

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage.



An interview with Dr. Marvin Olasky

ABOUT DR. MARVIN OLASKY

Dr. Olasky earned an A.B. from Yale University in 1971 and a Ph.D. in American Culture from the University of Michigan in 1976. He is the author of 18 books, including *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, which *Philanthropy* magazine called one of "eight books that changed America."

He is currently editor-in-chief of *World* magazine and holder of the Distinguished Chair in Journalism and Public Policy at Patrick Henry College. He has been a foster parent, a PTA president, a cross-country bicycle rider, a newspaper reporter, an informal advisor to George W. Bush, and a Little League assistant coach. He has also been married for 35 years, has four sons, and is an elder of the Presbyterian Church in America.

In this short interview, Dr. Olasky expands on ideas of welfare, compassion and community, which will be the subject of his talk on March 9.

By Dave Quist, Executive Director, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

Can government be compassionate? Why or why not?

Etymology is useful here: "Compassion" comes from "com" (with) and "pati" (suffering). A person who is compassionate to another suffers with that person: Compassion is far more than passing out a check, which government can do well, or feeling sorry for a person. Compassion requires spending lots of time with those in need. Individual government employees can be compassionate, but many government social workers acknowledge that rules and time pressure makes them treat people more as numbers than individual human beings.

Most Canadians take it for granted that government should be involved in supporting our vulnerable citizens. The welfare state is alive and well in both Canada and the United States. Is a drastic change in mindset necessary in order to restore true charity in our culture?

The problem in welfare concerns not our most vulnerable citizens but those who could fend for themselves yet have become accustomed to garnering subsidies from others. In that regard we need a large change of mind, which will come either harshly or gently. The harsh way in the United States will come if we continue on our present path of escalating deficits and eventually have to hyper-inflate our currency. That will economically devastate most people, especially those with fixed incomes. I still hope that we take the gentler path of continuing to help the truly needy while emphasizing work for everyone else. That will require new thinking, but the change need not be drastic.

Can you cite one example where government action resulted in truly improving the welfare of citizens?

Defense expenditures in World War II saved the world from Naziism, and during the Cold War saved the world from Communism. Public health measures from draining swamps to fighting diseases have saved many lives.

What is the worst example you can give of government "support" gone awry?

In the United States, the parents of one million children receive SSI, Supplemental Security Income: They can get \$700 per month for having a child deemed "disabled" and thus in need of special help. Many recipients are truly needy, but with disability now including "mood swings" and attention deficit disorder, some grasping parents strive to increase their income by having cooperative doctors declare their children to be disabled.

This became an issue in Massachusetts when a 4-year-old, Rebecca Riley, died after ingesting lots of powerful medicine that a doctor prescribed for her at the request of her SSI-enrolled parents, who were found guilty of murder. That's an extreme case, but you asked for "the worst," and even the very liberal *Boston Globe*, which usually cheerleads for more government welfare, editorialized last year that "The damage done to children who are misclassified as mentally ill is incalculable: Some linger in special ed. classes when they are capable of accelerated work; others come to believe themselves to be impaired when so such impairment exists."

A friend of mine who runs a homeless shelter in Denver also talks about the effects of SSI on some adults who have disabled themselves by becoming alcoholics. He's had experience with recipients who during the winter receive their SSI checks, go on a binge, and freeze to death on the streets.

Newt Gingrich championed your book The Tragedy of American Compassion by handing it out to staffers in Congress, I believe. Is there one among the Republican presidential hopefuls who you believe will best champion the welfare of the vulnerable?

Rick Santorum understands the need to help the needy without enticing more to declare themselves needy. Newt is a bold thinker who operates best by bringing lots of ideas to public attention, but he has not shown himself to be a reliable and consistent leader.

Why should those who call themselves conservative care about poverty and welfare?

The conservative movement in the United States has, in regard to poverty and welfare, a spectrum of beliefs, but we can talk about two main segments. Those most influenced by the Bible (I'm in that camp) care about the poor because God clearly cares about the poor. Those most influenced by Social Darwinism, theoretically, should not care about the poor, because in the battle for economic success (a modern manifestation of the struggle for survival) the long-term poor have proved themselves unfit, and attempts to help them will slow down human evolution.

Pragmatically, though, even Social Darwinists should care because if they don't support effective programs government will continue to grow, the liberties of all will diminish, and trillions of dollars will be wasted on ineffective programs.