



PREPARED REMARKS: Why Grassroots Groups Are Good Public Policy

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by [William A. Schambra](#)

These remarks were given at the opening of a January 30, 2004 workshop on reducing school violence organized by the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, founded by Robert Woodson, Sr. For more information on the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, and to access the center's online press release about the workshop, please [click here](#).

BOB (Woodson) ASKED me to give you all a lecture today about "mediating structures," one of those fancy terms that only a sociologist could come up with. I said, "Bob, these folks don't want to hear a lecture on mediating structures. I don't want to hear a lecture on mediating structures, much less give one. Let's just get right to the good part of the conference, where we hear from the real heroes of the grassroots movement, folks like Geanie Kase, whom I've watched grow up from the means streets of Hartford into a demanding and responsible job here in the nation's capital, and Omar and 'Bookman,' Carl Hardrick, and the Apostle Shirley Johnson, and Curtis Watkins."



But Bob is right after all. It's important for our next panel of individuals whose lives have been changed by grassroots groups to understand why *you* need to tell us your stories. It's important for us in the nation's capital, and in this temple of public policy research today, to understand why *we* need to listen carefully to those stories.

We need to do this because you bring us hope. In a city full of well-intentioned but failed social experiments – some funded by government, some by corporations, some by foundations – we need to hear the message from the streets of America that there *are* solutions to our nation's problems. But to help us grasp that hope, we do in fact need to understand something about that peculiar term, mediating structures.

We need to go back to a time when a much younger Bob Woodson was invited to join a project located just a few blocks away, over at another think tank, the American Enterprise Institute. (Brookings must have been closed for renovation at the time.) Even more so then than now – this was the mid-1970s – America was in despair over our inability to solve our social problems. And neither political party seemed to offer much

hope.

Liberals and Democrats believed that we need to look to the state, to big government, for the solution to our problems. But as the results were coming in from the Great Society programs, it looked like we hadn't made much headway against poverty and suffering. Yet conservatives and Republicans didn't offer much of an alternative. They were right that government programs weren't working, but their answer was based on individualism and the marketplace, on the idea that individuals had to make it on their own and rely on the workings of the free market, without assistance from the public sector.

But a couple of scholars at AEI, Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus, soon joined by Bob Woodson, said, "Wait a minute. There's more to society and public policy than just the state way up here, on the one hand, and the individual way down here, on the other." In between, there are all sorts of social institutions, where people come to each other's assistance and tackle their own problems their own way – institutions like the family, neighborhood, faith-based groups, and ethnic and voluntary associations. Since Berger and Neuhaus were scholars, they had to come up with a fancy name for this idea. And the name was "mediating structures," because they "mediate" between the individual and the larger structures of government and society.

They commissioned a series of volumes to study, really for the first time, how these quiet, almost invisible everyday institutions of American life went about solving problems like housing, education, health care, and crime. Bob Woodson's volume, by far the best in the series, was entitled *A Summons to Life: Mediating Structures and the Prevention of Youth Crime*, and it was based on a careful study of Sister Falaka Fattah's House of Umoja in Philadelphia, a grassroots outreach effort to youth gangs based on the principle of the extended African family.

In a nation desperate for answers to our social problems, the idea of mediating structures caught on immediately. NCNE Board member Mike Baroody saw to it that Governor Reagan's 1980 Republican Platform was focused directly on the idea of using mediating structures to deliver social services. And every President since then, of both parties, has made an effort – some more successful than others – to incorporate the idea of mediating structures into public policy. President Reagan's "private sector initiatives" effort was followed by the first President Bush's emphasis on "a thousand points of light." That was followed by President Clinton's call to voluntary national and community service. And that was followed by the current President Bush's program of faith-based initiatives.

Just about a year ago, an historic church not too far from here was packed to the rafters with many of you here today, but also with Senators and Cabinet officers and Presidential

staff. The immediate purpose was to pay tribute to the life of an extraordinary young man, Rob Woodson. But it was also a tribute by our nation's leadership to the vision of grassroots mediating structures that Rob and his father have labored tirelessly to introduce into the nation's public policy.

Now, the reason every president for the past quarter century has returned to this idea of mediating structures is that they *work*. Exactly why they work, you'll hear more about from other panels today. But let me give you a quick overview, so maybe you'll know what to listen for in those panels. All I'll really be doing is summarizing what I've learned from Bob Woodson at sessions like this one over the years.

Three reasons why mediating structures work, why you as grassroots leaders have experienced success: first, grassroots groups are *yours*. You experienced the problem, you thought about it, you watched other approaches fall short, and finally you said, "hey, enough of this. We know what we need to do, to build housing here, or to close drug houses, or to get jobs for our young people. Let's get together on our own, to tackle this problem our way."

Other programs have failed in the past, because they're *not* yours. Someone else came up with a grand hypothesis about the causes of the problems in your neighborhood, and funded an expensive, one-size-fits-all bureaucratic program that was dropped on your head without your advice and consent. Or maybe, at the last minute, they had a "community input" session, where you sat and listened to them tell you what they were going to "put in" to your community. But people running their own lives, their own neighborhoods, the way they see fit – the fancy word for that is *democracy*, and we know democracy works.

The fancy word for the second reason grassroots groups work is *community*. You're tackling your own problems, but you're not doing it alone. You're doing it with others, with friends, neighbors, fellow church members, many of whom have been in the same place you're in, overcoming the very same problems and temptations. You realize that you can count on each other for help and uplift, you celebrate and grieve together, you form a genuine, tightly woven community. In fact, I know there must be times when the only reason you manage to stay the course is because you don't want to disappoint those who stand beside and support you.

Now, in the past, programs have failed because they were designed by some outside expert, who probably never experienced what you've been through, never walked a mile in your shoes. But because he took some college classes, he supposedly knows more about your problems than your friends and neighbors. The expert approach relies on diplomas and credentials. The grassroots approach relies on the *community* of those who

have been through the same trials and tribulations, who are linked in the heart, not just abstractions in someone's head.

The third reason grassroots groups succeed is a pretty simple idea: *faith*. Most grassroots groups say that even with programs they design for themselves, even with a strong community behind them, some greater force is necessary, some power that transcends anything on this earth. For the evils to be confronted and overcome, the temptations to be resisted, are finally just too powerful for mere mortals.

Programs have failed in the past because they had contempt for faith. They've been based instead on some sort of scientific expertise. And experts always define problems in obscure, complicated ways – ways that put the solution far beyond *your* reach, but well within *their* reach.

Economists tell us we can't have positive change unless we get the market incentives right, which only they can chart and graph and manipulate. Sociologists tell us we can't have change unless we analyze the broader institutional dynamics of society, which only they understand. Psychologists tell us we can't have change unless we delve into childhood traumas from long ago, which only they can explain to you. *All* those sciences agree that change is pretty hard once you're out of the cradle, because the economic and social and psychological forces are so powerful that they quickly and permanently warp their victims.

But *faith* doesn't accept those counsels of despair. Faith tells us that we can change *right now*, without some expert telling us how to do it, through the transforming power of the Lord. Faith tells us that transformation is better than mere rehabilitation, because rehabilitation may just be for ninety days, but transformation is forever. Faith tells us that if you falter, there's a place to go for mercy and forgiveness. Programs that ignore that element of faith, that rely only on secular science, are overlooking the most awesome and potent instrument for enduring change at our disposal.

So democracy, community, faith -- these are the things that grassroots groups bring to public policy. Now the interesting thing is, if you look at some of the most thoughtful scholarly explanations of what makes America great, those are exactly the factors they point to. Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who visited America almost two hundred years ago, wrote a book called *Democracy in America*, trying to explain why this country was likely to be one of the great powers of the future, even though we were still a small, scruffy, struggling nation at the time. And he said: America will be great because we are *democratic*; because we know how to form *communities* to solve our own problems; and because we have *faith* that God is behind our ventures.

If he walked into the middle of the next panel and heard the stories we're about to hear, he would know immediately that he could only be in the presence of Americans. He'd feel a little silly in his powdered wig and frilly shirt, but otherwise he'd feel right at home. At a time when scholars are fretting about the decline of community in America, when they worry that people seem to be "bowling alone" rather than in groups, you in this room today capture precisely the qualities and virtues that define what it means to be an American.

But if that's true, then why aren't grassroots groups at the very center of public policy? Why don't our law enforcement and housing and drug rehabilitation programs build directly on your successes? Part of the problem, as Bob as argued over the years, is that some very powerful, entrenched interest groups have significant financial stakes in the failed approaches of the past. All those professionals and scientific experts aren't about to give up their paychecks without a struggle.

Now, you're going to hear shortly from some distinguished professionals and public servants who *have* managed to get beyond their credentials and honors, who *have* found ways to work with grassroots groups – so it can happen. And it's a lot more likely to happen when Bob's National Center is there, to build a bridge of trust and understanding between these two divergent worlds.

But the fact is that it's hard for those of us in the professions to embrace the answers of faith-based groups, because it's an admission that we don't have all the answers, that there's a more powerful source of healing beyond our training that many of us simply don't understand. In the final analysis, it means confessing that our tidy professional lives aren't so neat and clean and under control after all -- that *what you've* experienced and suffered, *we also must experience and suffer*, no matter how much we try to run away from it, no matter how hard we try to protect ourselves from that truth behind our badges and robes and checkbooks.

To listen to the stories we're about to hear is to be invited to remember that we are *all* broken, that we are *all* in desperate need of healing that reaches beyond the powers of our sciences and our professions. That's not an easy message to hear and respond to. But when we do, when the scales fall from our eyes, we suddenly have access to the surpassing power that surges through the grassroots groups in this room today, and that could be at the heart of a new and effective public policy for America.

Certainly, the President of the United States has felt that power. That's why he just won't

give up on his faith-based initiatives effort, even when the experts insist that it won't work, and that it won't get him any votes anyway. When he visits a faith-based organization, as he does often, he always recalls and talks about his *own* struggle with alcohol, and the fact that he's experienced in his *own* life the transforming power of God.

When he hears the sorts of stories that we are about to hear today, he must have the same sense that I have whenever I listen to these stories, as I do at every opportunity. For me, your testimony is as close as I can come on this earth to seeing with my own eyes the indisputable evidence of an almighty God: one who can touch the hardest heart, bind up the most grievous wound, turn around the most desperate life; the one who is the ultimate source of hope in the midst of our failed efforts to heal ourselves.

And now, let's get on with the best part of this program. Let's open ourselves to the message of those stories.



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