

Michael Gerson is the former speechwriter for President George W. Bush and a current syndicated columnist with the Washington Post. The author of “Heroic Conservatism”, Gerson witnessed the implementation of foreign policy that has resulted in millions of saved African lives. Last week, he came to town to speak about global poverty through his involvement with the ONE Campaign.

We spoke over the phone. Gerson was energetic and hopeful, especially about America's work in reducing global poverty.

Why are you coming to Chattanooga? What is your involvement with the ONE Campaign?

I got involved on issues of global health and poverty when I was at the White House. I was a domestic policy guy when I first went to the White House, and I'd been identified with a set of ideas known as compassionate conservatism and we were trying to promote the work of private and religious institutions to solve social problems. I was attracted to Bush on that basis.

I went in as head of speech-writing. Particularly after 9/11, a lot of the focus of administration changed and not just in the obvious ways of war and terrorism. Bush really started to pay a lot more attention to the non-military instruments of American power, particularly development and global health funding.

I saw from the vantage point of the West Wing as the administration put together the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) which we announced in 2003 State of the Union address, and then the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI), which has saved hundreds of thousands of lives. And the Millennium Challenge and some women's justice empowerment initiatives. It was a real fertile period when it came to development and the fight against preventable diseases.

One of our main outside partners that was willing to become completely nonpartisan and speak up for progress no matter where it came from and work with both sides was Bono. I met and got to know Bono in that effort. I went to lunch with him and really heard a deep commitment on these set of issues.

I arranged a lunch between President Bush and Bono. I also arranged a lunch between the president and Bill Gates. We built some unexpected alliances to support this work.

When I left government, I wanted to stay involved in these issues. I was at the Council on Foreign Relations, then a few years ago, I went to ONE as a Fellow. They are the main advocacy organization in the country — completely nonpartisan organization — to promote U.S. government efforts on preventable disease and extreme poverty around the world.

I do speaking for them and am involved in their policy efforts.

Are everyday Americans mystified by global poverty, or do they understand it? Does it take a lot of work to get them compassionately interested?

It depends on where you're speaking. A lot of people sympathize with the moral goals and are skeptical about the implementation of these programs.

I come from a conservative and Republican background and it's more pronounced in that audience. Part of what I do is to talk about the extraordinary effectiveness in saving literally millions of lives. This is different than people think.

First of all, it's a refuge from the bitterness and division of American politics. You have a real bipartisan group of people involved in this effort.

When we did this with Bush, some of our main partners were Joe Biden and John Kerry. When I've traveled with ONE, I've traveled on the same trip with Mike Huckabee and John Podesta who are deeply committed. You just don't find issues like that.

Part of it this is really a refuge from the bitterness and division of our politics. It really does draw from

across the spectrum. Part of this is it's results oriented, accountable government. When I was with President Bush and saw him make decisions about these programs, his focus was on outcomes not inputs. His whole approach was the alignment of resources, accountability and responsibility. Somebody has to be in charge and somebody has to be responsible for specific goals. You look at PEPFAR and the malaria program, these were not just new programs. These were a new way of doing programs. And they were highly effective and outcome oriented. When people look at that record, they find a lot to like about it.

But it's also a bit of a challenge to some assumptions of people of my background that this is effective government. A lot of people think that our foreign assistance money is thrown down a rathole and that's not true. It's actually very effective and cost effective.

Q: What is the good news coming out of Africa?

The most moving thing I ever saw was at a rural clinic in Rwanda.

I was visiting a rural hospital, a serious major facility. I asked to see the people with opportunistic infections that relates to AIDS. I'd seen wards full. And I was being told they didn't have any cases. It's because 90-some-percent of people in that area who needed AIDS drugs were on them.

When I first visited Africa in 2003, I saw full hospices. These were places people were just going to die. Then I saw full AIDS wards and clinics, where people at least had the hope of health.

Now to see empty wards? That hospital was focusing on diabetes, low birth weight babies, heart disease. All of a sudden, they have the luxury of focusing on the diseases we focus on instead of these emergencies related to infectious diseases.

When I first to go to Zambia, I met a guy there who had started to do small scale AIDS treatments beginning in 2000 or 2001. This was before any real programs. He moved to Lusaka, Zambia. This doctor had his daughter across town in an English language school and he had to commute across town every morning. He had to leave an hour or an hour-and-a-half early every morning because of the funeral processions going on all day, every day in Zambia, a country that at one point was losing two teachers to AIDS for every one it graduated from teacher school. It was an absolute nightmare.

When President Bush announced PEPFAR in the State of the Union address in 2003, there were about 50,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa on AIDS treatments. The most recent numbers across two administrations? Well over seven million in people in sub-Saharan Africa.

It's literally saving the lives of millions of people. I think the American people need to know about it and be proud of it. It really is the kind of story where a lot of good people — Republicans and Democrats — contributed to this.

Q: What gets in the way of that bipartisan and nonpartisan compassion? Why is this the exception?

We've had over last several years a massive national discussion over the role and size of government. Some of that, in my view, has been justified, as I've not been a fan of the Affordable Care Act. And I understand the concerns that people have.

The reality here, in my view, is that we have serious global problems, including disease and development, and we have serious national problems, including stalled social and economic mobility.

We're going to have to craft effective government policies to meet this problem. I would like to see both sides contributing to that discussion in positive ways.

I understand the discontent of Republicans with ineffective government, but there are some things government has to do well if we're going to improve where we are, and they should be involved in an

active competition of ideas to provide those types of solutions.

I think conservative, free market ideas can contribute to that discussion.

I see signs of that virtuous competition in our current 2016 Republican field, if you're talking about Marco Rubio or Jeb Bush, or some of the others, and that to me is good news. They're starting to talk about the need for a positive, hopeful agenda, particularly that appeals to working class and middle class Americans.

What role should global poverty play in upcoming campaign?

Global poverty can fit into a lot of people's worldviews. This is not some kind of altruistic add-on to American foreign policy. It is a centerpiece national security commitment. We are in a global competition of ideas when it comes to forces like radical jihad-ism, where we have to provide not just a message of military resolve but a hopeful alternative to despair.

Part of that is a hopeful global economic agenda and inclusive growth. Part of that is global health that really shows our values in other countries and wins us friends around the world.

I think there is a good national security argument to be made there. This is one of the important non-military instruments of American influence around the world. That is creating hope. Hope is an alternative to hatred.

I've seen that work in a variety of places, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, where the view of America is very positive because of the image we've established through PEPFAR and other programs. I think that is a national advantage. This fits our values, which is a belief in universal human rights and dignity, but also serves our interest by providing a hopeful alternative to hatred.

Talk about the theology and the moralness of what you call 'heroic conservatism.'

I got to see George W. Bush up close. He was deeply influenced by a certain view of human rights and dignity and shared universal human value. He often would say, "To whom much is given, much is required" when he talked about this specific set of issues. That is a powerful message. We as Americans have all the normal set of interests of any other nation, but we've got something more. We've got a belief that human dignity is universal. And when we act in a manner that's consistent with that ideal, it serves us well.

One reason this set of issues is interesting to me is because of a program like PEPFAR or a program like the malaria initiative, the political constituency they draw is a strange bedfellow. It often includes traditionally liberal global health and human rights groups, and it includes religious conservatives, who have been some of the biggest supporters of AIDS funding in Washington, D.C.

There aren't too many other issues that can say that. It attracts a different type of coalition and a very interesting one.

What does that tell you?

There are at least a few moral issues in our political life that are beyond the normal realm of political division and polarization. That's just strikes me as a very good and hopeful thing. Not every thing is thrown into the meat grinder of political polarization. There are some exceptions and real hopeful things.

Your advice to the Republican party in the 21st century? What should conservatism look like in this century?

We have a serious national problem with stalled economic mobility by which there are large groups of people — because of failures of education, because of community breakdown, because of many issues

— that are stuck in a recession that does not get better even when economic times are good. Republicans are going to have to craft a message to that group.

Our levels of actual mobility are lower than Canada, lower than Scandinavia, lower than France. And that should offend people who are committed to the American ideal. And Republicans need to have a positive message on that.

Would you talk about Sen. Corker's influence and growing power in Washington and the role you see him playing?

Sen. Corker is broadly respected in both parties for his work ethic and his intellectual seriousness. This is a guy that unlike — and I won't name names — somebody that tries to use issues to draw attention to himself, he has actually mastered issues and gained the respect of his colleagues. That to me is a rare thing. I have a lot of respect for him.

If people couldn't make it to Thursday night's event, what is the message you'd communicate to them?

Some of the most durable, difficult problems of the last 15 years have yielded to exciting, productive ideas in a way that might surprise you. We have seen some of the largest gains in American standing and in American influence in these areas since the Marshall Plan and that has happened over the last 10 or 15 years, and people should know about it. It's true with global health, development and a lot of issues.

There is a lot of good news out there about what America has done, is doing and continues to do.

It's not a set of issues that divides us. It is a set of issues that has the capacity of uniting us, and that's also a good thing for the healing of American politics, not just our influence in the world. It's important to find those areas where we can honestly agree and where we're not questioning one another's motives all the time and where we can find common moral purposes in our politics.

What about the military response to 9/11? Hasn't there been a backlash to our moral standing in the world, even if you look at torture alone and some of the wartime atrocities?

There is no doubt that there has been some tiredness with the pace and level of American military engagement. I think that's just undeniable.

That's true, but we are still seeing with the rise of ISIS and with Russian expansionism that we may be tired, but the challenges of the world are still very real. We're going to have to craft in both parties smart, effective ways to remain engaged in the world because it's still a very scary place. Our retreat would have terrible consequences. I think Americans are tired, but I think the world still represents a series of challenges that require us to be engaged and that is a very important role of leadership in both parties.

I strongly believe there are three legs of the stool when it comes to American influence in the world.

One is a strong engaged military presence. Another is our diplomacy and working with allies. The third is the hope we provide through development, assistance and global health. I'm a strong advocate for keeping all three of things those things strong, rigorous and effective.

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