

¹Compassionate Conservatism 101: George W. Bush's Africa AIDS Initiative

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Introduction

Ask 10 people for a definition of conservatism and you will get 10 different answers. Ask 10 conservatives for a definition of conservatism and you will get 10 different answers. Ask 10 conservative *Christians* for a definition of conservatism and you will get 10 different answers.

The problem with defining conservatism is that the issues and times change, and, further, there is no ultimate authority—no deposit of infallible truth enshrined on a mountain top—with the preeminent ability to thunder down an absolute definition of conservatism. There are no Ten Commandments of Conservatism etched in stone tablets at the headquarters of *National Review* or outside the Reagan Library or at the base of the tombstone of William F. Buckley, Jr. Neither Russell Kirk nor Barry Goldwater left us a sacred canon of inspired texts that constitute the Conservative Bible. And if they did, how long would it take before there were 30,000 differing, bickering conservative denominations rigidly separated by their myriad of conflicting interpretations?

Even if we all agreed on a definition of conservatism, how would we agree on application of the definition? Where would we house the Conservative Magisterium infused with the spirit of Reagan to settle, say, the *correct* conservative position on Social Security reform in America in 2012?

For that matter, what is the *proper* conservatism position on Social Security reform?

¹ I write about this at length in my book, *God and George W. Bush: A Spiritual Life* (NY: HarperCollins, 2004).

What is the *right* conservative position on immigration? Good luck getting an answer to that one.

Where should conservatives stand on the question of spreading democracy in the Middle East? Good luck again.

And here is a quick way to start a fight among a group of Republicans:

Was President George W. Bush a conservative? To fiscal conservatives, Bush was not; to social conservatives, Bush most assuredly was. Bush spent too much money, conservatives (almost) universally agree, but he was wonderful on the first and most fundamental of all human freedoms: the right to life. Besides, are not all conservatives at least pro-life? Not all conservatives would agree.

How about foreign policy? Was George W. Bush a conservative in that area? To foreign-policy conservatives he was.... Well, wait a minute, what is a foreign-policy conservative nowadays?

Such questions concerning George W. Bush, his policies, and his foreign policy brings me to the focus of this paper.

Few positions of President Bush prompted as many raised eyebrows among conservatives as his historic, massive program of multi-tens of billions of dollars in American relief for AIDS victims in Africa. To this day, it elicits all sorts of reactions from conservatives, with diametrically opposed receptions from, say, a Wheaton College conservative vs. a Hillsdale College conservative, from a Michael Gerson vs. a Pat Buchanan, from a “social justice” Christian vs. a libertarian.

What was that AIDS initiative? From what sort of conservative thinking did it emanate? What has been its effect? And where do conservatives continue to stand today on this truly remarkable, albeit controversial, Bush program?

This paper addresses those questions. It will not attempt the impossible: that is, for its author to assume unto himself the absolute authority of judging whether the Bush initiative is or is not *conservative*. I will leave those judgments to the debaters—who will happily take up the charge with gusto.

For here, it is worth our time, in this conference on conservatism, to at least pause to consider the facts and roots and results of this uniquely Bush brand of self-described “conservatism,” for better or worse.

Compassionate Conservatism

To understand George W. Bush’s thinking on Africa and AIDS, one first needs to revisit his concept of “compassionate conservatism.”²

This thinking dates back to Bush’s period as two-term governor of Texas in the 1990s. Bush had concluded, based not only on his faith experiences but his experiences working with urban youth in the 1970s, that both the private and public sectors were hampered in how much they could help people: He believed that the private sector was limited by a lack of funds, whereas the public sector was limited by a lack of faith. What Bush sought to do was to provide public funds to private religious groups that were dedicated to helping ameliorate social ills. He would call this compassionate conservatism.

² I write about this at length in my book, *God and Bush*, (NY: HarperCollins, 2004).

The original concept for “compassionate conservatism” has been traced to Marvin Olasky, a former professor at the University of Texas at Austin and longtime editor of the influential evangelical magazine, *World*. Though Olasky takes credit for coining compassionate conservatism, he said that Bush “saw its potential, developed it, ran with it, and made it a hit.”³ Moreover, Olasky is not responsible for what some enthusiasts of compassionate conservatism ultimately did with the concept, perhaps even pulling it far away from what he initially envisioned.

Compassionate conservatism is, nonetheless, effectively George W. Bush’s trademark. In his pre-presidential memoirs, *A Charge to Keep*, where he laid out his vision for the country and the world, Bush focused on this philosophy.⁴ The closing chapter of the book is titled, “A Compassionate Conservative.” That philosophy was his sign-off, his launching point.

Many conservatives almost immediately resented Bush’s use of the phrase, believing—not unjustifiably—that it seemed to both validate and feed the liberal assertion that conservatives lack compassion. It appeared to suggest that there was conservatism, yes, but then there was *compassionate* conservatism—as if traditional conservatism was inherently bereft of compassion.

Bush, however, never claimed that conservatism was wanting for compassion. The phrase merely defined him, he said, and the form of conservatism he embraced. He called it conservatism with a smile, not a frown.⁵ Indeed, the concept that Bush had in mind piggybacked on the anti-poverty emphasis of many conservative writers and thinkers in the 1980s and 1990s, from Patrick Fagan and Stuart Butler at the Heritage Foundation to Nicholas Eberstadt and many

³ Interview with Marvin Olasky, February 7, 2003.

⁴ George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep* (NY: HarperCollins, Perennial, 2001).

⁵ Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 236.

others. Had conservative stalwart Jack Kemp become president, it (or some derivation of it) may have defined him, though by a different name.

Bush maintained that his philosophy outlined “a new vision” for the “proper role” of government. He pictured a state that consistently and systematically confronts human suffering and helps the disadvantaged. In that way, very broadly speaking, his thinking was not unlike LBJ’s War on Poverty launched in the 1960s; yet, it was critically different in how it enlisted the private sector. The vehicles to deliver Bush’s compassionate conservative agenda would be non-governmental, faith-based groups, even when infused or funded in part by federal dollars. Also, the goal went beyond the War on Poverty in that the target was not merely poverty (lack of income) but forms of social “poverty,” such as drug and alcohol abuse that have long been a domain of religious-based non-profits.

Bush referred to these religiously affiliated institutions, everything from soup kitchens to shelters for battered women, as “platoons” in the “armies of compassion.” Because of their faith-rooted component, these groups, stated Bush, can “demonstrate compassion and inspire hope in a way that government never can. And they inspire life-changing faith in a way that government never should.”⁶

Olasky remarked that Bush believes in these faith-based groups “because he knows how faith in Christ led him to stop emphasizing short-term satisfaction and begin thinking about long-range responsibility.”⁷ Here, Olasky was referring to Bush’s personal battles with alcohol, which were ultimately defeated through his commitment to the Christian faith. Bush saw such religion-based reform in his own life. Ari Fleischer, Bush’s White House press secretary, affirmed that

⁶ President George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast,” (Capital Hilton, Washington, DC, May 16, 2002). He also uses this rhetoric in his pre-presidential memoirs.

⁷ Interview with Marvin Olasky, February 5, 2003.

his boss became invested in faith-based initiatives because of his own history of drinking, where faith motivated a change.⁸

It was, thus, no coincidence that Bush as governor began to implement his compassionate conservatism with an anti-alcohol initiative. It started in 1995 when he backed a non-profit group called Teen Challenge against his own Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse. That was just the start. Many other programs followed, including a remarkable partnership with Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship Ministry, where the governor embarked on what was aptly called "a radical experiment in rehabilitation" at a prison in Sugar Land, Texas.⁹ In this particular case, Bush cited the thinking of his good friend, Pastor Tony Evans, who said, "You don't fix the crack on the wall until you first fix the foundation." Bush agreed, arguing that fixing that moral foundation was the key to fixing prisoners' lives.¹⁰

Tapping the Spiritual Well

The best illustration of Bush's compassionate conservative remains a significant July 8, 1997, speech he gave at a dedication ceremony for the Jesse H. Jones Power Center, a ministry created by the Windsor Village United Methodist Church, an African-American church in Houston. The pastor at Windsor Village was Bush friend, Kirbyjon H. Caldwell. This remains one of the most spiritually and philosophically revealing statements ever given by George W. Bush.

There, Bush said that government is capable of addressing social ills only to a limited degree, because "all the laws in the world cannot make people love one another." Government

⁸ Quoted in Laurie Goodstein, "Puts His Faith in Providence," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2003.

⁹ Hanna Rosin and Terry M. Neal, "Texas Prison Uses 'Christ-Centered' Agenda," *Washington Post*, November 27, 1999, A1.

¹⁰ President George W. Bush, "Remarks on Faith-Based Initiative in Tennessee" (Opryland, Nashville, Tenn., February 10, 2003).

“cannot fill the spiritual well from which we draw strength every day. Only faith can do that.” At the same time, said Bush, “purely secular solutions to social problems” have not worked.

Again, the essence of Bush’s compassionate conservatism was to combine both forces, as he made clear in this speech: “One of my missions as governor is to call on people of faith and people of goodwill to unleash their compassion.” He would mobilize “armies of compassion”—fellow citizens helping their brothers and sisters. Bush said that he wanted neighbor to help neighbor, and quoted Martin Luther King, Jr.: “My neighbor ... is any needy man on one of the numerous Jericho roads of life.... He is a part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me and his salvation enlarges me.”

Bush shared another revealing anecdote at the Power Center. He joked about a minister who Sunday after Sunday had his sermons interrupted by a parishioner that yelled out, “Use me Lord! Use me!” Finally, one Sunday the minister pulled the man aside and told him that the Lord had answered his prayer: “God would like you to sand down all the pews before next Sunday.” The pastor figured that he had heard the last interruption from the congregant. The next Sunday, however, the man called out again: “Use me Lord! Use me—but only in an *advisory* capacity.” America had plenty of advisors, said the governor, “What we need is more doers.”¹¹

In his speech, Bush followed by commending the Texas legislature, which, at his urging, had passed new laws that allowed and encouraged faith-based charities “to bring their compassion and hope” to the delivery of the state’s social services. This was a precursor to what he would champion at the national level once he reached the White House. Bush found these faith-based groups superior to “some soulless bureaucracy.” He would seek to engage the

¹¹ As governor, Bush used the same story on March 7, 1999, at the Second Baptist Church in Houston.

bureaucracy in a way that was not soulless. The bureaucracy would support faith-based groups that nurtured the soul.

To be sure, this thinking, which Bush indeed took into his presidency, specifically through the unprecedented action of creating an Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, rattled secular liberals and religious conservatives alike. Secular liberals recoiled at the prospect of government dollars directly supporting religious-based work. Religious conservatives, who appreciated the government dollars, realized the dangers of accepting government money; doing so meant that they were explicitly forbidden to “proselytize” as they spent that money. How do you change souls if you cannot use the salve of the Gospel?

These concerns were certainly justified.

Bush’s AIDS Initiative

Alas, one of the single most striking echoes of Bush’s compassionate conservatism—once he became president—was his Africa AIDS initiative. Foreseen by no one, it dramatically appeared in his January 2003 State of the Union address, a speech in which he also pushed a number of other compassion-based policies (reminiscent of his Texas days), such as federal assistance for prisons, shelters for battered women, and senior citizen homes.

The AIDS announcement, however, was stunning, seemingly coming completely out of nowhere. “As our nation moves troops and builds alliances to make our world safer,” Bush began, “we must also remember our calling, as a blessed country, to make this world better.” He continued, “Today, on the continent of Africa, nearly 30 million people have the AIDS virus—including three million children under the age of 15.... Yet across that continent, only 50,000

AIDS victims—only 50,000—are receiving the medicine they need.” He noted that there were entire nations in Africa in which more than one-third of adults carried the infection.¹²

Speaking of how the United States could help these Africans, Bush claimed that, “seldom has history offered a greater opportunity to do so much for so many.” He proposed the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which he called a “work of mercy” to provide “humane care” for the millions afflicted. He asked Congress for \$15 billion over the next five years, including \$10 billion in “new” money. This was not a small sum, especially during a time of recession and record budget deficits. It meant billions in taxpayer dollars for drugs, treatment, and prevention.

Initially, some of the response was positive. Bush received good press from some influential Washington opinion-makers.

Writing in the *Washington Post*, highly respected columnist Michael Kelly said that until Bush’s remarks, the response by the United States to the African AIDS “holocaust” had been “scandalous.” Bush’s proposal, he said, was a “rare and wonderful thing.” “History will judge whether a world led by America stood by and let transpire one of the greatest destructions of human life of all time,” assessed Kelly, “or performed one of the greatest rescues of human life of all time.” The president, he maintained, had opened the door to the latter possibility.¹³

There was little criticism of the humanity of Bush’s AIDS proposal. Disapproval came almost exclusively on cost.

Bush quickly proved his seriousness. He followed this State of the Union announcement by launching a sustained commitment. A few months later, on April 29, he issued a major statement in the East Room, in which he assembled the press, the secretary of state, and others,

¹² President George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address” (January 28, 2003).

¹³ Michael Kelly, “We Can Save 10 Million Lives,” *Washington Post*, February 5, 2003, A23.

and urged Congress to “act quickly” on his “emergency plan.” He said he would try to enlist the world in this “great effort,” calling the AIDS “tragedy” the “responsibility of every nation.” He said it was a “dignity of life” issue. “We believe everyone has the right to life,” said Bush, “including children in the cities and villages of Africa and the Caribbean.” This “urgent work,” he said, was a “moral imperative” on which “time is not on our side.”¹⁴

Bush then shared with the assembled media something it was not accustomed to hearing at a presidential press conference: a Christian parable. “[T]his cause is rooted in the simplest of moral duties,” he lectured a stunned press corps. “When we see this kind of preventable suffering ... we must act. When we see the wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not, America will not, pass to the other side of the road.”

There it was: Bush’s faith applied to public policy. Africa was America’s neighbor. The African people were George W. Bush’s neighbors. They were down and out along the road to Jericho. Their more prosperous American neighbor had some money to help them up. Uncle Sam would not stroll by, ignoring them.

Like it or not, this was President Bush’s thinking. It was his love-thy-neighbor faith channeled in the sudden form of a love-thy-neighbor foreign policy.

Just four weeks later, on May 27, Bush signed his \$15 billion plan into law.

The pace of substantive action was remarkable. In only four months, Bush’s announcement became reality. Few things have happened so quickly in American politics—not even Marshall Plan aid had come as rapidly.

¹⁴ President George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President on Global HIV/AIDS Initiative” (Washington, DC, April 29, 2003).

When Bush signed the bill, he challenged Europe to match the U.S. commitment without delay. The following week, at the Group of Eight summit for the world's wealthiest nations held in France, he pleaded for help in this "moral" obligation.¹⁵ In late June, he continued the cause in a speech at the Washington Hilton.¹⁶ In July, he made a major trip to Africa, where he again spoke out on AIDS.

All of this had happened over the course of about six months in 2003. George W. Bush's compassionate conservatism, once the province of Texas politics, now had global borders.

Actually, that was always the plan. "My vision of compassionate conservatism also requires America to assert its leadership in the world," Governor Bush had said. "We are the world's only remaining superpower, and we must use our power in a strong but compassionate way to help keep the peace and encourage the spread of freedom."¹⁷

He did not stop making his case. In a February 2004 interview with NBC's Tim Russert, Bush spoke of his country's "responsibility to fight AIDS." This was, insisted Bush, "history's call to America. I accept the call and will continue to lead in that direction."¹⁸

Objections from the Right and the Left

Was George W. Bush acting like a conservative or a liberal—or perhaps both?

Bush's penchant to expand federal programs and create new ones led the *Weekly Standard's* Fred Barnes to dub the president a "big government conservative."¹⁹ Another leading conservative, *National Review's* Rich Lowry, pleaded with liberals that there was much about

¹⁵ "Bush Signs AIDS Plan; Tells Europe to Follow Suit," *Reuters*, May 27, 2003; and "Bush to Sign Global AIDS Bill," *Associated Press*, May 27, 2003.

¹⁶ President George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President to the Corporate Council on Africa's U.S.-Africa Business Summit" (Washington, DC, June 26, 2003).

¹⁷ Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 236.

¹⁸ President George W. Bush, "Interview on Meet the Press With Tim Russert" (February 8, 2004).

¹⁹ Fred Barnes, "A 'Big Government Conservatism,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2003.

Bush they ought to welcome: “This is the kind of Bible-thumping any bleeding heart should love.”²⁰

In truth, there had always been a lot of liberal Christianity in Bush’s faith, especially in terms of his domestic politics. It was totally unwarranted for secular liberals to characterize Bush as a panderer to the Religious Right when so much of his Biblically grounded policies should have appealed to the Religious Left.

The Africa-AIDS initiative was the perfect example. George W. Bush, devout Christian, in the role of Good Samaritan, was doing what no leader of any country had ever done for Africa.

And yet, objections to Bush’s program from the right and the left were omnipresent.

Conservatives pointed to the escalating federal budget deficit, which had ballooned as a result of the September 11 attacks, the 2000-2 recession, the war in Afghanistan, and general spending surges—and all after George W. Bush had inherited a budget surplus from the Democratic Clinton administration and Republican Gingrich Congress. More than that, a war in Iraq was rapidly approaching as American troops would enter Iraq in March-April 2003. On top of all of this, the Bush Africa AIDS initiative would cost billions in new taxpayer dollars for drugs, treatment, and prevention. Could Uncle Sam afford this?

Conservatives constantly complained that President Bush spent federal money like a drunken sailor, and his actions toward Africa were viewed as merely another such manifestation—a raft of do-gooder poppycock that was not the job of the federal government.

Because I had published a book on Bush’s faith in the fall of 2004, along with numerous articles and media interviews—many of which dealt with the Africa AIDS program—I heard

²⁰ Rich Lowry, “The President Keeps His Distance,” *Washington Post*, August 10, 2003, B1.

from Bush detractors daily. I can attest to having received numerous angry emails from conservatives demanding to know where the U.S. Constitution authorized Bush's AIDS initiative, how the program constituted a "core function" of the federal government, and how could America possibly afford it.

Conservatives generally disapproved on grounds of fiscal discipline and (in their view) Constitutional prohibitions. At least they had principled reasons.

The big mystery was why liberals objected, or why were they silent and not positively thrilled? Why did liberals/progressives not publicly celebrate this generous, benevolent offer by Bush? Certainly, they did not object along Constitutional lines, or because of concerns that the federal government should not be spending such monies overseas or for purposes of public health. Liberals pride themselves on their compassion and sensitivity—whether to matters of race, to Africa, to the poor, to the downtrodden, to AIDS victims, to debt-ridden Third World nations, to those lacking sufficient wealth to provide for vital healthcare, and on and on. Moreover, they are never shy about spending federal money. They view the U.S. Constitution as a "living, breathing," fully malleable document that does not prohibit anything they would like to do. They look into the text of the Constitution and see no words like "life" (which is used in the Fifth and 14th amendments) but somehow discover non-existent words and *rights* like "privacy" and abortion, even government-funded abortion.

If a liberal Democrat president had done what Bush was doing for AIDS victims in Africa, the *New York Times* would have editorialized in favor of erecting a 100-foot bronze statue to the man on the Mall. Liberal college professors and Hollywood celebrities would adorn their lapels with special multi-colored ribbons representing the president's Africa AIDS

initiative. This gesture of genuine compassion would have been a huge lead in repeat newscasts by CNN, CBS, ABC, NBC, and MSNBC.

Instead, there was near silence concerning this stunning act of human charity—one certainly beyond what American presidents would ever be expected to do.

Just as I can cite examples of conservatives emailing me their strident objections to Bush’s action, so I can likewise with liberals.

In September 2004, I wrote an op-ed article on Bush’s initiative for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.²¹ The opinion editor of the *Chronicle* was a very fair, open-minded liberal; he happily ran the piece, thinking it would both challenge and enlighten his readership, especially the faith motivation behind Bush’s action. It would be a bracing revelation to an angry secular left that insisted that Bush’s “born-again faith” made him a narrow-minded, “fundamentalist” bigot.

What was the response? I received hateful emails telling me that not only was Bush (and myself as well) a “moron,” but insisting that the entire Africa AIDS announcement was nothing but a cynical ruse, a sham, and the money was not even being spent. Bush was a “liar” (and so was I). These incensed emailers refused to concede that Bush did what he did. They said the craziest things, insisting that the program effectively did not even exist. They could not find it within their power to grant that this “compassionate conservative” president could do something so kind, which they should naturally embrace.

I was most disappointed by liberal Christians on the “social-justice” Religious Left, who were deafeningly silent on a campaign that ought to have served as a poster-child for precisely what they advocate.

²¹ Paul Kengor, “A Fundamental Flaw in Divining Bush’s Faith,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 19, 2004.

That said, to be fair, some liberals did step up to thank Bush, including no less than Bill Clinton, U-2 rock star “Bono,” and musician-activist Bob Geldof.²² Among them, Geldof wrote a remarkable article for *Time* magazine.²³ He described a recent trip he made to Africa with Bush. As a liberal, Geldof disagreed with Bush on many things, especially the war in Iraq. But Geldof was willing to reach out where the two found common ground. He carefully observed what Bush had done for Africa, and was enormously grateful. To cite just one example of the fruits of Bush’s effort, which Geldof heralded: In 2003, only 50,000 Africans were on HIV antiretroviral drugs; thanks to American relief, 1.3 million were suddenly receiving free medicine.

Bob Geldof asked Bush, “Why doesn’t America know about this?” Bush answered: “I tried to tell them. But the press weren’t much interested.”

Results of the Bush AIDS Initiative

What was the impact of the Bush plan for African AIDS relief?

This story has a very happy ending. Despite being maligned by critics, the president’s plan was enormously successfully.

In April 2009, the results of a major study were released by researchers at the Stanford University School of Medicine, published in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine*. According to the study, the first to evaluate the outcomes of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR, the formal acronym for the Africa AIDS initiative), the Bush program cut the death toll from HIV/AIDS by more than 10 percent in targeted African countries between 2003 and 2007. “It has averted deaths—a lot of deaths,” said Eran Bendavid, M.D., one of the researchers. “It is working. It’s reducing the death toll from HIV. People who are not dying may

²² “Clinton and Bush Disagree on Cuba, Show Camaraderie in Canada,” Bloomberg News Service, May 30, 2009.

²³ “Geldof and Bush: Diary From the Road,” *Time*, February 28, 2008.

be able to work and support their families and their local economy.” Co-researcher, Peter Piot, M.D., Ph.D., stated that PEPFAR “is changing the course of the AIDS epidemic.”²⁴

The study estimated that the Bush relief plan had saved over one million African lives. To repeat: *over one million lives*. That figure equates to more than double the combined death toll of all Americans lost in World War I and II.

Those are the facts. They are extraordinary facts. They come from a scientific/academic evaluation published as a peer-reviewed study in one of the world’s preeminent medical journals. Bush’s plan was a human triumph.

If a liberal president had done this, he would be feted as both national and international hero on his way to a ceremony with the Nobel Committee. In fact, Bush’s White House successor, President Barack Obama, literally got himself a Nobel Prize before he had done anything as president, as Obama himself conceded; Obama got the award for hopeful intentions. The Nobel Committee hardly beat a path to Bush’s door in Texas.

With the results of the Stanford study, I again wrote on Bush’s AIDS initiative, and I again got nasty emails from conservatives and liberals alike.

From the right, the response was unchanged, with some conservatives digging in even more. They reiterated: What Bush was doing for HIV-infected Africans was not a “core function” of the federal government, certainly not enumerated anywhere in the U.S. Constitution; America could not afford this huge expenditure during a time of record budget deficits.

Some of the responses I received were downright mean. Some made valid points: “Actually, the credit should go to the American taxpayer,” one conservative wrote to me, “whose

²⁴ Ruthann Richter, “Stanford Study First Ever to Show U.S. AIDS Relief Saved 1 million Lives,” Stanford University School of Medicine, News Release, April 6, 2009.

effort and ingenuity afforded Bush and Congress the \$15 billion they used for AIDS programs in Africa. Your [article] title should be ‘American Taxpayers Saved a Million African Lives.’”

Point taken. Of course, one might add that American taxpayers did not come up with the idea and push it and adopt it and make it a reality. That was entirely George W. Bush’s doing alone. In fact, if Bush’s proposal had been placed on referendum, I suspect taxpayers might have handily rejected it. Certainly no group of taxpayers has generously stepped forward with a cool \$15 billion for AIDS relief in Africa.

Nonetheless, yes, American taxpayers footed the bill. The emailer was correct. Taxpayers are viewed by politicians as an eternal cash-cow always there for the milking, but rarely to be thanked. Without their effort and ingenuity that produces the revenue, the government cannot spend a dime. The emailer made this point precisely as Bush’s successor, President Barack Obama, along with a Democratic Congress, was tapping infinitely larger sums of taxpayer dollars. The projected deficit for that particular year (2009) was a breathtaking \$1.5-2 trillion, which made Bush’s deficit in 2003 (\$377 billion)—the year he announced his AIDS initiative—look negligible.

The response by liberals to the results of the Stanford study remained sadly predictable. There continued to be a refusal to give George W. Bush credit for this extraordinary act. This was evident in a brief statement by an editor at an Iowa newspaper, who responded to my 1,159-word article with 11 words: “And he [Bush] killed thousands of American lives in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Granted, within that statement was a tiny inadvertent acknowledgment that Bush had saved African lives. That was at least an improvement from past emails I had received from liberals, who refused to concede the program even existed.

Conclusion

The roots of George W. Bush's compassionate conservatism branch in all sorts of directions. His Africa AIDS initiative is one such manifestation.

That initiative prompts many legitimate points of debate, from Constitutional legitimacy to excessive federal spending to the best means of AIDS prevention. Among these objections, conservatives are certainly right to ask *how much?* Technically, or perhaps *fiscally*, or maybe even *Constitutionally*, this is most assuredly a legitimate inquiry. I have held back from providing my personal view on those questions.

To be sure, George W. Bush understood the financial cost, and said so explicitly. Nonetheless, he judged that only America could carry out this “act of compassion” at that critical juncture. He also judged, apparently, that only he, as a Western leader, had the will to do this. So, he did it. He absorbed the cost to try to save lives. We now know that the policy achieved its desired social effect—just as, yes, we know it also contributed to a record deficit.

Nonetheless, it is rare when history can so directly, indisputably credit a president for a specific, undeniable policy achievement, a genuinely generous one that clearly emerged from his personal doing, from his heart. Bush did so under no demands from staff, or from supporters or opponents, at a time when the nation could not afford it, and citing his faith as a primary motivation.

The African AIDS crisis has been truly devastating. And neither the Nobel Committee, nor many liberals and conservatives, want to grant Bush any accolades. While the policy helped, it never did anything to help George W. Bush's terrible disapproval ratings at the end of his presidency.

George W. Bush, the much ridiculed man of faith—ridiculed often *because* of his faith—always said he never expected rewards in this lifetime.

Still, a broader question at the heart of this paper and conference remains: Is Bush's Africa AIDS initiative the essence of conservatism, or is it not conservative at all? To Bush, it is conservatism in the finest tradition, or at least in the tradition he would like to craft. It is conservatism according to his personal estimation and definition. It is *compassionate* conservatism.

Is it conservatism? Let that debate begin.