From Godless Government to the Faith-Based State:

The Failure of “Compassionate Conservatism”

**Abstract:**

Political scientists have approached the administration of George W. Bush from the perspective of his foreign policy, tax plan, and entitlement reform proposals. One facet of Bush’s presidency which may be overlooked was his commitment to overhaul the social welfare system. This commitment provided the basis for his first campaign speech in 1999, “The Duty of Hope” and his first and second executive orders as president. President Bush’s rhetoric and executive orders promoted a policy termed, “faith-based initiatives” which involved administering federal welfare monies through local faith-based organizations for the purpose of increasing the effectiveness and the efficiency of the welfare state through a more holistic approach. This paper first assesses the importance of ideas in President Bush’s proposal, specifically neoliberalism and neo-puritanism and how the contradictory directions of these ideational frames profoundly limited the success of the policy proposals thus generated. The paper will also evaluate why it is that policy initiatives are presented from seemingly irreconcilable frames, considering the motives and priorities of political actors involved, specifically in the realm of presidential politics.

**Introduction:**

Public policy can be understood in terms of effectiveness, implementation, and outcomes. It is important to assess the ideas which go into the creation of public policy and the interaction of different ideas brought together as a singular program. For instance scholars have demonstrated that the ideas supporting policy frames enable individuals to better understand societal occurrences in the context of their “life space” [[1]](#footnote-1). The investigation of faith-based initiatives has been a subject for much scholarly attention. In political science there have been works evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of faith-based initiatives implemented at the state level[[2]](#footnote-2). There have also been scholarly works studying the coalition-building process between neoliberals and religious conservatives specifically on matters of welfare, but this work favored similarities rather than contradictions[[3]](#footnote-3). In sociology, scholarship has focused on institutional development of government offices promoting faith-based initiatives and theoretical explanations for the failed outcomes of these programs[[4]](#footnote-4). Interdisciplinary works have considered both the development of church-state relations in the United States and have explored the normative, theological merits of faith-based initiatives[[5]](#footnote-5). This paper contributes to this literature by providing an assessment of how the ideas which brought faith-based initiatives to the political table were central to both its genesis and failure. In so doing, the paper seeks to expose some of the wider ideational contradictions in these frames which support contemporary conservative politics in America.

In this article I will bridge the gap between the ideational foundation of the faith-based initiative program and the outcome of the policy, and suggest that the frames employed to support these policy initiatives were not merely facades, but crucial to the integrity of the policy. By assembling the two frames invoked in support of faith-based initiatives as the neo-puritan frame and the neoliberal frame, I argue that the failure of the faith-based initiative comes from the inherent tension between these two frames, despite the frequent attempt to blend these two frames cohesively in conservative politics. Secondly, I argue that these ideational tensions frequently occur in policy propositions because the political actors who offer them have short-term goals and privilege their reelection prospects over the success of specific policy initiatives.

The narrative presented will proceed as follows: an introduction into the church-state history that unfolded through various governing institutions in the United States, which made possible the introduction of faith-based initiatives as significant to welfare reform in the late 20th century and early 21st century. I will also provide a general summary of the origins of Anglo social welfare which were formative of social welfare programs in British colonies. The rationale for these brief expositions is to reveal how ideas have interacted with institutional and historical setting. This paper will define both the neo-puritan and neoliberal models and I will illustrate how both ideational strains were juxtaposed in an effort to promote a new understanding of social welfare in faith-based initiatives/programs. I then analyze the inherit contradictions between neoliberalism and neo-puritanism and explain why political actors such as President George W. Bush were insistent upon their compatibility. In order to explain this I point to the short-term goals of political actors and the tendencies exhibited within presidential policy-making to use specific initiatives to strengthen narratives.

**The Institutional Setting:**

Since faith-based initiatives involve the interaction of religious organizations and government institutions it is important to consider the legal history of church and state. Ultimately, policy ideas are contingent upon the institutional setting in which they are proposed. Constitutional prescriptions insist on a vaguely-defined separation of church and state through The Establishment Clause which states that Congress “shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”[[6]](#footnote-6).

Prior to the emergence of faith-based initiatives the Supreme Court referenced two central doctrines in decisions on church and state, strict separation and accommodation[[7]](#footnote-7). In the early Burger court, the court displayed a commitment to strict separation. During this period, the Lemon test was issued[[8]](#footnote-8) and tax emptions for religious schools were declared unconstitutional[[9]](#footnote-9). Suddenly in the early 1980s, the court moved from decisions separating religious organizations from public resources to protecting the right of religious speech and association in public matters, a position described as accommodation. Decisions were made granting religious organizations university support at public institutions of education[[10]](#footnote-10), permitting federal funding for abstinence instructions[[11]](#footnote-11), and supplying public school teachers to work at faith-based institutions[[12]](#footnote-12). Perhaps, the most dramatic rearrangement of the church-state order came from the decision issued in *Mitchell v. Helms* which held that the third assertion of the Lemon Test, prohibiting “excessive entanglement between government and religion” was violable under unspecified circumstances[[13]](#footnote-13).

While the validity of such interactions between government and state were upheld by the judiciary, the legislative branch developed faith-based initiatives as a means for religious organizations to receive federal funding in a bi-partisan effort to reform welfare policy. In the midst of the welfare reform discussions of the 1990s, John Ashcroft, Senator from Missouri also to be appointed Attorney General in the George W. Bush administration, introduced the Individual Accountability Act of 1995, which was the first piece of welfare reform legislation to grant religious organizations access to federally-funded social service grants. Ashcroft’s proposal allowed for faith-based organizations to have complete autonomy over employment, however, they could not deny services to beneficiaries on the grounds of the beneficiary’s religious beliefs[[14]](#footnote-14). When Ashcroft introduced the bill on the House floor, he made little reference to federal funding for faith-based organizations, a provision referred to as “charitable choice”. He insisted that in matters of social welfare, “Government alone will not solve these problems”, revealing that the primary intention of this bill was to “reduce the bureaucracy”[[15]](#footnote-15). In order to ameliorate the plight of the poor it should be the work of the “communities and the states” rather than the federal government[[16]](#footnote-16). Ashcroft advocated both a reduction of the federal government and an approach to poverty assistance which was localized. He is disavowing the centralized, bureaucratic, material approach and suggesting something different from New Deal social democratic conceptions of welfare. He is alluding to the neo-puritan frame to suggest that what poor Americans are in need of is a system which speaks to the need of their soul. Such a system can only operate through interpersonal relationships facilitated by religious organizations.

Ultimately, Ashcroft’s proposal was included in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA)[[17]](#footnote-17). A bill which President Bill Clinton remarked was to be nothing short of, “ending welfare as we know it”[[18]](#footnote-18). The terms remained as generous to religious organizations as they were in Ashcroft’s proposal. Under this law, religious organizations are allowed to accept state disbursements of social service grants as if they were any other nongovernmental provider. The employment practices of religious organizations remain under their direction. The internal governance of religious organization are protected from intervention by the state and federal governments and they cannot be requested to remove “religious art, icon, scriptures, or symbols”[[19]](#footnote-19). The sole instrument of separation is the limitations on government funds, so that they may not be used for “sectarian worship, instruction, or proselytization”[[20]](#footnote-20). This act remains the chief legislative grounding for faith-based initiatives because it allowed for local congregations, not only large, religious-inspired non-profits, to receive federal funds. The executive measures issued under the Bush Administration find their validity in this doctrine of “charitable choice” which was established through the aforementioned section of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Restoration Act of 1996. “Charitable Choice” refers to the ability of government to provide welfare funds to religious organizations.

**The Historical Setting:**

Eric Hobsbawm wrote, “Concepts, of course are not part of free-floating philosophical discourse, but socially, historically, and locally rooted and must be explained in terms of these realities”[[21]](#footnote-21). The notion of social welfare being administered through provincial means and dependent upon a combination of interpersonal relationships and religious sentiment has been present throughout Anglo-American history. Proponents of the faith-based initiatives, while proposing a policy initiative, evoked nostalgia for a time before welfare was decided by an impersonal, central state. In *From Poor Law to Welfare State*, William Trattner reveals that the provincial welfare services idealized in the faith-based initiatives find their roots in late medieval legal codes[[22]](#footnote-22). In 1536 the British parliament passed the Henrican Poor Law which operated in a dual manner, first punishing the able-bodied with penalties as severe as death, but also requiring local public officials to collect the contributions for those who were poor as resultant from circumstances beyond their control [[23]](#footnote-23). This statute moved welfare from strictly parochial, to a more systematic approach involving local governments in the process of assisting the poor. And this condition for social welfare remained until economic circumstances arose which demanded an empowered, benevolent state.

To think that President Bush’s plan to introduce faith organizations into the provision of social services was merely a sign of piety or preference for sectarian influences in culture is misleading. President Bush’s welfare plan dealt as much with his vision for the economic operation of American society as it was to heal the poor who were cast out from the nation’s wealth. Bush inherited the political philosophy of the “New Federalism” granted to him by Ronald Reagan, which has as its driving force “devolution”[[24]](#footnote-24). This flowed out of a conviction that the federal government was incapable of solving societal ills such as poverty because they originated with the individual and therefore, their solutions should be limited to the immediate society closest to the impoverished individuals. The state’s intervention, in the hopes of correcting poverty, was considered largely a waste of resources which could be put to better use through market forces.

Neoliberalism and neo-puritanism have already been briefly alluded to in the historical context presented. Organizing social welfare through a parochial administrative system as was the case under Henrican Poore Laws points to an idea central to Puritan conceptions of welfare. President Reagan’s desire to reduce the size of the state and a permit a less restricted market economy provide the basis for neoliberalism. It is important to remove these ideas from their historical application in order to define them in abstract. A theoretical interrogation of both of these ideas will reveal the inconsistencies these ideas produce when brought together as part of a framing strategy.

**The Two Frames of the Faith-Based Initiatives**

The tradition supported by the rhetoric calling for church participation in social services has distinctly neo-puritan roots. According to James Morone, the neo-puritan tradition is the suspicion that American society is in a perpetual state of peril due to poor behavioral attitudes condemned by the Christian tradition[[25]](#footnote-25). The corrosive behavioral attitudes usually reflect sinful behavior such as: laziness, substance abuse, violence, and sexual misconduct[[26]](#footnote-26). While the insistence on personal responsibility, sobriety, and rigid sexual ethics may be the most visible lasting contribution of the Puritan tradition to present-day American society, this image alone does not reveal the complexity of Puritanism and its reemergence in the neo-puritan form. An investigation into the political philosophy of Puritans, their ideas of state and society highlight their preoccupation with the moral integrity of society.

The Puritan’s rationale for strict moral codes resulted from a conviction of interrelatedness of all and thus the possibility that sin could spread quite rapidly. This awareness to “the communal nature of the soul”, has also been manifested through compassion and solidarity. George W. Bush’s term, “compassionate conservatism” is thus a fitting illustration of his neo-puritan approach. In John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity”, he insists that “everyman might have need of others” in order to “knit more nearly the bonds of brotherly love”[[27]](#footnote-27). This philosophical conviction that there is an inherently social component of peoplehood propels Puritan society toward the family, community, and the congregation. The Puritans’ belief in the intrinsic sociability of people did not translate into a strong state because it was measured by a conviction that no person shall be granted “more liberty and authority than will do them good”[[28]](#footnote-28). Therefore, a rule administered by God primarily through scripture and the local congregation was far more appealing to the Puritans. If there was one function state was seen as a capable vehicle for it was to organize charitable services for the lowly individuals in society. For example, in times of scarcity the state was to make food available to ensure that no section of society faced unnecessary starvation[[29]](#footnote-29).

On the other hand, neoliberalism provides a starkly different worldview. David Harvey has led the scholarship dedicated to defining and analyzing neoliberal from sociological, philosophical, political, and economic perspectives. The primary values of the neoliberal order are “human dignity” and “individual freedom”[[30]](#footnote-30). Government is perceived as a burden upon the larger society and not only unable to ameliorate problems, but actually a cause of societal problems. Ronald Reagan, the most famous American entrepreneur of neoliberalism declared famously, “Government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem”[[31]](#footnote-31). Neoliberals perceive the market and forums for social interaction in general to be guided by individuals who “make rational economic decisions in their own interests” with no “asymmetries of power” to interfere with their capacity to do this[[32]](#footnote-32). Welfare in the neoliberal worldview is seen as a wasteful, ineffective extension of an unnecessarily large state, states should maintain social safety nets at a “bare minimum” and adopt “a system that emphasizes personal responsibility”[[33]](#footnote-33).

The contradictions between these two frames are readily apparent. In the neoliberal tradition, there is no appeal to transcendence, instead neoliberalism is concerned with optimal market performance as its end. These competing objectives and worldviews come with profound effects when they are coupled with political life. For one, the neo-puritan and neoliberal discourse on liberty are entirely opposed. The Puritans and the neo-Puritan movement are apprehensive about liberty, John Cotton when writing on matters of government remarked, “give man no more liberty than God does” and from a Calvinist worldview this is no liberty[[34]](#footnote-34). There is also tension between their notion of the individual with Puritans asserting strongly that the communities of the family and church are the basis of society, while neoliberalism casts the individual as a lone, rational actor. For the sake of welfare policy, the most irreconcilable difficulty is with respect to poverty. Puritans held the notion of poverty that informed the aforementioned Poor Laws and that described poverty as intrinsic to the human condition because of the presence of sin[[35]](#footnote-35). Neoliberalism posits poverty as a personal failure of the individual. Neo-puritanism expresses a sense of obligation to the poor even if it be of their own doing or misfortune, and as a result it is the responsibility of the state in conjunction with local congregations, to direct some resources to ameliorate the suffering. Again, neoliberalism presumes that such action is futile.

**The Duty of Hope**

The clear invocation of both neoliberal and neo-puritan frames surrounding faith-based initiatives is present in George W. Bush’s speech, “The Duty of Hope”[[36]](#footnote-36) made in July of 1999. This was his first policy speech delivered during the campaign. The speech took place in front of various religious leaders both from the surrounding Indianapolis area and nation-wide. Bush began by stating that those at “the frontlines of community renewal” should work together and that “government should take your side”[[37]](#footnote-37). Bush presented a communal interpretation of society and wealth stating “the purpose of prosperity is to leave no one out”[[38]](#footnote-38). Bush is not making a structural argument here, he clearly sees societal problems within the context of family breakdowns and poor individual decision-making. He speaks of *InnerChange*, a faith-based organization which he provided collective funds to as governor of Texas. According to Bush the strength of the program came with its insistence to teenage prisoners that “if you don’t work, you don’t eat”, or as President Bush refers to it as “demanding love and severe mercy”[[39]](#footnote-39).

To balance the neo-puritan rhetoric with his neoliberal commitments he identifies himself as an “economic conservative” and expresses his intentions for “cutting taxes to stimulate economic growth”[[40]](#footnote-40). From the beginning it is clear that there is a tension between government support for faith-based organizations and President Bush’s commitments to lower revenue and the size of government in general. Bush seems to renege his neoliberal commitments stating that the nation is so prosperous it is capable to both “meet our priorities”, but also “take on new battles” implying a new task for government[[41]](#footnote-41). Bush then reverts back to his neoliberal position, calling on the Republican Party, to apply “conservative and free-market ideas to the job of helping real people”[[42]](#footnote-42). Bush’s insistence upon the free market as an approach to welfare seems to contradict earlier statements he made where he called upon the resources of government to assist faith-based organizations.

Bush’s policy proposal suggests that he is actually calling on his party to increase the expanse of the federal government and to entangle the government in subsidizing these faith groups. Since the “Charitable Choice” option of the PRWORA of 1996 allows for religious organizations to receive funds through a competitive grant based system, in order to increase the likelihood of religious organizations receiving federal funds there would have to be an overall increase in welfare spending[[43]](#footnote-43). Thus there is a competition between the two frames invoked. Social welfare spending could have been maintained at its current rate, preferably reduced in line with the neoliberal program, or it could have increased in hopes to provide churches with funds necessary to correct the wrongs and sins in society. Since Bush’s proposed faith-based initiatives have had marginal impacts upon the welfare system, as will be demonstrated in following sections, it can be said that the neoliberal frame was prioritized over the neo-puritan frame.

**Framing and Faith-Based Initiatives**

A formal framing analysis of welfare reform with respect to the neoliberal and neo-puritan paradigms will reveal why there may appear to be initial similarities, but an ultimate disagreement will emerge that is ultimately destructive to this policy of faith-based initiatives. It is important to note policy framing is not an event that occurs in a single moment or outside of political time, but unfolds through a pattern of “diagnostic”, “prognostic”, and “motivational” processes[[44]](#footnote-44).

The diagnostic process of framing involves “identification of the source(s) of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents” within a given social problem[[45]](#footnote-45). When Americans identified what they saw as a crisis of dependency in the welfare system, the diagnostic frame was settled. The problem identified was the dependence of individuals on the welfare system. The neoliberal frame shares in this agreement seeing the welfare system as excusing recipients from correcting their poor behavioral attitudes. Furthermore, neoliberals perceive the state’s extension into welfare as unnecessary excess which withdraws capital from markets and allocates it towards a broken system. The exponents of the neo-puritan tradition frame this not from an economic lens, but from a spiritual one. With neo-puritanism positing that dependency’s greatest danger is to people’s souls, leaving them unable to assert their own dignity as a worker and productive member of society. Despite sharp variations in ideology, the conclusion of the diagnostic phase for both frames leads to the same initial course of action: reduce state involvement in welfare.

Through the prognostic element of a frame, political actors engage with the public to form an “articulation of a proposed solution to the problem”[[46]](#footnote-46). The prognostic process for both frames remain partially the same, erode the involvement of the state from the social welfare system. This is where the first substantial disconnect arises. While the neoliberal frame, seeks the erosion of the state. The neo-puritan frame calls for the state to abdicate its agency, but still provide the necessary resources to churches and faith-centered action groups. This distinction is what paralyzes the policy from success in the later phases of action-related steps.

Although there are distinctions within the diagnostic and prognostic frame, there is still enough resemblance to formulate a coherent motivational frame which aims to provide a “rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action”[[47]](#footnote-47). President Bush serves as the chief architect of this motivational frame surrounding faith-based initiatives. He resurrects an obscure section of welfare reform legislation, namely section 104 of PRWORA, and turns it into his chief policy proposition as a presidential candidate. Appealing to the religious character of the nation, he makes the argument that a materialist conception of people have led them into state dependency. This motivational process is not only rhetorical, but a small institutional footprint follows as President Bush makes his first and second executive orders as president, creating the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) in the Executive Office of the President[[48]](#footnote-48). To reinforce his commitment, his second executive order creates offices for faith-based organizations in five departments of government[[49]](#footnote-49). These initial attempts to build consensus around this issue of faith-based initiatives were undeniably successful by March 2001, about three-quarters of all Americans supported the faith-based initiatives program[[50]](#footnote-50).

The usefulness of these two frames is severely limited when considering the mobilization aspect. The “greater and more apparent contradictions” are between frames, “the more problematic the mobilization”[[51]](#footnote-51). While Bush implies more welfare spending in his speech, “The Duty of Hope”, this would be opposed to the neoliberal principles of less government. At this point in framing processes developed upon contradictory frames, political actors must prioritize their commitment. The priorities of the Bush administration remained largely one-sided. While perhaps the neo-puritan model remained the basis for his rhetoric, it appears as though the neoliberal agenda received the greatest investment of political resources from the president.

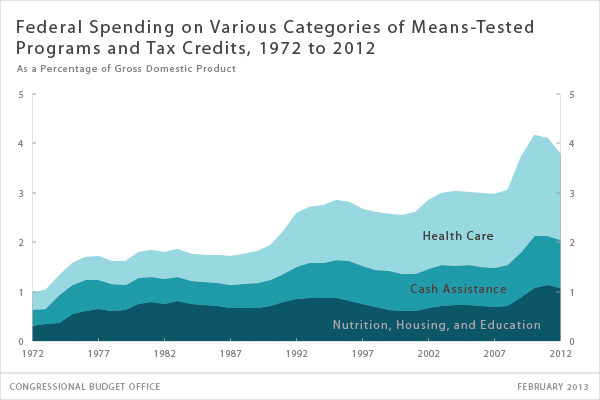
Since framing is a political process which unfolds through time, President Bush took advantage of the neo-puritan and neoliberal frames to focus on an overhaul of the American social welfare system because the superficial aspects of the frames had closely-related responses. The diagnostic process and the prognostic aspect of the two frames, were similar enough to allow President Bush to reconcile these two frames for his campaign, where his unelected status limited his capacity to execute policy reform. His commitment remained through his early presidency when the motivational process of framing only required limited political resources, such as executive orders, creation of small institutions within governments, and rhetorical investment. However, had President Bush appealed to further his agenda of welfare overhaul through legislative action, the inherent contradictories present in this policy would have made for a tough sell to the Republican base and the Republican-controlled Congress who would have likely been opposed to increased funding for welfare.

**An Empirical Evaluation of Faith-Based Initiatives:**

Faith-based initiatives thus did not receive any significant level of resources, as revealed in the following empirical analysis. First it is important to note that faith-based organizations are intentionally difficult to classify by the government agencies who process grant requests because forcing faith-based organizations to disclose their status may trigger unwanted bias in the bureaucracy[[52]](#footnote-52). However, the Government Accountability Office did conduct inquiries into the success and execution of faith-based initiatives. About $500 million dollars was spent on “training and technical assistance” for faith-based organizations in the first few years of the Bush administration[[53]](#footnote-53). This spending was allotted in the hopes of empowering faith-based organizations to both compete for funds and also administer them properly[[54]](#footnote-54). Since the program was designed to encourage participation of small, community-based religious organizations federal inquiries were reserved for organizations receiving over $500, 000 a year[[55]](#footnote-55). Slightly less than one-third of all the agencies which received federal funds appeared to be either misinformed about the nature of “charitable choice” or in direct violation of federal guidelines[[56]](#footnote-56). Suggesting that the implementation of faith-based initiatives on many occasions involved violating statutory demands. The last examination of expenditures pertaining to faith-based initiatives was conducted in 2006 by the Government Accountability Office which estimated total expenditures to be $2.1 billion[[57]](#footnote-57). The difficulty in measuring these grants results from the different levels of government which they can be administered from and the ambiguity concerning what exactly is a faith-based organization

A study conducted by the Rockefeller Institute of Government, reviewed 28,000 federal grants from 2002 to 2004, the number of identified faith-based organizations receiving grants moved from 665 to 762, and the number of total grants awarded to these organizations moved from 1,042 to 1,332[[58]](#footnote-58). The majority of programs receiving grants had been previously already been recipient of grants in the past. In 2002, faith-based organizations had received 11.6 percent of grants in the ninety-nine federal programs reviewed, by 2004 that number had only increased to 12.8 percent[[59]](#footnote-59). Research conducted by National Congregation Survey that compared the data surrounding the faith-based initiative program in 1998 to the data in 2006 reveals the limited nature of change to the welfare system was[[60]](#footnote-60). In the final analysis, faith-based initiatives are found to be dependent upon total welfare spending and therefore without increase in welfare expenditures, there is no necessary increase in money received by faith-based initiatives. Since most federal contractors are likely to receive renewed grants every year, it would be unlikely that faith-based initiatives could steer away the grants that had been offered to them in previous years.

**Graph 1:**



Source: Congressional Budget Office (2013), Growth in Means-Tested Programs and Tax Credits for Low-Income Households, Accessible at: https://www.cbo.gov/publication/43934

**Table 1:**

National Congregation Survey on Congregations and Social Services

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| % of Congregations: | 1998 | 2006-2007 |
| Report Social Service Involvement: | 58.4 | 45.4 |
| Receive Government Funding: | 5.2 | 7.4 |

Source: National Congregation Survey hosted at Duke University. All data can be accessed at: http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/

**Why Are Incompatible Frames Arranged?**

The question arises, why were apparently contradictory and, at some level, incoherent policies strung together that shaped welfare policy in the late 20th and early twenty-first century. As Robert Lieberman asserts, “political arrangements are rarely if ever the products of a coherent, total vision of politics that informs institutions and ideas and knits them together into a unified whole” [[61]](#footnote-61). Since this new basis for social welfare was proposed during a presidential election cycle, the short-term goals political actors sought to attain, specifically election, did not incentivize attention to policy implementation and success. Many scholars and pundits observed as a presidential candidate, George W. Bush in 2000 was especially interested in garnering the evangelical support. The evangelical vote accounted for 23 percent of the electorate[[62]](#footnote-62). It was especially important for George W. Bush to secure the lead among evangelicals early in the primary as many saw John McCain as a formidable candidate, but relatively unpopular with evangelicals[[63]](#footnote-63).

Bush was appealing to a developed theology within the evangelical tradition, which perceived the devolution in welfare that had taken place in the 104th Congress as compatible with its own theological leanings. Like the neoliberal tradition, the Evangelical movement of the post-World War II period has been skeptical of the role of the state. Some popular Evangelicals saw the abolishment of the secular, public safety net as a path to issue in a new reign for the people of God. Lew Daly refers to these people as “dominionists”[[64]](#footnote-64). George Grant, a contemporary Evangelical philosopher, saw the introduction of church in welfare policy, preferably through tax credits as part of this dominionist agenda stating that, “Government cannot get out of the way if the church does not get into the way”[[65]](#footnote-65).

It may seem as though this evidence reveals that the religious character of the nation was compatible with the neoliberal reforms impacting welfare. I would argue, that because an idea may be coherent within sections of particular religious movement, namely the evangelical born-again movement does not mean that it is part of the neo-puritan movement. The neo-puritan movement speaks to only to a set of religious ideals embedded in the collective conscience of America. A discursive analysis of George W. Bush’s speech, “The Duty of Hope” proved, this vague, non-sectarian approach was the basis for his expansion of welfare reform. While the domionists shared a similar goal for an eradication of not only the state as a participant, but also as a provider of resource like neoliberals, there is no evidence to suggest this was President Bush’s explicit intention.

Policies which are initiated by the president and solely dependent upon the president for execution, like the faith-based initiatives cannot be treated in a vacuum without reference to the entire spectrum of the president’s politics. The evidence seems to suggest that the faith-based initiatives advocated for by the Bush administration have some direct relationship with President Bush’s chief policy goal of this time, tax reform and deregulation. At the time in which the faith-based initiative were popular so were the president’s plans for tax reform[[66]](#footnote-66). This suggests a correlation between the two policy initiatives which was contingent upon a tacit presumption among the electorate that somehow a devolution of welfare, will allow for people to keep taxes low by moving the burden of spending off the federal government to the local churches and individual philanthropists.

In Rogers Smith’s work, *Political Peoplehood*, Smith identifies three themes which are presented in narratives constructed by political actors: economic, political, and constitutive[[67]](#footnote-67). The idea of political actors seeking to construct ideas of peoplehood, provides a means for considering faith-based initiatives as part of a broader integrative strategy. The faith-based initiative would fit firmly under the “constitutive” type because constitutive themes seek to “proclaim the members’ religion, race, ethnicity, ancestry, language culture, history, class, customs, and practices or other such traits are integral to their very identities and affirm their moral while also delineating their duties”.[[68]](#footnote-68)

In the case of George W. Bush and faith-based initiatives, Bush is making an argument that there is something intrinsically religious, even Christian, about the United States and that its religious convictions should directly shape the way it approaches those in need. This conception that there is a unified religious tradition in America has been a key element in forming its political culture. This proposition is in fact so common throughout the history of the United States, that it has led some scholars to define this non-denominational faith which holds as its central tenets America’s journey toward some transcendent end as “civil religion”[[69]](#footnote-69). Kenneth Wald, describes civil religion as “the idea that a nation tries to understand its historical experience and national purpose in religious terms”[[70]](#footnote-70). Smith asserts that constitutive themes, like faith-based initiatives, are especially useful “when economic and political power benefits are being obtained, but by morally questionable” means[[71]](#footnote-71). In other words, the faith-based initiatives provide a protective shield against the outrage which would otherwise follow from an economic arrangement perceived unjust by the public. By incorporating religious ideas into the wider political conversation through faith-based initiatives, economic policy is no longer measured from solely a quantitative analysis, but from a spiritual lens as well.

Throughout the history of the United States, there has an inherent tension between economic development of the country and the needs of the most vulnerable. The service of the poor has frequently taken the guise of a religious mission, so this tension can be generalized by a struggle between economic motives and religious ideals. President George W. Bush, explicit appeal to faith can be interpreted as a means to justify his larger economic policy of tax cuts and government devolution, which many Americans may object to as harmful to those already in need of financial assistance. By evoking to the religious currents that have historically flowed through the United States, Bush is pointing the electorate to look beyond the material, structural reality to a transcendent one which offers individual salvation. To view the faith-based initiatives not as stand-a-lone policy, but as part of an integrative narrative makes the ultimate failure of the program more comprehensible, since it was designed to bolster a story of peoplehood, rather than execute a specific policy goal. Therefore, if faith-based initiatives were part of a campaign to assuage American concerns over the economic overhaul already in progress, it makes sense that the objectives of the economic elements of Bush’s narratives were prioritized over the faith-based initiatives.

**Beyond the Bush Presidency:**

As stated, faith-based initiatives are a unique area of policy because they can be a part of a myriad of differing programmatic agendas. It is their flexibility which improves the likelihood of them being paired with incompatible frames like the neoliberal frame. An interesting development in recent years has been how the faith-based initiatives have functioned under the Obama administration. As candidate, then Senator Obama sought to increase religious organizations involvement in distribution of federal social service grants. According to Obama, he wanted a “real partnership” between “the White House and faith-based groups”, not merely a “photo-op” citing the underfunded status of welfare programs in America as an explanation for why faith-based initiatives were unsuccessful[[72]](#footnote-72).

With new, perhaps Keynesian and Social Gospel, frames applied to faith-based initiatives by President Obama, the funding of faith-based organizations became more popular among Democrats than Republicans, despite the party’s tendency to resist against church and state entanglements[[73]](#footnote-73). An explanation for this would be that faith-based initiatives would be perceived by Democrats as an opportunity to effectively administer social services, or at least provide another sector of society capable of administering these services. This would ultimately be cohesive with President Obama’s policy goals to provide effective assistances to people in need. While Republicans may perceive faith-based initiatives under the Obama administration as another vehicle for the expansion of the welfare state, rather than a means to decrease the welfare state as George W. Bush appeared to present the faith-based initiatives as. Under the Obama administration, this goal has not been realized and that has been due to tensions between the President and Congress over increases for means-tested welfare[[74]](#footnote-74).

The faith-based initiative assessed as a policy extricated from context can be seen as a nearly bipartisan issue, containing elements which are supported by both parties. Therefore, the success of faith-based initiatives, where success is defined by provisions and effectiveness of services will ultimately depend on the president’s larger political program which consists of specific policy, ideas, and central narratives of state and society. If a president has as his priority a decrease in social welfare spending, as was the case under President Bush, then it is unlikely that local congregations will be able to successfully attain grants from large, experienced nonprofits. However, if a president seeks to increase social welfare spending, there is more potential for faith-based initiatives to make in-roads in the government agencies responsible for administering grants.

**Conclusion:**

This paper has argued that the ideas which informed the frame applied to faith-based initiatives were responsible for its ultimate failure to gain traction as an innovative source of social welfare reform. For this reason it is crucial that political actors seeking specific policy initiatives employ complementary frames when introducing policy. A contradiction between frames will demand a prioritization of frames in a way that can have deleterious impacts for the overall integrity of the policy. This is not a claim specific to social welfare policy. Any type of policy involves framing from political actors. There are issues where this is extremely crucial such as environmental policy, healthcare policy, and foreign policy.

Politics is complex. Policies often have widespread impacts across different sectors of the political, social, and economic and political coalitions are often diverse in background. Out of political necessity, the frames which support policy are often contradictory. A certain amount of accommodation of contradictory frames is possible given some issues, but there is certainly a threshold of compatibility that if not met will lead to the ultimate failure of the policy.

This paper also explored the relationship between ideas and the contexts from which they are proposed, with respect for both the institutional and historical setting. The proposition for social welfare reform made by George W. Bush, involved a return to the past as all political actions require. In *The Search for American Political Development*, Orren and Skowronek assert “empty lots are few and far between. Building something new usually means disturbing something else”[[75]](#footnote-75). Political actors involved with policy creation therefore should ensure that ideas proposed are informed by context.

This work has also offered a closer look at neo-Puritanism. The neo-Puritan frames has been described as a frame which promotes a rigid concept of morality and dichotomizes society between “us” and “other”. Certainly, these are the most visible externalities of the frame. However, less explored are the core ideas which inform the frame, namely the communal setting of all Christians and an impulse toward charity for the poor, although not often through structural or institutional devices. These tenets of the neo-puritan frame are irreconcilable with neoliberalism

This paper contributes to explanation for why irreconcilable political frames are placed together in an unfitting relationship. Political frames do not take place in an isolated moment or moments, but rather like all areas of political life unfold through time. Therefore it should be expected that incoherent framing strategies, if popular, may exist for the early stages of the framing process. However, when greater quantities of political resources, beyond simply rhetoric and gesture, like legislation becomes necessary the contradictions suffocate the chances of successful policy.

There are also two other areas of public policy scholarship this paper has contributed towards. For one, it has yet again revealed the perils of policies which are made as part of short-term goals. Election cycles which force short-term considerations are especially conducive to irreconcilable policy frames. This work inverts the common notion that narratives are designed to support policy, by asserting that policy can be designed to support narratives. The office of the presidency is unlike any other political institution in the United States because it has the responsibility to the public to present a coherent, monolithic narrative which legitimizes its support. President Bush’s commitment to “compassionate conservatism” focused around faith-based organizations was an innovative way of presenting his commitment to less government involvement, while affirming traditional values centered on strong communities, families, and religious institutions.

Beyond policy narratives and frames, the content of this paper should be part of a larger branch of research in American political science, specifically with regards to the disciplines’ work on religion. For one, this work notes the unsuspected parallel between increased religious presence in the public sphere and the onset of neoliberal economic reform. This is an especially peculiar arrangement because of the theoretical disagreements between these two worldviews. I would argue that this paper’s examination of the intrinsic contradictions, yet frequent interactions between the neoliberal and neo-Puritan frame is the irony for which contemporary American conservatism is founded upon.

1. Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow (2000) “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment, p. 614 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kennedy, Sheila Suess; Bielefeld, Wolfgang.(2006) Charitable Choice at Work : Evaluating Faith-Based Job Programs in the States. Washington, DC: *Georgetown University Press.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hackworth, Jason (2012). *Faith-Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States*: Athens, *University of Georgia Press* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sager, Rebecca. 2010. *Faith, politics, and power: The politics of faith-based initiatives*. Oxford*: Oxford University Press*, USA. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Daly, Lew. 2009. *God's Economy: Faith-Based Initiatives and the Caring State*. Chicago;London;: *University of Chicago Press* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. United States Constitution, Amendment I, [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Epstein, Richard (2006). *“Separation Versus Accommodation: Why We Should Favor the Latter, 44 Criterion 3*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U.S. 602, (1971) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Committee for Public Education v. Nyquist 413 U.S. 756 (1973) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Widmar v. Vincent, 454 U.S. 263 (1981) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bowen v. Kendrick, 487 U.S. 589 (1988) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Agostini v. Felton 521 U.S. 203 (1997) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mitchell v. Helms, 530 U.S. 793 (2000) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. S.842 Individual Accountability Act of 1995, 104th Congress, 1st Session, Sponsor: John Ashcroft, introduced on May 23, 1995 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John Ashcroft, Speaking on S. 842, on September 19, 1995. 104th, 1st session. Congressional Record. Transcript is accessible at: https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-1995-09-19/pdf/CREC-1995-09-19-pt1-PgS13750.pdf#page=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Public Law 104-193, 110 Statues at Large 2105 (1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Clinton, William J. (1996) “Statement on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, of 1996. Archived at The American Presidency Project at University of California Santa Barbara. Accessible at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=53219 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Sec. 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Hobsbawm, E. J. 1990. *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. New York; Cambridge [England];: *Cambridge University Press*. P. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Trattner, W. I. (1989). *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*. New York: Free Press p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wineburg, Robert (2008). *Leveling the Playing Field: Epitomizing Devolution through Faith-Based Organization. Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare Vol 35.1*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Morone, James A. 2003. *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History. New Haven: Yale University Press*. p. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Morone, James. 2003. *Hellfire Nation*. p. 15-17 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Winthrop, John (1630) “A Modell of Christian Charity”, 3rd Series*. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (Boston, 1838) p. 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cotton, John (1655). “Limitation of Government”, this document was accessed through, Miller, Perry; Johnson, Thomas H. (2014*). Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings*. *: Dover Publications*, p. 425 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Hall, David D. (2012*) Reforming People :Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (Chapter 4: “An Equitable Society”. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Harvey, David (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford;New York;: Oxford University Press, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Reagan, Ronald (1981) First Inaugural Address, The Presidents Project, University California Santa Barbara accessed at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43130 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Harvey, David (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Harvey, David. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* p. 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Cotton, John (1655). “Limitation of Government”, this document was accessed through, Miller, Perry; Johnson, Thomas H. (2014). *Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings. : Dover Publications*, p. 425 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Trattner, W.I. (1989) *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*. New York p. 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Bush, George W. (1999) “The Duty of Hope”, delivered in Indianapolis, Indiana. archived at The Houston Chronicle, Houston, Texas, accessible at: http://blog.chron.com/txpotomac/2010/07/today-in-texas-history-gw-bush-delivers-first-presidential-campaign-speech/ [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Bush, George W. “The Duty of Hope”, par.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Bush, George W. “The Duty of Hope”, par. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Bush, George W. “The Duty of Hope”, par. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Bush, George W. “The Duty of Hope” para. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Bush, George W. “The Duty of Hope”, para. 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Bush, George W. “The Duty of Hope”, para. 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Sec. 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Benford, RD. Snow, David. (2000) “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”. *Annual Review of Sociology* p. 615 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Benford, RD. Snow, David. (2000) “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”. *Annual Review of Sociology* p. 616 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Benford, RD. Snow, David. (2000) “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”. *Annual Review of Sociology* p. 617 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Bush, George W., (2001) Executive Order 13199, Establishment of White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives” (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office) Accessible at: https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/WCPD-2001-02-05/pdf/WCPD-2001-02-05-Pg235.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Bush, George W. (2001) Executive Order 13198, Agency Responsibilities With Respect to Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office) Accessible at: https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2001-01-31/pdf/01-2851.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. “Faith-Based Programs Still Popular, Less Visible”. *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life*. November 16, 2009. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/11/16/faith-based-programs-still-popular-less-visible/> [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Benford, RD. Snow, David. (2000) “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”. *Annual Review of Sociology* p. 615 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. White House Website, Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, Frequently Asked Questions, Accessible at: http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06616.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Government Accountability Office (2006), Faith-Based and Community Initiatives: Improving in Monitoring Grantees and Measuring Performance Could Enhance Accountability, p. 3 Accessible at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06616.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Government Accountability Office (2006) Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, page 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Government Accountability Office (2006), Faith-Based and Community Initiatives: Improving in Monitoring Grantees and Measuring Performance Could Enhance Accountability, p. 61 Accessible at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06616.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Montiel, Lisa and David Wright.(2006) “Getting a Piece of the Pie: Federal Grants to Faith-Based Social Service Organizations, *The Rockefeller Institute of Government: The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy*. Accessible at http://www.rockinst.org/pdf/faith-based\_social\_services/2006-getting\_a\_piece\_of\_the\_pie\_federal\_grants\_to\_faith-based\_social\_service\_organizations.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Montiel, Lisa and David Wright (2006) “Getting a Piece of the Pie”, p. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. All Data is available at the National Congregation Study Website <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/>. Data was discovered through the following publication: Chaves, Mark, and Bob Wineburg. 2010. Did the faith-based initiative change congregations? *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 39 (2): 343-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Lieberman, Robert C. 2002. Ideas, institutions, and political order: Explaining political change. *The American Political Science Review [H.W. Wilson - SSA]* 96 (4): p. 702 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. “Religion and the Presidential Vote: Bush’s Gains Broad-Based” (2004), *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics and Policy*. The report is accessible at <http://www.people-press.org/2004/12/06/religion-and-the-presidential-vote/> [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Knowlton, Brian (2000), “Republican Say Bush Panders to the ‘Agents of Intolerance’: McCain Takes Aim at Religious Right*”, The New York Times*. The New York Times Company; New York, NY. This article can be accessed through the New York electronic archives at: http://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/29/news/29iht-bush.2.t\_9.html [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Daly, Lew (2009*) God’s Economy: Faith-Based Initiatives and the Caring State*. Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.* 2009. p. 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Grant, George (1998), *In the Shadow of Plenty, Christian Liberty Press*: Arlington Heights, Il., 120-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Simmons, Wendy (2001) “Majority of Americans Continue to Support Bush’s Tax Cut Plan*, Gallup*. Poll is accessible at http://www.gallup.com/poll/1924/majority-americans-continue-support-bushs-tax-cut-plan.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Smtih, Rogers (2015*). Political Peoplehood: The Roles of Values, Interests, and Identities*. University of Chicago Press. p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Smith, Rogers (2015*) Political Peoplehood*, p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Bellah, Robert. (1967). “Civil Religion in America” *Daedalus. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, from the issue entitled,” Religion in America” Vol. 96, No. 1, p. 1-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Wald, Kenneth D., and Allison Calhoun-Brown. 2011. *Religion and Politics in the United States*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Smith, Rogers(2015) *Political Peoplehood* p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Obama, Barack. Prepared Remarks to be Delivered in Zainesville, Ohio on June 1, 2008. The transcript of these prepared remarks is accessible at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/us/politics/01obama-text.html?_r=0> [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. (2009) “Faith-Based Programs Still Popular, Less Visible” Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life, Washington D.C., poll is accessible at: http://www.pewforum.org/2009/11/16/pew-research-poll-faith-based-programs-still-popular-less-visible/ [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Evidence of this can be found on Graph 1 located on page 17 of this paper. This graph was provided by the Congressional Budget Office. Congressional Budget Office (2013*), Growth in Means-Tested Programs and Tax Credits for Low-Income Households,* Accessible at https://www.cbo.gov/publication/43934 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Orren, Karen and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) [↑](#footnote-ref-75)