

GAO Report Stings Bush's Faith-based Initiative

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Government Accounting Office affirms critics' doubts about the so-called centerpiece of Team Bush's domestic policy

"I am confident that the faith community is achieving unbelievable successes in -- throughout our country." -- President George W. Bush, second White House National Conference on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, March 2006

"... while more elaborate scientific studies are underway, the White House has relied on largely anecdotal evidence to support the view that faith-based approaches produce better long-term results." -- Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, August 2004

For years, President Bush has been going around the country touting his faith-based initiative, claiming that it has been achieving remarkable results delivering social services to the needy. Few reporters bothered to ask what the president he meant by "results."

Well, the results are in on the president's Faith-Based Initiative and it doesn't look good for Team Bush. A new report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has affirmed what many critics of President Bush faith-based initiative have long asserted: too many religious groups that have received government grants have been mixing religious activities with their social work; and the government has not yet established a concrete process to monitor grant recipients to see if they are being effective.

The GAO study entitled "Faith-Based and Community Initiative: Improvements in Monitoring Grantees and Measuring Performance Could Enhance Accountability" found that "While officials in all 26 FBOs [faith-based organizations receiving federal grants] that we visited said that they understood that federal funds cannot be used for inherently religious activities, a few FBOs described activities that appeared to violate this safeguard. Four of the 13 FBOs that provided voluntary religious activities did not separate in time or location some religious activities from federally funded program services."

The report also noted that "[L]ittle information is available to assess progress toward another long-term goal of improving participant outcomes because outcome-based evaluations for many pilot programs have not begun."

Rep. Pete Stark, D-Calif., who along with Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., requested the report, said "The Bush administration has failed to develop standards to verify that faith-based organizations aren't using federal funds to pay for inherently religious activity or to provide services on the basis of religion."

According to the report's abstract, the GAO "was asked to examine (1) the activities of the initiative-related centers in five federal agencies; (2) the grant award procedures for selected grants; (3) the extent to which selected federal and state agencies are providing information on and ensuring compliance with safeguards designed to protect faith-based organizations (FBO), beneficiaries, and the government; and (4) how the progress of the initiative is being measured."

While Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind. agreed that there needed to be better oversight of those groups receiving grants, he also charged that the report was suspect. "What they're trying to do is put a straight jacket on all types of programs," he said, "regardless of how the law is different and regardless of how the money flows."

Souder, a longtime supporter of Team Bush's faith-based initiative, maintained that the faith-based initiative was in danger unless supporters stepped up to defend it. "This could also ripple into foster care, it could ripple into church homes who care for people assigned through juvenile courts," he said. "It would be a devastating blow to our mission to reach those who are hurting the most."

The GAO's conclusions "echoed ones earlier asserted by a non-partisan organization studying the faith-based initiative," the Associated Baptist Press noted. "Since 2002, legal scholars from the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy have advised the Bush administration that religious grantees should have clearer guidance on how to use government funds without violating the Constitution."

"While there weren't any surprises, and it was blandly worded, nevertheless the GAO report was quite an

indictment of President Bush's faith-based initiative," Annie Laurie Gaylor, the co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, told me in a telephone interview. "After two readings, I couldn't find any summary of what they thought the safeguards should be. It left me wondering whether the administration has any safeguards in place.

"It also left me questioning how the government was monitoring the grants they've given," Gaylor said. "After all, there is no indication in the report that anyone is doing site visits and following up on the grants."

"While I hope it will motivate changes by the administration, I don't think the report will fundamentally change the Bush Administration's approach," said Gaylor, whose organization has been one of several in the forefront of challenging the initiative in the courts. "It is difficult to imagine the faith-based initiative being challenged if so many Democrats support it in one way or another."

"I hope other members of Congress, in addition to Rep. Stark and Rep. Miller, wake up and realize that the several billion dollars given to religious organizations is going down the drain, while at the same time, the wall of separation between church and state is being eroded."

Despite the GAO's critical report and recent court rulings against religious groups misusing government funds, the president's faith-based initiative is here to stay, at least in the short term. And while there has been not yet been congressional action on a comprehensive faith-based bill, riders exempting religious organization from civil rights laws have been tucked into several pieces of legislation. Meanwhile, there have been congressional moves to fully institutionalize the White House Office on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Consider the faith-based initiative a permanent part of the political landscape.

The best critics can hope for is that strict standards regarding the use of government money by religious organizations is adhered to, an effective monitoring system -- including audits and on-site visits -- is established, and that watchdog groups such as the Freedom From Religion Foundation and Americans United for Separation of Church and State continue to keep their eyes on discriminatory practices by religious organizations.

Money for marriage

Interestingly enough, the GAO report was issued around the same time that so-called pro-marriage Christian ministries have been gearing up to swoop down and grab up a piece of \$150 million a year -- over the next five years -- that Congress is allocating to promote marriage and to produce committed fathers, the Associated Press reported.

"Children who grow up in healthy, stable, married households don't wake up one day and decide they want to run away to Hollywood and become street prostitutes," said Wade Horn, the Bush administration's point man for welfare reform. "Couples in a healthy, stable married relationship don't come home one day and decide they want to abuse their children. This, in my view, is an exercise in limited government."

Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Wash., said "that the Republican-backed program is like a city filling potholes right before the next mayor's race," AP reported. "Only this time, the administration is reaching out to religious groups."

"This is one of those real strange things they get involved in where they say they want small government and they say they want to get government out of people's lives. Then they go try to find two high school kids and use some money to encourage them to get married," McDermott said.

Photo of Mr. Berkowitz by Earl Anderson

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