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OP-ED COLUMNIST

A Bushian Laboratory

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On Oct. 5, 1999, George Bush went to the Manhattan Institute and delivered the most important domestic policy speech of his life. In what was mostly a talk about education, he made it quite clear he was no liberal. But he also broke with mainstream conservatism as it then existed.



He distanced himself from the cultural pessimists, the dour conservatives who were arguing that America was sliding toward decadence. Then he bluntly repudiated the small government conservatism that marked the Gingrich/Armey era.

It's not enough to cut the size of government, Bush said, or simply get government out of the way. Instead, Republicans have to come up with a positive vision of "focused and effective and energetic government."

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With that, Bush set off on a journey to define what he called "compassionate conservatism" and

what others call big government conservatism.

It's been a bumpy ride. Over the past five years, Bush has overseen the fastest increase in domestic spending of any president in recent history. Moreover, he's never resolved the contradiction between his compassionate spending policy and his small-government tax policy.

But gradually and fitfully, Bush has muddled his way toward something important, a positive use of government that is neither big government liberalism nor antigovernment libertarianism. He's been willing to spend heaps of federal dollars, but he wants that spending to go to programs that enhance individual initiative and personal responsibility.

On Thursday, President Bush went to New Orleans and gave the second most important domestic policy speech of his life. Politically it was a

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masterpiece, proof that if the president levels with the American people and admits mistakes, it pays off.

But in policy terms, the speech pushed the journey toward Bushian conservatism into high gear. The Gulf Coast will be a laboratory for the Bushian vision of energetic but not domineering government.

Bush proposed an Urban Homestead Act, which will draw enterprising people to the area, giving them an opportunity to own property so long as they're willing to work with private agencies to put up their own homes. He proposed individual job training accounts, so much of the rebuilding work can be done by former residents. Children who have left flooded areas will find themselves in a proto-school-choice program, with education dollars strapped to each individual child.

This is an effort to transform the gulf region, which had become a disaster zone of urban liberalism. All around the South, cities are booming, but New Orleans never did. All around the country, crime was dropping, but in New Orleans it was rising. Immigrants were flowing across the land in search of opportunity, but as Joel Kotkin has observed, few were interested in New Orleans.

Now the Bush administration is trying to change all that. That means trying to get around the corruption that made the city such a rotten place to do business. The White House is trying to do this by devising programs in which checks and benefits flow directly to recipients, not through local agencies.

That means challenging the reigning assumptions. Right now the White House is fighting with Louisiana over where to house evacuees. The state wants to put temporary trailer parks on faraway military bases, where there are no jobs and where they will live in "abject dependency," as one senior White House official puts it. The Bush folks want to put temporary housing within a mile of the original neighborhoods so people can become self-sufficient as quickly as possible.

On Thursday, the president was honest about the cost of all this, but he only began to lay out a plan. The Bushies are still trying to figure out how to help people from broken families and those with mental disabilities. They're trying to figure out where to cut government to offset the costs. There are arguments about what New Orleans should try to be, a smaller controlled-growth Portland or a booming and spreading Houston.

Like Franklin Roosevelt in the New Deal era, Bush doesn't have a complete vision of what he wants to achieve. But he does have an instinctive framework.

His administration is going to fight a two-front war, against big government liberals and small government conservatives, but if he can devote himself to executing his policies, the Gulf Coast will be his T.V.A., the program that serves as a model for what can be done nationwide.

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