

# C APITAL C OMMENTARY

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## The Real Face of the Faith-Based Initiative

In December, President Bush signaled that his Administration refuses to back down from its mission to level the playing field for faith-based organizations. Signing two executive orders to expand access to public funding for religious social service groups, he stated: “The days of discriminating against religious groups just because they are religious are coming to an end...And I don’t intend to compromise either.” This bold action was cheered by leaders of countless faith-based programs that struggle every day on dwindling budgets to lift the poor out of poverty, house the homeless, and heal the drug addicted.

But judging from media reports, one might have guessed that the President had just announced the beginning of Taliban rule in America. “Using Tax Dollars for Churches” shrieked the *New York Times* editorial. “Faith-Based by Fiat” proclaimed the ever-discerning *Washington Post*.

With the President’s Initiative back in the spotlight, one thing remains abundantly clear: some people simply do not grasp the true intent of this necessary reform. In Congress, the misinformation of political opponents continues to stall long overdue progress. Sadly, after nearly two years now, the Initiative remains the most widely misunderstood and unintelligently maligned movement for justice since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s freedom marches.

Unfortunately, this analogy fits rather well. Many in the media and in Congress do not realize fully what they oppose. Without this new policy, black churches, and social programs run by people of all races and faiths, will continue to be denied an equal opportunity to access the public funds they need to restore broken lives and to repair impoverished ghettos, just because they refuse to hide their faith.

This scandal should end now. And critics and skeptics of all stripes should think again about criticisms that are founded on fumes instead of facts. It is not unconstitutional for government agencies to part-

ner with Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other religious agencies to help people in need. To the contrary, it *is* unconstitutional for our laws and rules to exclude them. It *is* unconstitutional to demand, as the ACLU and others do, that only “religion-free” programs should be eligible. The President’s Initiative hammers a nail in the coffin of those injustices.

The Initiative is not about “hiring discrimination,” despite the loud cries of critics. It is about freeing government to work with the most effective organizations in communities of need, whether they be religious or secular, Baptist or Buddhist. Results, and no bias for or against religion is the new focus. Under law, the government must recognize the right of each group to control its own internal policies, including whom it hires to carry out its mission.

The White House and Congress should show America the real face of the Faith-Based Initiative. The President should not hesitate to use the full extent of his authority to strengthen America’s social safety net by opening government programs to wider participation by faith-based groups under more respectful rules. Congress, too, should embrace the true intent of this initiative by ensuring that no legislation erects unnecessary barriers or excludes religious groups just because they are religious. The separation of church and state never requires citizens to check their faith at the door nor to accept the separate and unequal status of the past. In the spirit of Dr. King, only when people of all religions and races are finally free to serve those in need in their diverse faith-based ways will America become a nation of opportunity and justice for all. This is the *real* face of the faith-based initiative. Skeptics should heed it. Both Republicans and Democrats should speed its dawning. And we all should seek it for the sake of the least, the last, and the lost among us.

—Stephen Lazarus  
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