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Op-Ed Columnist

Bleeding Hearts of the World, Unite!

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WASHINGTON

In a country dispirited by political mud wrestling, there was a spark of hope the other day: a conference in which liberals discussed international issues with conservative Christians - and agreed!

The conference, sponsored by Madeleine Albright on the left and Senator Sam Brownback on the right, underscored that we now have a tantalizing opportunity. If only left and right can hold their noses and work together, we can confront some of the scourges of our time - sex trafficking, genocide, religious oppression, prison brutality - on which there is surprising agreement about what needs to be done.

Democrats have mostly watched the arrival of evangelicals on the foreign policy scene the way the Romans regarded the approach of the Visigoths and Vandals, but that's a mistake. The growing engagement of conservative Christians on international issues is welcome because for the first time it has turned the American heartland into a constituency for foreign aid and humanitarian action.

A decade ago, the heartland was a force for isolation. That's why Tom DeLay said foreign aid meant "putting Ghana over Grandma," and Jesse Helms referred to aid as "money down a rat hole."

Now, in contrast, conservatives are leading the charge on some of these issues. Regular readers know that I'm no fan of this administration, but there's no arguing with facts. President Bush has almost tripled actual spending on overseas development assistance to \$19 billion last year, compared with its trough under President Clinton of less than \$7 billion in 1997, according to O.E.C.D. figures. (Mr. Bush hasn't given nearly as much as he's promised, but his broken promises still amount to far more than Mr. Clinton ever gave.)

Pushed by conservative Christians, Mr. Bush is also doing more to fight both AIDS and sex trafficking than any of his predecessors did. Foreign governments are learning that the U.S. now takes the slavery of 13-year-old girls almost as seriously as the pirating of American movies, and that's a step forward.

So that's the context in which Ms. Albright and Mr. Brownback (who call themselves "the ultimate

political odd couple") held their conference, under the auspices of the Aspen Institute. There was a voyeuristic thrill of spying illicit love - as when Mr. Brownback praised Hillary Clinton, who spoke on sex trafficking, for her "outstanding job."

And cooperation can achieve more than just civility. Darfur is a perfect example of left-right cooperation that has saved thousands of lives, because the leaders in Congress against the genocide are Jon Corzine, one of the most liberal members, and Mr. Brownback, one of the most conservative.

Of course, they have their work cut out for them: Congress just sent Darfur a "drop dead" message by cutting funds for African Union peacekeeping troops there. If Congressional leaders let that stand, they should just rename the bill the Genocide Enabling Act.

What next? Ms. Albright and Mr. Brownback agreed on a tentative agenda by coming up with a list of "the Top 5 worst places to wake up in the morning."

Those are Darfur, North Korea, Burma, Congo and northern Uganda. They're all neglected, brutal spots. Congo, for example, is the site of the most lethal conflict since World War II, with four million dead since 1998.

Another area ripe for cooperation would be safe maternity abroad. For all the battles over abortion and condoms, both sides can agree that half a million women shouldn't be dying unnecessarily in childbirth each year around the world, when modest investments can save their lives.

Domestically, the obvious issue is prisons, the nastiest places in America. A bipartisan coalition won a landmark law against prison rape in 2003, with evangelical leaders standing side by side with Ted Kennedy at the signing ceremony. The next step is the Second Chance Act, which aims to reduce recidivism by easing the adjustment from prisons into society. It stands a real chance of getting through this Congress.

Obviously, there are differences. As I see it, conservatives have gravely undermined the effectiveness of their programs against AIDS with their squeamishness about condoms - but there's still no doubt that the U.S. is doing far more about the disease now than it ever did under Mr. Clinton.

Look, I think that Christian leaders on the right like Senator Brownback, Frank Wolf in the House and Chuck Colson are utterly wrong on many issues. I probably wouldn't vote for them for political office. But I admire them immensely for their humanitarian efforts, and I might vote for them for sainthood.

Over the next year, Democrats and Republicans will devote millions of dollars to heap slime on each other. If they devote 1 percent as much energy to cooperating on a few of these issues, they'll make the world a much better place. Bleeding hearts of the world, unite!

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