

# C APITAL C OMMENTARY

June 16, 2003

## Faith-Based Football

**M**emo to Mr. Karl Rove, White House Political Advisor: With football season coming (not to mention Campaign 2004) we encourage you and your team to consider a new game plan to advance the President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative past the 50-yard mark and on into scoring territory. Push back the opposition and head for the goal line. The Initiative looked so promising when Team Bush first took to the field. But since then, as you know, it has too often limped along, battered and bruised by misguided and unfounded criticisms by skeptical reporters, secularists, and special interest groups like the gay rights lobby. We believe this trend will only intensify unless you adopt a new and more principled strategy. Now is the time to build on the first principles the Administration laid out in the original playbook that launched this contest to level the playing field for religious organizations in the public square.

Consider three developments: Dozens of religious leaders met last week with senior White House staff to issue a challenge: "We've supported your faith-based initiative," they said, "but don't ask us to make bricks out of straw." (They implied between the lines: More tax cuts on the backs of the poor and we may just have to reconsider our support. How important is the Initiative anyway without new money?)

Wait. There's more. Progress in Congress has stalled, as you know, over the sticky issue of religious staffing rights. Picture the handful in Congress who have spread the lie that accepting government money requires faith-based organizations to give up their right to hire like-minded employees.

Sometimes close friends mix things up, too. Many of your conservative colleagues have tried to build the case for faith-based initiatives on effectiveness alone: FBOs as miracle cures. Now along comes a report released last month, trumpeted by the *Washington Post* suggesting that faith-based groups were *less* successful in one Indiana study.

How do you tackle all these challenges? May I

modestly make a radical suggestion: Dispense with the old left/right political boxes that limit your options and perspective. Move beyond both liberal and conservative answers to show in each policy decision you make that government will truly advance justice for faith-based groups and the people they serve.

**F**irst, continue to work to end discrimination against faith-based organizations at all levels of government. This means changing unjustified policies and regulations that exclude faith-based groups or pressure them to secularize their programs. But as the President has often said, FBOs are partners in, not substitutes for, government's poverty-fighting efforts. Mentors can never replace Medicaid for America's hurting families. They need both.

Second, by inviting faith-based groups to collaborate with government if they choose, and removing the roadblocks that groups like the ACLU seek to erect, you can empower these "paramedics" of civil society to help heal broken neighborhoods. This course is superior to both "the government is always the answer" and "the market is always the answer" ideologies that each have serious flaws. States must honor the right of these groups to adhere to their missions. Show why our laws have protected the right of FBOs to hire whom they judge to be most qualified. Move the debate beyond this impasse by showing that it is the *critics* who want to roll back basic civil rights we have long respected.

Finally, one need not assume that every FBO will always be more successful than every secular program to justify policies that end government's discrimination against them. And, yes, that *Post* report was a bit misleading in not revealing that the Indiana study was conducted by the former head of the state's ACLU chapter. But keep fighting and don't give up.

—Stephen Lazarus  
*Senior Policy Associate*

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