourse was a re-imagining of the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism. It provided Bush with a means to respond to the shifting rhetorical situation brought about by the failure of the faith-based initiative without admitting defeat or jettisoning the rhetoric that had been used to support the initiative. Additionally, like its faith-based predecessor, Communities of Character served as a symbolic badge displaying the president's personal character. Moreover, it reaffirmed the principles of Bush's governing philosophy while portraying his continued pursuit of a compassionate conservative policy agenda that could catalyze a behavioral change in American culture.

Faltering Rhetorical Leadership and Buying Time in the Wake of 9/11

The events of September 11, 2001, abruptly brought about a new situation that demanded a multifaceted rhetorical response by Bush. New exigencies concerning foreign policy, homeland security, and economic recovery were understandably thrust to the top of the president's agenda. However, accompanying these was a need for Bush to offer a timely and compelling answer to the question that so many Americans were suddenly asking: "How can I help?"

In the month following the events of September 11, 70 percent of all Americans took part in some form of charitable involvement (Independent Sector, 2001) and four out of every five reported displaying the flag (Risser and Ward, 2001). As one commentator remarked of September 11: "In the days that followed, we all witnessed an outbreak of civic-mindedness so

extreme that it seemed American character had changed overnight” (Packer, 2001). Data indicated that 81 percent of those surveyed were “looking for a way to contribute to the nation and support efforts by the federal government to facilitate such efforts,” and 70 percent supported “dramatically enlarging America’s national service program” (Penn, 2001). Additionally, Americans reported a renewed trust in national government, up 44 percent from the year before (Sander and Putnam, 2002). As Theda Skocpol (2002) explains: “When war breaks out—and especially when the nation is attacked—millions of Americans become aware of their shared national identity and are willing to work together on local and national responses to the crisis” (p. 537).

Robert D. Putnam described the period as a “window of opportunity” that “has opened for a sort of civic renewal that occurs only once or twice a century.” Yet, he warned that without the widespread and timely transformation of attitudes into behavior through government leadership the opportunity would be lost (Putnam, 2002, p. 22). This argument, supported by Putnam’s research on American civic engagement, echoed the literature on rhetorical situations. Specifically, Bitzer (1968) contends that “[e]very rhetorical situation in principle evolves to a propitious moment for the fitting rhetorical response. After this moment, most situations decay” and the opportunity to introduce a fitting response is lost (p. 13).

Yet, the promotion and encouragement that characterized Bush’s rhetoric of compassionate conservatism was largely absent from the president’s public communications in the month following September 11. Noting this silence, commentator David Gergen (2001), former advisor to Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, remarked that “President Bush clearly supports the idea [of citizen service]. What is lacking, though, is a clarion call, a ‘certain trumpet’ that breaks through, along with a sweeping plan for action.” The

exigence presented by an historic “outbreak of civic-mindedness” was not addressed by the president’s discourse. This failure of rhetorical leadership was further compounded by Bush’s impromptu responses to reporters’ questions that seemingly begged him to take advantage of the opportunity.

For instance, in a press conference at Camp David on September 15, Bush was asked about the sacrifices that ordinary Americans would now be expected to make in their daily lives. Rather than encourage and promote the armies of compassion as he had done many times before, the president instead responded: “Our hope, of course, is that they make no sacrifice whatsoever. We would like to see life return to normal in America” (Bush, 2001g). Again, in a primetime news conference held on October 11 in the East Room of the White House, Bush was asked if he planned to call for any sacrifices from the American people. The president responded:

Well, you know, I think the American people are sacrificing now. I think they’re waiting in airport lines longer than they ever had before. I think there’s a certain sacrifice when you lose a piece of your soul. I think there’s a sacrifice, there’s a certain sense of giving themselves to share their grief with people they’ll never, maybe, ever see in their lives. So America is sacrificing.

The evil ones have sparked an interesting change in America, I think—a compassion in our country that is overflowing. I know their intended act was to destroy us and make us cowards and make us not want to respond. But quite the opposite has happened—our nation is united, we are strong, we’re compassionate; neighbors care about neighbors (Bush, 2001h).

Here, Bush uses the language of compassion, not to rally the American people to action, but to define them. According to Medhurst (2007), in moments such as that which emerged in the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, “the exigence is clear—the need to help Americans understand who they have become, to reconfigure their self-identity” (p. 75). The president notes that an “interesting change in America” has occurred in the form of “overflowing” compassion; that is, the same change in attitude that his rhetoric of compassionate conservatism had sought to bring about. Yet, the active promotion and encouragement of compassionate behavior that was central to Bush compassionate conservative agenda in general, and his faith-based initiative in particular, was lacking.

In Bush's opening remarks at the October 11 press conference he also returned to the phrase “communities of character,” although its purpose was no longer to provide rhetorical cover for the faith-based initiative. Sheared of the action-oriented effort to develop communities of service, the phrase was now used to define the changed character of the American people and present the image of a leader in tune with this transformation.

Before Sept. 11, my administration was planning an initiative called Communities of Character. It was designed to help parents develop good character in their children and to strengthen the spirit of citizenship and service in our communities. The acts of September 11 have prompted that initiative to occur on its own in ways far greater than I could have ever imagined (Bush, 2001h).

Bush's claim that his administration's goal to create a culture of compassion had been achieved "on its own" implicitly suggests that no further presidential calls to action were necessary.

Rather than turning to the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism to promote and encourage the armies of compassion at the most opportune of moments, Bush opted for a discourse that instead seemed to encourage quiescence.

The reasons for this breakdown of rhetorical leadership are unclear. In interviews, officials at relevant executive departments, agencies, and offices, such as the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Faith-Based Office, and the Department of Homeland Security, suggested it was a consequence of the fact that so many major issues demanded the president's attention during this period. By contrast, a former White House official claimed that substantial policy discussions concerning a compassionate response to September 11 were taking place during this time. Though, another administration official described the White House during these months as "disoriented" and "scrambling."

There was, however, clear movement on Capitol Hill. In November 2001, Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Evan Bayh (D-IN) cosponsored the bipartisan *Call to Service Act*. As they explained in a *New York Times* op-ed piece: "Americans have found a new spirit of national unity and purpose [and] are eager for ways to serve at home and abroad. Government should make it easier for them to do so" (McCain and Bayh, 2001a). The senators' bill had two primary objectives: to increase the size of the AmeriCorps national service program from 50,000 to 250,000 members by 2010, including an immediate increase of 20,000 corps members; and to mandate that 50 percent of these corps members be designated to address issues of public safety, public health, and disaster relief and preparedness.

This activity in the Senate threatened the president's image as a leader who took the

initiative on compassion-related issues and therefore created a new exigence that demanded a rapid rhetorical response. On November 8, 2001, one day after the McCain-Bayh bill was introduced, Bush used a primetime speech from the World Congress Center in Atlanta to remind the American people of his compassionate conservative credentials.

In my inaugural address, I asked our citizens to serve their nation, beginning with their neighbors. This fall, I had planned a new initiative called Communities of Character, designed to spark a rebirth of citizenship and character and service. The events of September the 11th have caused that initiative to happen on its own, in ways we could never have imagined.

Many ask, what can I do to help in our fight. The answer is simple. All of us can become a September the 11th volunteer by making a commitment to service in our own communities (Bush, 2001i).

Bush never fleshed out what it meant to be a “September the 11th volunteer.” Nor did the phrase ever reappear in his public communications. Yet, it did mark a return to the active promotion and encouragement that characterized the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism; although in response to a new rhetorical situation. The president’s speech also introduced two new initiatives, both framed in the context of the War on Terror. The Presidential Task Force on Citizen Preparedness in the War Against Terrorism was created for a 40-day mission to “make recommendations to help prepare Americans in their homes, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, places of worship and public places from the potential consequences of terrorist

attacks” (White House, 2001). The second initiative consisted of a plan to refocus AmeriCorps on homeland security issues, such as public safety, public health, and disaster mitigation and preparedness; though all of these had been aspects of the program’s mission since its creation in 1993. The primary difference between the administration’s proposal and the McCain-Bayh bill was that the White House initiative left the policy details unspecified and made no mention of any interest in pursuing legislation. These omissions were highlighted by a *New York Times* headline two days later that read: “After Asking for Volunteers, Government Tries to Determine What They Will Do” (Mitchell, 2001).

The senators’ *Call to Service Act* was not mentioned in Bush’s speech, after which McCain and Bayh released a statement that they “anticipate working closely with the Administration to enact this legislation” (McCain and Bayh, 2001b). Although disputed by White House officials, sources involved with the McCain-Bayh bill claim that neither senator was ever contacted by the White House, nor received a response after multiple personal and written requests for consultation. Their bill never made it out of committee. The Presidential Task Force carried out its duties, yet, the remainder of Bush’s “September the 11th Volunteer” proposal never materialized. In response to the situation, Bush had again deployed the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism, in this case as a rapid-response placeholder that could buy time and steal back the spotlight from Congress by portraying the president as a leader taking the initiative.

Trying to Reenergize National Values with a “Call to Service”

On January 29, 2002, Bush delivered his first State of the Union address since the events of September 11.

None of us would ever wish the evil that was done on September the 11th. Yet after America was attacked, it was as if our entire country looked into a mirror and saw our better selves. We were reminded that we are citizens, with obligations to each other, to our country, and to history. We began to think less of the goods we can accumulate, and more about the good we can do (Bush, 2002).

Bush sought to shape public memory through a rhetorical reconstruction of the positive ways that this event had changed the character of the American people by bringing about “our better selves.” But then the president returned to the action-oriented rhetoric of compassionate conservatism that, apart from his encouragement to become a September the 11th Volunteer, had been absent since the late summer of 2001.

We have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like. We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self. We've been offered a unique opportunity, and we must not let this moment pass (Bush, 2002).

Rhetorically portraying himself as leading the charge toward the realization of this vision, the president sought to reenergize national values and take advantage of the “unique opportunity.”

Returning to the discourse of promotion and encouragement, Bush called upon every American to seize the moment and join in a great civic undertaking by pledging at least two years of their lives, the equivalent of 4000 hours, to the service of others. To support his “call to service,” Bush introduced a new initiative, the USA Freedom Corps. According to the

president's "Foreword" in the government-published policy book that accompanied the announcement of this initiative:

We have seen the true character of the American people reveal itself in unity and generosity, patriotism and civic pride. Our great challenge now is to encourage this outpouring of service and civic pride—and to harness it to a great national purpose (White House, 2002, p. 1).

To meet this challenge, the USA Freedom Corps was designed to “encourage and support those who want to serve their country” and “promote a culture of responsibility, service, and citizenship” (White House, 2002, p. 3). The language of encouragement and promotion again took center stage.

Akin to the strategy employed in pursuit of the faith-based initiative, the USA Freedom Corps was joined by a proposed legislative centerpiece—the *Citizen Service Act of 2002*—principally written by the head of Bush's Domestic Policy Council, John Bridgeland.⁹ The primary intent of the bill, submitted in April 2002, was to overhaul and expand opportunities for service through accountability reforms and a dramatic increase in appropriations for programs administered by Corporation for National and Community Service (e.g., AmeriCorps, VISTA, and Senior Corps). The bill was taken up the following month by the House Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Select Education, chaired by Republican Representative and co-sponsor Peter Hoekstra, who declared that it would pass through the House “relatively quickly and on a bipartisan basis” (Quoted in Hebel, 2002).

Despite Hoekstra's optimism, the White House knew that the legislation would face

strong opposition from members of the House Republican leadership, for whom Bill Clinton's AmeriCorps was, according to DiIulio, "the thing they love most to hate. They can't stand the very word—they call it AmeriCorpse" (DiIulio, personal communication, May 20, 2004).

Conservative critics had long charged the national service program with wastefulness, liberal advocacy, and overblown claims of success that lacked accompanying evidence. Persuading them to not only embrace, but agree to fund the significant expansion of that which they had long targeted for destruction would require an intense rhetorical effort by Bush to rally favorable public opinion to use as leverage with Congress.

The president did undertake a lengthy speaking campaign to publicize his "call to service" and introduce the new USA Freedom Corps immediately following his State of the Union address. In fact, during the remaining eleven months of 2002, Bush spoke at 28 public events to promote his "call to service." This represented a remarkable expenditure of the president's time and energies considering the magnitude and immediacy of the security concerns that commanded the attention of the White House in the wake of September 11.

Contrary to expectations, however, this substantial rhetorical endeavor lacked any concerted efforts by the president to mobilize popular support for the passage of his initiative's legislative centerpiece. Akin to his State of the Union, Bush's rhetoric continued to rally the armies of compassion through the energizing of national values, but it never explicitly attempted to use his leadership of public opinion as a persuasive instrument to generate congressional support. In other words, there was proposed legislation and plenty of rhetoric, but no going public. Concerning this state of affairs, Senator McCain incredulously remarked in a December 2002 interview: "I've seen no push for legislation from the White House" (Quoted in Milbank, 2002).

In fact, the Bush administration was not pushing. According to an interview with Bridgeland (personal communication, May 19, 2004), the architect of the USA Freedom Corps initiative and first Director of its White House office, a decision had been made early on in the process to abandon the *Citizen Service Act*. Rather than expending the political capital that would have been necessary to pressure key legislators and successfully guide the bill through Congress—which risked a repeat of the public failure sustained by the faith-based bill—Bush simply turned his back on Capitol Hill. The bill, after surviving difficult subcommittee and committee votes in June 2002, ended up in legislative purgatory when the House Republican leadership declined to schedule a floor vote. All the while, the president's public communications in support of his USA Freedom Corps initiative continued. And yet, even while the *Citizen Service Act* remained in limbo, its precarious legislative status was never mentioned in Bush's public communications on the issue.

Like the move made after the legislative failure of the faith-based bill, the White House simply continued on with the rhetorical campaign. In an interview, Bridgeland dismissed the criticism that the president's abandonment of the *Citizen Service Act* constituted a failure as “very narrow-minded” and “Washington-centric.” Americans would not be any more encouraged to engage in civic service by legislation, he argued, because a bill “means nothing to them. Nothing. [And] it doesn't really matter now...because we're focused on the result” (Bridgeland, personal communication, May 19, 2004). This echoed the claims that Bush had made about his faith-based initiative in the summer of 2001—it is not laws, but cultural change that brings results.

Conclusions

Each reincarnation of Bush's rhetoric of compassionate conservatism emphasized the government's role in the promotion and encouragement of acts of compassion, regardless of the particular situation that it was employed to respond to. Despite the consistency of his language, however, the political exigencies that the president sought to address with this rhetoric were continuously shifting. During the 31-month period between the official declaration of his candidacy for the White House and his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush only deviated from this rhetorical construct for a brief moment. Yet it was this moment, in the immediate wake of the events of September 11, at which this discourse would likely have been the most influential.

This analysis raises questions about the consistency, if not the quality, of Bush's rhetorical leadership during his first year in office. However, more interesting is the flexibility of the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism that was demonstrated in Bush's public communications, both as candidate and president. While all presidents, of course, hope to turn every exigence to their political advantage, it is challenging enough to simply address them adequately most of the time. The range of situations in which Bush deployed this rhetorical construct, and its ability to make meaning for multiple audiences on multiple dimensions, suggests its once-held value for the president as a multifaceted political tool. And while it ultimately yielded little, if anything, in the public policy arena, compassionate conservatism was certainly something more than mere campaign rhetoric.

The significance of such discourse for presidential leadership is not its ability or inability to move public opinion by "going public," but rather its provision of a heuristic within which a president can frame multiple dimensions of rhetorical presentation. Compassionate conservatism

provided Bush with a means to simultaneously define his personal character, present the principles of his governing philosophy, offer a framework within which to couch his policy proposals and, most definitively, serve as a political tool to address emerging exigencies. Similar variations on this heuristic of presidential leadership could be valuable to future presidents in important ways. It provides the White House with a rapid-response mechanism that, while not a “problem solver” in itself, functions as a placeholder that can to buy a president time, which is at a premium. And it is able to do so by presenting a consistent image of leadership, even while behind-the-scenes the White House muddles through political exigencies with a combination of improvisation and trial-and-error.

In Bush's case, this form of rhetorical leadership was not constructive in the public policy arena and, too often, it was not intended to be. But an assessment of the normative value of the president's rhetorical construct and a situational analysis of its strategic value are not one in the same. The former tells a story of compassionate conservatism as a policy failure—promises were made and forgotten, proposals were defeated, and opportunities were missed. By contrast, this essay offers an alternative interpretation of Bush's rhetoric of compassionate conservatism based on the latter approach. It is not a success story either, but one of political survival.

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¹ An earlier draft of this essay was presented as “George W. Bush’s Compassionate Conservatism: An Interpretive Analysis of Rhetorical Situation” at the 3rd International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis: Democracy, Governance, and Methods, organized by the Centre for Theoretical Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Essex, Colchester, UK, June 20, 2008.

² For a comprehensive discussion of these constraints, abilities, resources, exigencies, and audiences, see Martin J. Medhurst, “Rhetorical Leadership and the Presidency: A Situational Taxonomy,” in *The Values of Presidential Leadership*, eds. T. L. Price and J. T. Wren (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 59-84.

³ A political dimension is inherent to presidential rhetoric. For example, while Bush’s statement “I am proud to be a compassionate conservative” is a display of personal character, it simultaneously represents an effort to define political reality in an advantageous way. Such examples of “presidential definition,” according to David Zarefsky, are always political because “there are interests at stake in how a situation is framed.” See David Zarefsky, “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004): 611-613.

⁴ For a discussion regarding the importance of the display of character for presidential leadership, see Medhurst, “Rhetorical Leadership and the Presidency,” 74.

⁵ On mediating institutions, see the seminal research of Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977).

⁶ For a comprehensive account and analysis of the faith-based initiative and the policy-making process that accompanied it, see Amy E. Black, Douglas L. Koopman, and David K. Ryden, *Of*

Little Faith: The Politics of George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiatives (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

⁷ With much gratitude, I would like to acknowledge my debt to Professor John DiIuilo. The hours of observations, insights, and good stories he left me with have both greatly contributed to my research and significantly influenced my understanding of the modern American presidency.

⁸ Also see the cogent critique of going public as a strategy of presidential leadership in George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁹ I would like to express my sincere thanks to John Bridgeland for his time and his candor. He is truly a man of great character and compassion.