



## What Is Real Compassion?

by Lawrence W. Reed

*(The Mackinac Center first published a version of this commentary in January 1997. As the 2000 presidential election approaches, its re-issuance is especially timely.)*

### Summary

Some people measure others' "compassion," or lack of it, by whether or not they support increased government spending on social programs. The original meaning of the word, however, emphasizes *personal* involvement with the needy, not government checks.

Main text word count: 702

In the last presidential campaign, we heard the word "compassion" at least a thousand times. Democrats have it, Republicans do not. Big government programs are evidence of compassion; cutting back government is a sign of cold-hearted meanness. By their misuse of the term for partisan advantage, politicians have thoroughly muddied up the real meaning of the word.

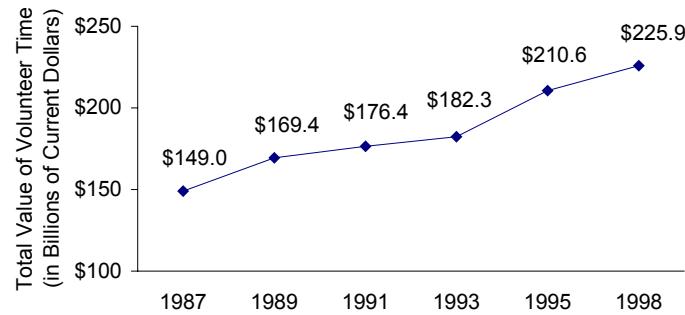
As Marvin Olasky points out in *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, the original definition of compassion as noted in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is "suffering together with another, participation in suffering." The emphasis, as the word itself shows—"com," which means *with*, and "passion," from the Latin term "pati," meaning *to suffer*—is on personal involvement with the needy, suffering *with* them, not just giving to them.

But today most people use the term to mean little more than, as Olasky puts it, "the feeling, or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it." There is a world of difference between those two definitions: One demands personal action, the other simply a "feeling" that usually is accompanied by a call for someone else—namely, *government*—to deal with the problem. One describes Mother Teresa or the Salvation Army, the other President Bill Clinton or the Lansing welfare lobby.

The fact is that government "compassion" is not the same as personal and private compassion. When we expect the government to substitute for what we ourselves ought to do, we expect the impossible and end up with the intolerable. We don't really solve problems, we just manage them expensively into perpetuity and create a bunch of new ones along the way.

From 1965, the beginning of the so-called War on Poverty, to the mid-1990s, total welfare spending in the United States was \$5.4

### Americans Volunteer More of Their Time Than Ever



Source: Gallup Poll for Independent Sector, [www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org).

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trillion. In 1965, total government welfare spending was just over 1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), but 30 years later it had ballooned to 5.1 percent of GDP annually—higher than the record set during the Great Depression. Until welfare reforms that emphasized work began to kick in four years ago, the poverty rate had hardly changed from where it was in 1965. For decades, millions lived lives of demoralizing dependency, families were rewarded for breaking up, and the number of children born out of wedlock soared to the stratosphere—terrible facts brought about, in large part, by “compassionate” government programs.

A person’s willingness to spend government funds on aid programs is not evidence that the person is himself compassionate. Professor William B. Irvine of Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, explains: “It would be absurd to take a person’s willingness to increase defense spending as evidence that the person is himself brave, or to take a person’s willingness to spend government money on athletic programs as evidence that the person is himself physically fit.” In the same way as it is possible for a “couch potato” to favor government funding of athletic teams, it is possible for a person who lacks compassion to favor various government aid programs and, conversely, it is possible for a compassionate person to oppose these programs.

It is a mistake to use a person’s political beliefs as the litmus test of his compassion. Professor Irvine says that if you want to determine how compassionate an individual is, you are wasting your time if you ask for whom he voted; instead, you should ask what charitable contributions he has made and whether he has done any volunteer work lately. You might also inquire into how he responds to the needs of his relatives, friends, and neighbors.

True compassion is a bulwark of strong families and communities, of liberty and self-reliance, while the false compassion of the second usage is fraught with great danger and dubious results. True compassion is people helping people out of a genuine sense of caring. It is not asking your legislator or congressman to do it for you. True compassion comes from your heart, not from government treasuries. True compassion is a deeply personal thing, not a check from a distant bureaucracy.

The next time you hear someone use the word “compassion,” ask him if he really knows what he’s talking about.

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(**Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan.** More information is available at [www.mackinac.org](http://www.mackinac.org). Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)

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