

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
impacting the world's financial markets*

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### WITH GEORGE BUSH, FAITH TRUMPS IDEOLOGY

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I read a great many analyses of President Bush's first 100 days in office last week, and in virtually all of them the central theme was Bush's "conservatism." Some authors found his conservatism surprisingly strong. Others smugly maintained that they knew that he was from the "far right" all along. But time and again, conservatism was cited as the touchstone of Bush's decision-making process.

In theory, at least, such an insight is useful for making predictions as to what Bush might do in the future. In practice, however, I would argue that by focusing attention on Bush's "conservatism," each of these budding augurs missed the marrow of his politics.

Yes, George Bush is a conservative. And yes, that matters a great deal. But it is important to keep in mind that people who describe themselves, and are described by others, as conservative, can have widely different views on a variety of important subjects.

There are Burkean conservatives, whose central focus is on tradition and suspicion of utopian projects. There are neo-conservatives, who believe that big government isn't bad, so long as neo-conservatives run it. There are Hayekian conservatives, libertarians in fact, who are most often described as conservatives because the press is incapable or unwilling to understand the difference. There are paleo-conservatives, once called "reactionaries," who want to preserve the "unique American culture" at all costs. And then there are "business conservatives," who are primarily concerned with promoting commerce, and protecting this commerce from what they view as leftist "do-gooders" and closet socialists.

These groups overlap in their beliefs, but, as I said earlier, they can differ vastly on a variety of issues, ranging from trade and defense policy to some of the most divisive cultural matters. Like most conservatives, Bush takes a little from one category and a little from another. He describes his particular ideological mix "compassionate conservatism," whatever that means.

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In short, I don't think there is much of practical value to be learned from the discovery that Bush is "surprisingly conservative," most especially in this age when the terms "conservative" and "liberal" are more appropriate for defining blocks of special interest groups than for describing a bedrock political philosophy.

If the goal is to single out a defining philosophical characteristic in Bush's politics, with an eye toward using this to predict his future actions, I believe it would be much more fruitful to concentrate on the fact that Bush is a self-proclaimed born-again Christian.

I am aware that this is a somewhat controversial assertion in this age of religious skepticism. But I think Carlyle's thoughts on the subject are as accurate today as they were 160 years ago when he wrote them.

"It is well said, in every sense, that a man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him. A man's, or a nation of men's. By religion I do not mean here the church-creed which he professes...but the thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough without asserting it even to himself, much less to others); the thing a man does practically lay to heart, and know for certain; concerning his vital relations to this mysterious universe, and his duty and destiny there, that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest. That is his religion; or, it may be, his mere skepticism and no religion: the manner it is in which he feels himself to be spiritually related to the unseen world or no world; and I say, if you tell me what that is, you tell me to a very great extent what the man is, what the kind of things he will do is."

The immediate reaction to Bush's public witness to his faith during the campaign was confined almost exclusively to the issue of abortion. The pro-choice lobby went ballistic, and the press followed with a stream of stories addressing the question of whether an adamant foe of abortion could be elected president. This early fixation on the abortion issue appears to have prevented a serious discussion of what exactly such a testimony might mean on other issues that are arguably more important in the grand scheme of things.

Such a discussion might begin by noting that as a born-again Christian, George W. Bush believes in original sin. That is, he believes that every human inherits a flawed or tainted nature as a result of Adam's fall. Among other things, he also believes that sin is defined as purposeful disobedience to the will of God. And this means that he believes that "right" and "wrong" are not arbitrary terms, but refer to specific, divine mandates, as received from God by Moses at Mount Sinai and as taught by Jesus Christ. He believes that evil is an extant force in the world. And finally, he believes that redemption is gained through the highly personal process of individual self-improvement.

Not too many years ago, subscription to such a list of beliefs would have been considered unremarkable. In fact, any evidence that a public figure did not believe in these concepts would have been met with widespread suspicion. Today, popular culture challenges each and every one of these tenets on a daily basis, thus establishing a tension that lies at the heart of many of the nation's most heated political debates.

Take, for example, the twin concepts that humans are born in sin, and that each individual is personally responsible for fighting against his or her sinful nature. Popular American culture today is much more disposed to the idea that bad behavior, from serious crime to petty theft, is cultural, resulting from the failure of some public institution to function properly. Each new increase in crime, or evidence of widespread moral sloth, is viewed as evidence that the “government isn’t doing enough.”

This idea is not Christian in origin, although many Christian authorities teach it, and many Christians believe it. It’s roots can be traced to the mid-18th century teachings of Rousseau, who argued that the idea of original sin was bogus, that man in his natural state was noble; that vice and error were not natural to mankind but introduced from without, caused mostly by bad institutions. This begot the idea that political reform, rather than individual moral effort, would heal the problems of mankind, and led directly to the French revolution.

This difference of opinion over the moral purpose of government is central to the annual debate over budget and taxes, a circumstance that is not lost on the participants of either side. Time and again, during the campaign and since assuming office, George Bush has rejected the idea that support for more government automatically confers moral virtue on the petitioner.

And time and again, supporters of more government present the opposite case. A wonderful example of this came just over a week ago when California Congressman Pete Stark became so incensed at Bush’s determination to hold government spending increases to 4%, he described the President’s budget as “the embodiment of the anti-Christ.”

Specifically, Stark was concerned about Bush’s proposed cuts in the public housing drug elimination program. But he said that Bush’s entire budget “flies in the face of all Christ’s teachings,” and maintained that releasing it during the week of Easter, which he described as the “holiest week of the year,” was “infamy.” Stark, by the way, is a Unitarian, a religion that respects Christ’s teachings, but denies his divinity and, possibly more importantly, rejects the concept of original sin.

Ordinary mortals will never know which man is correct. But as a born-again Christian, it is unlikely that George Bush will be swayed by concerns that salvation depends on how generous he is with other peoples’ money.

And this brings us to one of the most important differences between George Bush and Bill Clinton, which, once again, provides a better explanation than the old liberal-conservative dichotomy of why Bush’s political decisions are likely to be different from Bill’s.

I am speaking of Bill Clinton’s publicly stated argument, made during an interview with Tom Brokaw, that “character” is demonstrated “most effectively” not by what you do in your personal life but by “what you fight for and for whom you fight.”

Specifically, Clinton said he believed that the goodness of his own character should be measured by “the fact that I’ve stood up for the American people for things like fighting for the Family Leave Law, the Assault Weapons Ban or the Brady Bill or the v-chip for parents, or trying to keep tobacco out of the hands of kids and a lot of other issues.”

Some observers might argue that this was simply Bill's way of excusing his lapses from traditional moral norms. I don't think so. I think he really believes what he said, and it was clear during the impeachment fight that a great many Americans, possibly a majority, believe it as well. Variations on statements such as "he has done so much for so many people," and "he cares so much about people," were, and continue to be, a constant refrain from his supporters.

As a practicing, born-again Christian, George Bush would disagree with Bill Clinton's thesis that virtue stems from support for increases in the power and size of government, as well as from the attendant concept of simply "caring" more than others. I would guess that he would be more inclined to subscribe to the thoughts contained in my friend Claes Ryn's book *The New Jacobins, Can Democracy Survive*.

According to Ryn, "moral responsibility is achieved only slowly and with effort. It is in daily life, primarily in one's own intimate associations, that opportunities for love of neighbor are actually present. Man's moral character is shaped and tested first and foremost in relationships that are up close and personal."

Ryn contrasts this to the idea that virtue can be gained through "entertaining benevolent sentiments for various abstract entities, such as 'the people,' 'mankind,' 'the proletariat,' 'the poor,' 'the downtrodden,' 'the starving third world,' or the like – categories that are all comfortably distant from the emoting person and which therefore impose no concrete and personally demanding obligations on the individual." This kind of virtue, Ryan says, "presupposes no difficult improvement of self in actual human relationships." Among other things "it lets individuals claim moral worth who show no particular signs of moral character in their actual conduct and who may, by traditional moral standards, actually be personally odious and very hard for people to live or work with."

Needless to say, these widely varying views of how virtue is obtained can lead to similarly wide disagreements over the importance of a host of important legislative initiatives.

I am not arguing here that Bush's religious beliefs will be the deciding influence on his actions as president, or necessarily more important than practical political considerations. I am simply saying that Bush's conservatism is a derivative of his faith, rather than the other way around, and as such, the latter probably provides a more revealing perspective on his politics than the former.

I think a good case could be made that this thesis could be applied to more than just the budget and tax debate. But I am running out of space, so I'll close with a brief comment on my view that Bush's religious beliefs are likely to be more important to many of his foreign policy positions than his conservatism.

As a born-again Christian, Bush believes that each individual is of infinite value as an object of God's love, a concept that Hegel once described as having spawned the "irresistible power" of the idea of freedom.

This is one of many Christian concepts that have become so much a part of the American culture that few people are aware of their Christian roots. As such, most Americans are also unaware

that this concept is unique to the Western world. As Karl Lowith puts it: “Whole continents, Africa and the Orient, have never shared this idea, nor do they share it now; the Greeks and Romans, Plato and Aristotle, even the Stoics did not share it.”

But like so many other traditional American culture beliefs, this one too is under considerable pressure from the post-modern movement, which increasingly subscribes to the Marxist understanding that the state can trump individual prerogatives if “the cause” is “just.” Or, as Marx himself put it, the “*droits de l’homme*” are not universal human rights, but bourgeois privileges.

To the degree that American politicians become less enamored with the concept of the divine importance of each individual, and more tolerant of the argument that the modern state not only has a right but an obligation to preempt these abstract individual rights on behalf of the *polis*, American foreign policy becomes more tolerant of foreign governments that routinely practice what, by traditional American standards, could only be described as heinous atrocities.

Thus, I would argue, for example, that China’s political leaders might be better served to study Bush’s faith, rather his conservatism, if they wish to understand his less-than-friendly attitude toward them.

Certainly, as a practical politician, George Bush will support expanded trade and other commercial and cultural exchanges with China. But his distaste for that nation’s attitude toward the dignity of the individual almost certainly means that relations will be conducted from a position of antagonism toward the Chinese leadership. Or to be more specific, they will be done with the idea that closer relations with the United States will undermine that leadership.

In short, many conservatives in the United States would be as willing to hug, exchange cheek kisses with, and trade pleasantries with the Chinese leadership as Bill Clinton and the senior members of foreign policy entourage were. But few, if any, born-again Christians would relish that assignment. And fewer still would take their political “contributions.”

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