

The Washington Post

November 19, 2007

The Right Kind of Hand Up

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV

In his Oct. 31 op-ed, "Open-Arms Conservatism," Michael Gerson argued that "the Republican Party is in the midst of an ideological identity crisis." Perhaps because of his experiences within the Bush administration, Gerson falsely portrayed the choice as between libertarianism (or "anti-government conservatism") and the "social teachings of the Jewish and Christian traditions," arguing that the former ignores the plight of the most disadvantaged. But that misunderstands the nature of the true conservative's reluctance to rush headlong into large, new government programs.

Most Americans want to help their fellow citizens, want an end to unnecessary suffering and racial discrimination, want to see greater equality of opportunity -- and recognize government's vital role in advancing these and other social goals.

But compared with liberals -- and here's the point that Gerson did not make -- conservatives are more sensitive to the limits of government's ability to ameliorate social problems. I say "more sensitive," for intensity is the point. Many liberals are concerned about the size and efficacy of government programs; they are just less worried about them than conservatives are, or they may feel more strongly about the need to "do something."

With that in mind, consider six principles that underlie a conservative approach to social problems.

• A preference for limited government. Most conservatives are prepared to use government to further social goals but only in the absence of viable private solutions. They expect government programs to be less efficient, less effective, difficult to terminate and more likely to have unforeseen (and possibly harmful) consequences.

They also see big government as stifling creativity and enterprise and as a danger to individual liberty -- in small ways, if not big ones. The larger government is, the more voters depend on it for benefits, subsidies and jobs. This, the thinking goes, makes politics even more about the distribution of government benefits, which in turn creates pressure for yet higher taxes and yet more government.

• A desire to means-test or otherwise target government benefits. The argument in favor of

universal programs and against means-testing, crudely, is that hooking the middle class increases political support. Perhaps -- but this is a widely repeated political axiom with little or no supporting evidence.

Compared with universal social welfare programs -- such as Social Security and Medicare -- targeted programs are much less expensive and, if properly focused, can do as much and perhaps more good. Too often, programs that seek to serve the middle class and the poor do a poor job of serving the poor. (Think student aid.)

Â· A concern about the behavioral consequences of assistance. Conservatives believe that no-strings-attached assistance has often been a catastrophe -- creating even more dependency and a fertile ground for social problems. Liberals are oblivious to such concerns or are more worried about leaving someone out of the social safety net. (Think welfare reform.)

Â· A deference to mediating institutions. Everyone seems eager to harness family, church and other voluntary associations -- what Edmund Burke called society's "little platoon[s]" -- to promote social progress. But true deference means letting the institutions do it "their way," in programming and staffing, in their tendency to be judgmental, and in their reliance on religious faith. Too many people, on the left and the right, want to use institutions to further government's objectives, in government's way.

Â· Respect for private choice, often in the form of markets. Conservatives have great faith in the ability of individuals -- including the poor -- to make sound decisions about their lives. Private choice is a value in itself, but when properly channeled, the individual choices of thousands about the services they receive translate into market forces many times more efficient -- and less political -- than the top-down decision making of most social programs.

Â· Humility bred from disappointing experiences -- and the likelihood of unintended consequences. Here the lines get blurry. Many political conservatives are anything but humble about their policy ideas, while many liberals display a healthy skepticism about overly ambitious designs. Contemporary social welfare efforts are strewn with program failures; unintended consequences; and plain harm to individuals, neighborhoods and even cities. (Think urban renewal.) A humility of purpose and design should permeate social planning.

When a problem seems bad enough, people often want to "do something," whether or not it is unproven or unlikely to succeed. Being conservative sometimes means seeing problems and deciding that nothing can be done -- at least not immediately. (That should not be the end of the inquiry. Being conservative includes a commitment to experimentation -- even with ideas with which one does not agree -- coupled with rigorous and honest evaluation.) These principles actually apply to any sound approach to social policymaking. One does not have to be conservative to be wary of unrealistic goals and the possible ill-effects of government intervention. Remember the "tough liberals" of the Kennedy administration?

Douglas J. Besharov, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a professor at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy, was the first director of the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect.