Institute for American Values

A Letter of Ideas and Findings
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Propositions

Why Not?

It seems important, at least to the editors of the *New York Times*, for us to know that Professor Lawrence Tribe of the Harvard Law School is having "second thoughts" regarding the prohibition of human cloning. Several years ago, he "leaned toward prohibition as the safest course." But today he is "inclined" to say: "Not so fast."

Several days ago Congress seemed on the verge of passing...a permanent ban on human cloning...On Wednesday, however...senators abruptly changed course and decided to postpone any vote on cloning legislation...Congress' abrupt turnaround shows that legislators will not succumb to demands for ethical certainty if the trade-off is hobbling medical science.

Editorial
Los Angeles Times
February 12, 1998

Why the change? Tribe is reluctant to endorse legal or social distinctions based on beliefs about what is "natural." Such beliefs, he worries, are "vague." They are also intertwined with tradition and conventional morality. Some of them are even connected to religion. In addition, the notion that some institutions and practices are naturally suited to humans — that they properly fit who we are — can lead to the stigmatizing of institutions and practices that are deemed unnatural. In the unenlightened old days, Tribe reminds us, we used to do this all the time: "One need only think of the long struggle to overcome the stigma of 'illegitimacy' for the children of unmarried parents."

Finally, a society that endorses some things as "natural" will "risk cutting itself off from vital experimentation," including lifestyle experimentation. In the case of cloning, the immediate victims of non-experimentation would be all those "with unconventional ways of linking erotic attachment, romantic commitment, genetic replication, gestational mothering, and the joys and responsibilities of child rearing."

To me, this argument flows inevitably from Tribe's unstated but implicit definition of the human person. For Tribe, we humans (at least in the U.S.) are what John Rawls calls "self-originating sources of valid claims." We are autonomous units of desires, rights, and legitimate values of our own choosing. Each of us is called to shape his own teleology. We create ourselves like artists paint, each working on a separate canvas. I may choose to paint a life in which I marry and, through sexual union with my wife, become the father of our child. Or I may choose to paint a life in which, through cloning, I engage in asexual reproduction, intentionally producing a single-parent child, perhaps even a child who is also my identical twin.

Any larger notion of what it means to be a human — any understanding of "natural" that extends beyond this little unencumbered self — is consigned by Tribe to the dustbin of vagueness, tradition, religion, and (what for Tribe is pretty much the same thing) bigotry. Tribe does not explicitly spell out this definition. But without the support of this understanding of who we are, Tribe's "second thoughts" would be unsustainable.

For the modern person of Western civilization at the end of this century, there are only two creation stories. One story takes place in the Garden of Eden, as told in the Book of Genesis. The other takes place in the State of Nature, as told by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and the other eighteenth-century philosophers of the Enlightenment and creators of Anglo-American liberalism.

In one story, humans are God's children, created in God's likeness and image, and called by God into special relationships with one another and into a covenant with God. In this accounting of who we are, humans are free to seek and understand the truth about themselves, and even free to reject the truth, but they are not free — here I believe is the meaning of the forbidden fruit — to decide for themselves what is good and what is evil, since the power to make the moral law is God's alone.

In the other story, humans leave the state of nature (where life is cruel and short) and contract with one another to create civilization. They do so because they choose to do so and because it is in their interest to do so. In this accounting, there is no natural human teleology and there is no forbidden fruit. In one story, the very idea of human cloning is repugnant. In the other, simply to ask the basic question — "Why not?" — is to know that the eventual answer will be: "Yes, let's do it. We can eat of that tree."

Of course, I am telling these stories simplistically. I am overly polarizing them. I am even ignoring the fact that our own national creation story — the story told in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution — draws deeply from both the Garden of Eden and the Enlightenment.

But the essential distinction remains. Moreover, Tribe is clearly on one extreme. By accepting only the unencumbered self — by insisting that one creation story must always and totally trump the other — Tribe announces his position on cloning, and on most other issues as well, before the question is asked.

One final point, drawn largely from Leon Kass' recent essay on cloning. Tribe's defense of cloning depends upon society's acceptance of individual freedom and individual rights as basic social goods. This acceptance, in turn, stems from our belief in the dignity of the individual: the idea that the human person is the subject of society and is an end in itself, never merely an object or an instrument for some other end. Yet the essence of cloning is objectification and instrumentalism — using some of my genes to produce a little replica of me, for my purposes. Human reproduction thus becomes very much like manufacturing, just as new people come ever closer to becoming commodities.

Such a transformation radically undermines the very concept of human dignity. In this sense, cloning inches us further toward what can be called, paradoxically and literally, self-destruction. Undertaking cloning in the name of the sovereign self ends up destroying any notion of the dignity of the self.

Lawrence H. Tribe, "Second Thoughts On Cloning," *New York Times*, December 5, 1997. John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism Moral Theory," *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (September 1980). Leon R. Kass, "The Wisdom of Repugnance," *The New Republic*, June 2, 1997.

But some ethicists and fertility doctors say it is time to call human eggs what they are: a commodity whose price is set by whatever the market will bear. Dr. Rawlins said women now finally realized just how valuable their eggs were. And there is nothing inherently wrong with bidding for human eggs, said Dr. Norman Fost, an ethicist at the University of Wisconsin. After all, who is harmed?

New York Times
February 25, 1998

Upstream, Anyone?

Perhaps the time is right for a public debate in the United States on the definition of the human person. Regarding almost all the key issues of today's culture-conflict, from doctor-assisted suicide to cloning to divorce, it is increasingly our answer to this upstream question — what is a person? — that ultimately guides our downstream conclusions. Defining the human person may be where today's civil society debate is ultimately headed.

Here's the proposition: *An impoverished understanding of the self — a view of the human person as self-owning and auto-teleological — dominates our popular culture, our political debates on both the left and the right, and our inquiries in both the human and natural sciences. This failure of self-understanding is the upstream source of our basic cultural disputes and most pressing social problems.*

Would it be possible to foster a national debate on the definition of the human person? How would it be done? Your ideas would be most welcome.

Each person owns himself.

Charles Murray
What It Means To Be A Libertarian
Broadway Books, 1997

Marriage Penalty

The Congressional Budget Office recently conducted a detailed study of how the federal tax code treats marriage. The study's guiding premise is that the tax code now divides married couples into two categories: those receiving a marriage "bonus" and those receiving a marriage "penalty." According to the study, about half of all couples now receive a bonus, paying an average of $1,300 less in total yearly taxes than they would have if they had remained single. Conversely, more than 40 percent of couples now endure a penalty. Just by getting married, these couples pay an average of $1,400 more in total taxes than they would have if they had filed as single individuals. The typical marriage penalty victim is a two-earner couple. The typical bonus beneficiary is a one-earner couple.

One solution to this inequity is to cut taxes for two-earner couples until the tax code no longer punishes them for having gotten married. This is the implicit recommendation of the CBO study. It's also the main goal of the "Marriage Tax Elimination Act," recently introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Republicans Jerry Weller of Illinois and David McIntosh of Indiana. Under Weller-MacIntosh, couples could choose to file their returns singly, as if they were unrelated individuals, or jointly, whichever would result in the lower tax burden. This reform would eliminate the marriage penalty. Sound like a good idea?

In my view, it's a terrible idea. By lowering taxes for comparatively affluent couples, it would increase regressivity in the tax code. By cutting the tax burden on two-earner couples while leaving everyone else's burden the same, it would further shift the economic incentives against parents who leave the labor force to be at home with children. Finally, by encouraging married couples to file separate returns, this proposal would be inconsistent with the basic reality of the marriage relationship.

A much better idea is called income splitting. Under this proposal, a married couple at tax time could add up their total income and divide by two, so that effectively each spouse would be taxed on half. Income splitting would also eliminate the marriage penalty, but without any of the harmful side effects of Weller-McIntosh. Sound like a good idea?

Expect a lot of fulminating next year against the "marriage penalty," the tax-code quirk that imposes an extra levy on millions of couples simply because they've wed.

Wall Street Journal
December 30, 1997

Actually my goal here is not to persuade you that income splitting is a better policy than the option of separate filing. My goal is to suggest that choosing the question — defining the terms of the inquiry — often pre-ordains the answer. The entire CBO study is based on one question: Regarding taxes, does getting married make a couple worse off, or better off, than they were as two unrelated individuals? Certainly this is a valid question. But is it the only question?

The CBO assumes that individual filing represents the basic standard of fairness. Accordingly, any tax outcome for a married couple that differs from individual filing must necessarily be classified as either a "penalty" or a "bonus." Yet this way of framing the problem makes it impossible to recognize the underlying issue at stake.

Should the tax code recognize the institution of marriage — or should it in effect only recognize individuals? That is the core question. By assuming individual filing as its standard of fairness — its sole criterion for determining whether someone is getting a "penalty" or "bonus" — the CBO implicitly suggests that the question does not exist. We are merely presented with the study's unexamined assumption in this area as the starting point for analysis. The rest is detail.

Besides serving as an example of flawed research methodology, this way of thinking about taxes and marriage also seem culturally diagnostic in a larger sense. Is it becoming increasingly impossible for us, regarding taxes or anything else, to think about our society as anything other than a collection of autonomous individuals?

Congressional Budget Office, *For Better of Worse: Marriage and the Federal Income Tax*, June 1997.

The Shift: 1987-1997

Among family scholars, the shift continues. It's been ten years since Norval Glenn of the University of Texas, as editor of the *Journal of Family Issues*, wrote that the views of leading family scholars were beginning to shift from "continuity-sanguineness" to "change-concern." Glenn meant that scholars in the late 1980s were becoming less likely to view current family trends as a process of gradual and even beneficial adaptation, and more likely to view them as new and socially harmful.

That trickle of change a decade ago has now become, if not a tidal wave, then at least a respectable current. By 1997, Glenn could describe the shift this way: "Not all family social scientists participated in this shift, but it is significant that the most prominent scholars and those most directly involved in the relevant research were most likely to do so."

It's now fair to add two more names to Glenn's list: Paul Amato of the University of Nebraska and Allan Booth of Penn State University. Their new book, *A Generation at Risk*, analyzes longitudinal child outcome data from a large national sample of families, seeking especially to isolate the independent effects of divorce on children from the effects of pre-existing marital conflict. It comes close to being a knockout punch against the prevailing academic and popular rationalizations of our high divorce rate.

The still-dominant view among family scholars and professionals is that parental unhappiness is worse for children than parental divorce: better for parents to separate rather than expose their children to on-going marital conflict and distress. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Francine Russo sums up the conventional wisdom: "children are damaged less by divorce per se than by exposure to intense conflict, whether their families are intact, dissolving, or broken."

A Generation at Risk disconfirms the notion that marital conflict outweighs "divorce per se" as a source of childhood problems. Amato and Booth find that only about 25 to 33 percent of parental divorces today end up being better for the children than if the parents had stayed together. By contrast, about 70 percent of divorces represent the termination of low-conflict marriages which, whatever their shortcomings, are distinctly better for children than the reality of divorce. Moreover, Booth and Amato estimate that, as divorce becomes more socially acceptable, an even higher proportion of future divorces will involve precisely those low-conflict situations in which divorce is worse for children than the continuation of marriage.

This reasoning leads the authors to a startling assertion. For that 70 percent of marriages-in-trouble that are not fraught with conflict, "future generations would be well served if parents remained together until children are grown." And again: "Spending one-third of one's life living in a marriage that is less than satisfactory in order to benefit children — children that parents elected to bring into the world — is not an unreasonable expectation."

This conclusion comes from two left-of-center social scientists, some of whose earlier writings have clearly suggested that one-parent homes are not especially harmful for children. Amato, in particular, has been frequently and favorably cited in recent years by anti-anti-divorce writers, and for good reason. Consider his 1987 book, *Children in Australian Families: The Growth of Competence*. (Amato spent a number of years living and working in Australia, where family trends are similar to those in the U.S.) In the book's final chapter, Amato sums up his major ideas.

The book's most important theme is that harmful "stereotypes" often prevent us from seeing families "as they really are." For example, here is what Amato in 1987 viewed as an especially harmful stereotype: "It is better to stay together for the sake of the children than to divorce." Widely believed, he tells us, but untrue. He even reminds us that "in harmonious one-parent families, children [in his study] had particularly high self-esteem."

Another 1987 theme is "the resilience of children in adapting to different family circumstances." Accordingly, "no single family type is associated with optimal child development. Instead, children are highly adaptable and are capable of

If children of divorce suffer psychological problems, it's usually because of the troubled family life that preceded the breakup, not the divorce itself...A good divorce is better for children than a bad marriage.

Ashton Applewhite
Cutting Loose
HarperCollins, 1997

adjusting to a wide range of family forms and circumstances. If nothing else, this implies that our community needs to develop a greater tolerance for, and appreciation of, the diversity of family forms that exist today." The final two themes are "the limitations of the family's influence on children" and "the generally positive nature of family life for children."

You get the point. From "The Growth of Competence" to "A Generation at Risk," Amato has traveled quite a distance. Not just geographically, from Australia back to the U.S., or chronologically, from 1987 to 1997, but also, and most importantly, *intellectually*: from a qualified defender of the current family trend to one of its most informed critics.

We should not blame Paul Amato and Allan Booth for inconsistency, any more than we should blame other leading scholars, or for that matter ourselves, for revising previous views in light of current evidence. Instead, we should thank them. The shift continues.

Norval D. Glenn, "Continuity Versus Change, Sanguineness Versus Concern: Views of the American Family in the Late 1980s," *Journal of Family Issues* 8, no. 4 (December 1987). For 1997 Glenn quote, Maggie Gallagher and David Blankenhorn, "Family Feud," *The American Prospect*, July-August 1997. Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 238. Francine Russo, "Can the Government Prevent Divorce?" *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1997. Paul Amato, *Children in Australian Families: The Growth of Competence* (Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1987), 242-248.

Marriage Penalty, II

This past October, Stephanie Coontz of Evergreen State College and Donna Franklin of the University of Southern California wrote an essay entitled "When the Marriage Penalty is Marriage." Their basic goal is to dispute the proposition that marriage is a good strategy for avoiding poverty. Marriage is fine if you already have money and a good job, the authors argue, but "marriage has fewer benefits and some surprising costs to people living in poverty." As a way to combat poverty, pro-marriage policies not only "won't work," but "could make the problems of impoverished mothers and children even worse."

As evidence for this conclusion, the authors suggest that the decline of marriage in recent decades has had little if any effect on the number of children living in poverty: "According to the Census Bureau, even if we reunited every single child in the United States with both biological parents — a move that would clearly not be healthy for children in many instances — two-thirds of the children who are poor today would still be poor, because their fathers and mothers do not earn enough to lift them out of poverty." The essential claim is that larger economic forces, not marriage patterns, drive current trends in child poverty.

As a participant in this debate — one who is criticized by name in their article — I was greatly interested in this matter of the Census Bureau finding. I deal with the Census Bureau all the time. They may be my favorite government agency. Had I missed one of their reports? I investigated.

It turns out that the Census Bureau has never reported anything even remotely similar to what Coontz and Franklin say they reported. I spoke to information analysts in the Bureau's marriage and family statistics branch, its income and poverty statistics branch, and its Public Information Office, and they were all mystified. For starters, the Census Bureau does not even attempt to collect information on the earnings of the non-resident fathers of children in mother-headed households. Moreover, even if they had this information, such a dramatically speculative conclusion — if one impossible thing were to happen, then another thing would be true — is well outside the purposes, competence, tradition, and methodology of the Census Bureau.

When I asked Coontz about the matter, she blithely referred me to *America's Children*, by Donald J. Hernandez, who wrote the book while working at the Census Bureau. Yet Hernandez plainly states in the book that he is speaking for himself, not for or about the Census Bureau. More importantly, Coontz and Franklin mangle Hernandez's ideas and hopelessly misreport his research. Hernandez repeatedly acknowledges a "family-composition effect" on current rates of child poverty: "Without the post-1959 rise in mother-only families, then, the relative poverty rate might have decreased by as much as 3.8 percentage points instead of increasing by 2.6 percentage points, while the official rate might have decreased by as much as 12.0 instead of 6.1 percentage points." By way of explaining this finding, Hernandez points out an obvious fact: even if there had been no deterioration (no change) in marriage and family structure trends between 1959 and 1988, many children — too many children — would still have been living in poverty in 1988. Amazingly, this rather banal point, with which virtually no one could disagree, seems to be the entire basis of that alleged "Census Bureau" report showing what would happen if "we reunited every single child" with both parents, which proves, you see...

Okay, I can hear you. Enough on these little details, like who said it or what precisely was said. Focus on the big picture. Weren't Coontz and Franklin simply telling us that lots of young unwed fathers don't have enough money to help raise their children? And doesn't this sound true? Actually, I suspect that it is true. But it completely misses the point.

No one is arguing that today's unwed teen-age fathers are likely to be great marriage candidates or wonderful providers for their children. The real pro-marriage argument is that we ought to strive to be a society in which far fewer of us become parents before we are grown up and married. Such a cultural shift would almost certainly produce, among good things, a lot more men who are much better equipped for marriage and fatherhood.

For example, Linda Waite of the University of Chicago describes what economists call the male "marriage premium": the significant increase in male earnings that typically accrues as men enter into the habits and responsibilities of marriage. (This premium does not stem primarily from so-called "selection effects" — in this case, the likelihood that men who can earn more are also more likely to get married. Waite reports that most of the marriage premium stems from the experience of marriage itself.) Another body of clinical and anthropological research finds, not surprisingly, that becoming a father also changes men for the

better — but in general only when that fatherhood occurs within the context of co-residency with children and a solid parental alliance with the mother. In other words, within marriage.

These are well-known facts, established by many reputable scholars who have taught us much about the dynamics of male socialization and the processes of family formation. But instead of confronting them, Coontz and Franklin substitute a static, purely hypothetical, and therefore irrelevant question — what if "we" instantly "reunited" all of today's estranged fathers and mothers? — in order to generate a meaningless answer.

On the actual empirical question of whether marriage rates help to drive poverty rates, Coontz and Franklin simply ignore the research, almost all of which concludes that the decline of marriage in recent decades has been an important contributor to the persistence of poverty, especially among children.

Consider a 1996 study by Robert I. Lerman of the Urban Institute: "The results [of the study] show that the 1971-1989 trend away from marriage among parents accounted for nearly half the increase in income inequality among children and for the entire rise in child poverty rates...Thus, despite the lower earnings of today's unmarried men, raising the proportion of mothers who are married would substantially reduce child poverty in the U.S." Many other scholars have reached essentially the same conclusion. As Norval Glenn of the University of Texas recently put it: "The proposition that the increase in single parenthood has contributed substantially to family poverty is supported by evidence from a variety of kinds of studies, including sophisticated causal modeling. This evidence is about as nearly conclusive as the support for any social science proposition ever is. If public policy should not be based on this evidence, it probably should not be based on any social scientific data."

One more example: an interesting 1997 book on African-American families called *Ensuring Inequality*. As part of "the mounting evidence against the desirability of single parenting," the author points historically to policy, cultural, and demographic trends that "increased the number of births to younger, unmarried black women, thereby boosting the proportion of all births occurring outside of marriage. These out-of-wedlock births then contributed to the exponential growth of black mother-only families in succeeding decades...It is now clear that increased childbearing among younger black women has widened the social and economic divisions within the black community by generating an ever-larger proportion of black children born into poverty."

The author of this book, amazingly, is Donna Franklin. It is a challenging, intellectually serious book — much more serious than anything Stephanie Coontz has ever written. I hope that Franklin is wrong about her basic conclusion, which is that marriage among African-Americans has declined so much that we have no choice other than to "accept the irreversibility of the high levels of nonmarriage." But clearly Franklin has concluded (at least in her book) that the steady deterioration of marriage in recent decades has indeed led to more children living in poverty.

In sum, Coontz and Franklin cite a Census Bureau report that does not exist, as the source of a frivolous question of their own invention whose answer can-

not be evaluated, all in defense of an empirical assertion that is, by any reasonable scholarly standard (including Donna Franklin's), completely indefensible. Occasionally in our public debate, a proposition emerges that is so wrong, and wrong in such multiple and revealing ways, that the proposition itself, when considered even briefly, convincingly demonstrates the opposite of what it was intended to demonstrate. I believe that we have before us a perfect example of this phenomenon.

Stephanie Coontz and Donna Franklin, "When the Marriage Penalty Is Marriage," *New York Times*, October 28, 1997. Donald J. Hernandez, *America's Children* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993), 282-290. Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (forthcoming). "Effect of Family Structure on Child Poverty and Income Inequality," *The Urban Institute Policy and Research Report* (Summer-Fall 1996). Norval D. Glenn, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, November 6, 1997 (edited version published November 11). Donna L. Franklin, *Ensuring Inequality: The Structural Transformation of the African-American Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 144-45, 218-19.

Consequently, between 1959 and 1988, most of the rise in the proportion of relatively poor children who lived in mother-only families is accounted for by the rise in the proportion of all children who lived in mother-only families; and all of the rise in the proportion of officially poor children who lived in mother-only families is accounted for by the rise in the proportion of all children who lived in mother-only families. These results suggest why many poverty researchers have focussed on the rise of mother-only families.

Donald J. Hernandez
America's Children

I Want What I Want

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then the Institute's main scholarly body, our 20-member Council on Families, has been sincerely flattered. In the last couple of years, several books (such as Judith Stacey's *In the Name of the Family* and Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Really Are*) and quite a few articles (such as Arlene Skolnick's "Family Values: The Sequel," in T*he American Prospect*) have gone to some lengths to argue that our Council is almost single-handedly responsible for fooling the media and harmfully distorting the national debate on family well-being.

To Judith Stacey, the Institute and Council "have had great success shaping the national debate over the family." Part of this success includes fostering "the national consensus on family values that rapidly shaped the family ideology and politics of the Clinton Administration and his New Democratic party." All very bad, in her view. Arlene Skolnick similarly describes the Institute as "the think tank responsible for the sudden shift in the national debate on the family," while concurring with Stacey that "its writers have the facts wrong — the policies they encourage could actually make children's lives worse."

No longer content merely to curse the darkness, Stacey, Coontz, Skolnick, and a number of other like-minded scholars and therapists have recently launched a Council on Contemporary Families — sound familiar? — devoted explicitly to attacking the ideas of our Council on Families.

To begin to grasp the new group's philosophy, consider some of the titles of recent material either written by them or in support of their ideas. Constance Ahrons, the co-chair of the group, is the author of a book called *The Good Divorce*. Stephanie Coontz and Donna Franklin: "When the Marriage Penalty is Marriage." Katha Pollitt, a regular Institute critic: "What's Right About Divorce." The main point of contrast seems pretty clear. Our purpose is to criticize the divorce revolution; their purpose is to defend it.

One way to defend the divorce revolution is to say that you are not necessarily in favor of divorce, but are against the people who are against divorce. (Their research is bad, they exaggerate, they are politically motivated, etc.) Everybody occasionally says something that is open to criticism, so it's easier for our critics to attack us rather than propose their own ideas. This was certainly the approach taken in a recent *New Republic* cover story reviewing *The Divorce Culture*, by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, a former member of our staff and current member of our Council, and *The Abolition of Marriage*, by Maggie Gallagher, an Institute staff member. The review essay was described as "The Case Against the Case Against Divorce."

Another strategy is the "per se" argument. Whatever you want to denigrate or downplay — marriage, fatherhood, the two-parent home — simply describe it as not very important "per se." Here is contemporary-council member Carolyn P. Cowan describing the new council's conceptual framework: "It's not the family structure per se, it's the quality of the relationships between adults and children." This formulation works for almost any topic. It's not marriage per se, it's commitment in relationships. It's not fatherhood per se, it's another caring adult to help raise the child. Or this slight variation: The problem for children is not divorce per se, it's parental conflict.

The purpose of the "per se" argument is always disassembly: to break something down into its constituent parts, so that the effects of one part can be said to override the effects of another. Consider this example: Regarding who gets lung cancer, what matters is not "smoking per se," but lifestyle habits. The statement is obviously absurd. One cannot logically separate smoking from lifestyle, much less suggest that the health consequences of lifestyle somehow invalidate the health consequences of smoking. Similarly, it is absurd for Carolyn Cowan to suggest that good relationships matter, but that who lives in the home ("family structure per se") does not, as if we must choose between the two, oblivious to the fact that they are inextricably connected. If a father is separated from the mother and living far away, doesn't that typically impinge on the "quality" of the father-child relationship?

One more example: the common claim that the main problem for children is not "father-absence per se," but rather the effects of living in poverty. See how it works? Like a magic wand, this formulation turns any evidence that poverty harms children into evidence that father-absence does not harm children, or at least does not harm children as much as poverty does. What gets lost in the sophistry is that fatherlessness and child poverty are not opposed to one another; they are causally linked. Which helps to explain why children in mother-only homes are five times more likely to be poor than the children in married-couple homes, and why approximately 60 percent of all poor children in the U.S. today live in homes characterized by "father-absence per se."

Yet in a larger sense, none of these particular disputes — most of which center on what the data show regarding the significance of the two-parent home — directly illuminate the essential dispute. After all, looking at it from the viewpoint of our critics, why would anyone want to spend all her time arguing that unwed childbearing doesn't hurt children, or writing articles with titles like "What's Right About Divorce"? Surely the spread of divorce and illegitimacy are not final aims; they do not constitute an animating vision. So what is the vision?

Judith Stacey, a founder of the new group, frames the point nicely: "The family values debate is not, then, just about the family. It is also about personal freedom and whether we can afford a plural moral culture that supports lifestyle experimentation." She elaborates: "This freedom consists not just in redefining the structure and composition of our intimate associations, but in redefining the roles of mother, father, husband, wife, lover and friend and the meaning of family, friendship and other forms of intimate relationship and association." For Katha Pollitt, the goal is similar: "a life not just with more justice but also with more freedom, more self-respect, more choices, and more pleasure."

Make your own rules.

TV ad (Toyota), 1997

But for succinctness and clarity, listen to Barbara Ehrenreich. The "first principle" for progressives must be "full freedom and economic security for all," meaning the creation of a society that is "economically socialist and socially libertarian." As I review the family-debate writings of Stacey, Coontz, Skolnick, and others in and around their school of thought and their new initiative, I can find nothing that is inconsistent with this goal of socialism plus libertarianism. Indeed, everything they say fits quite comfortably under this guiding premise.

Here, then, is the vision: a society that collectively provides for everyone's material needs ("economic security for all") while simultaneously encouraging everyone to do anything they want to do ("full freedom" and "lifestyle experimentation"). What kind of people would such a society tend to produce?

One person who comes to mind is Dennis Rodman, the professional basketball player and pop-culture celebrity who dyes his hair different colors, hosts a show on MTV, and recently wrote a best-selling book called *Bad As I Wanna Be*. Rodman might be too rich to favor socialism, but he is certainly the equal of Stacey and Ehrenreich in his support of "full freedom" and "lifestyle experimentation." Some years ago, in the midst of a suicidal depression, Rodman made a life-changing personal choice: "to let the person inside me be free to do what he wanted to do, no matter what anybody else said or thought." He elaborates: his basic dream today is "to live my life like a tiger in the jungle — eating whatever I want, having sex whenever I want, and running around butt naked, wild and free."

As Woody Allen similarly put it, discussing the merits of his sexual affair with the adopted daughter of his then-wife Mia Farrow: "The heart wants what the heart wants." Or as Clubber Lang, a bad guy in one of Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* movies, screams at everyone: "I want what I want!"

To put it mildly, this way of thinking can often lead to problems for men — a fact that many national political commentators are discussing today, and that has been pointed out in Rodman's case by Anicka Rodman, whose reflections about the father of her child are contained in her book, *Worse Than He Says He Is*. Others who have pointed out this fact include virtually every anthropologist, historian, or psychologist who has ever studied or written anything about male behavior or male socialization.

This way of thinking can also lead to problems for women — another fact that, for most people, surely goes into the "not surprising" file. Accordingly, across cultures and history, women, especially mothers, have always tended to be firm opponents of libertinism, especially sexual libertinism. At the same time,

it is true that the cause of libertinism in the U.S. today is frequently championed by women: especially by that small group of elite women who are intent on elevating "lifestyle experimentation" to the top of an otherwise venerable, and primarily economically oriented, progressive agenda.

To me, such a goal reflects a failure of the progressive imagination. The goal of blending guaranteed economic plenitude with personal libertarianism is not a serious philosophy. It is not even a serious politics. It is instead what psychologists call an infantile desire. It is the cry of the little girl who wants Mommy and Daddy to give her everything and let her do anything.

I do anything I want. I accept no judgements.

TV ad (Crunch), 1997

Judith Stacey, *In the Name of The Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 54; and unpublished paper, "Do Parents Make Better Citizens? The Civic Order and the New Familism," 1995. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). Arlene Skolnick, "Family Values: The Sequel," *The American Prospect*, May-June 1997. Constance Ahrons, *The Good Divorce: Keeping Your Family Together When Your Marriage Comes Apart* (New York: Basic Books, 1995). Coontz and Franklin, *op.cit*. Katha Pollitt, "What's Right About Divorce," *New York Times*, June 27, 1997; and "Feminism's Unfinished Business," *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1997. Margaret Talbot, "Love, American Style," *The New Republic,* April 14, 1997. Abigail Trafford, "Family Matters," *Washington Post*, November 25, 1997. Barbara Ehrenreich, "When Government Gets Mean," *The Nation*, November 17, 1997. Dennis Rodman, *Bad As I Wanna Be* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1996), 11; and *Walk on the Wild Side* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1997), jacket. Anicka Rodman, *Worse Than He Says He Is* (Los Angeles: Dove Books, 1997).

Old Times There

Governor David Beasely of South Carolina recently managed to annoy almost everyone at once by recommending that the Confederate flag be removed from atop the State Capitol Building in Columbia. Some important portions of his political base — Beasely is a Republican who tacks "conservative" on social issues — very adamantly want the flag to stay just where it is. Leaders of the Legislature's Black Caucus charged him with not going far enough, since Beasely wants to relocate the flag to a nearby Confederate monument, as opposed to, say, denouncing the flag and banishing it altogether. National political pundits, struggling to take the issue seriously — these people still fight about *that*? — guessed that Beasely was after publicity, perhaps in the hope of being "mentioned" as a possibility for Vice President in 2000. All in all, a fairly rough outcome for the guy.

For northern readers who have never shouted about this topic over dinner, please take my word for it: the Confederate flag is a volatile issue that cuts deep for both black and white Southerners. A few years ago, an old high school friend from my home town of Jackson, Mississippi, was working as a consultant for a local congressional candidate, one of whose opponents had casually (and in practical political terms, foolishly) endorsed the idea of removing the Confederate flag from the Mississippi Capitol. My friend's candidate realized that

he could help himself politically by "defending" the flag, but was reluctant to exploit the issue. Weren't there more important issues to discuss, he asked his consultant? Like jobs? "Let me put it to you this way," his knee-deep-in-poll-data advisor replied. "Would you rather be the flag congressman or the jobs candidate?" The guy stuck to his principles, talked about jobs and other "real" issues, and lost.

That the U.S. flag is also a potent symbol, and quite real politically, was dramatically demonstrated during the 1988 presidential campaign. Remember George Bush actually visiting a flag factory, talking about the flag for weeks on end, pounding poor Michael Dukakis nearly to death over whatever Dukakis had allegedly done — who can even remember what? — to disrespect the flag?

Beasley has already been hurt, and may be hurt more in the future, by the politics of the Confederate flag. But to me, the most interesting part of this story concerns why Beasely chose to take on this issue. He knows as well as anyone the tortured mix of wounded defiant pride, veneration of the past, racism, and moral outrage that surrounds any discussion of this flag. Weeks before he started the uproar, his own polls told him, in effect, that he couldn't win on the issue. But he did it anyway.

He did it because he thought that his religious faith required him to do it. Beasely is an evangelical Christian. My sense of him is that he tries to take seriously the notions of repentance, humility, and reconciliation. He wants to take down the flag because he believes that guys like him — Southern, white, conservative, Christian — ought to do more to heal racial wounds and confront our growing sense of racial mistrust. He wants the flag down because he does not want to invite African-American leaders to meet with him about racial reconciliation in a governor's office that sits under a flag that is viewed not by him, but by those African-American leaders, as an endorsement of racism.

We are seeing something new here. Not just regarding one governor, but regarding Southern evangelical Protestantism. Consider the rapid growth in all the Southern states of the Promise Keepers movement, with its forceful emphasis on racial reconciliation. Or the recent decision of the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination, to apologize and seek forgiveness for the sin of racism.

When I was growing up in Jackson in the 1960s, virtually all white religious organizations were adamant supporters of racial segregation. As far as I could tell, the fact that one was a Baptist or a Presbyterian typically had no more of an influence on one's racial views than did the fact that one was, say, a plumber or a baseball fan. Thus did conventional racial views overwhelm any chance of a "counter-cultural" Christian influence on the society.

Today, a relatively recent evangelical movement for racial reconciliation is clearly present in many white Southern churches and denominations. It does not represent everybody in those churches, and it is far from perfect. But it's there. And one result of this encouraging movement is David Beasely, who did the right thing, in the right way, for the right reason.

So What?

In her 1995 Erasmus Lecture sponsored by the Institute on Religion and Public Life, Midge Dector made so bold as to sum up our entire cultural predicament — and indeed, the overall trajectory of Western culture in this century — by pointing out modernity's primary cultural questions: "Why not?" and So what?"

"Why not?" is the question of early and high-tide modernity. It's an optimistic question. It aims to quarrel about limits, extend frontiers, push through previously respected boundaries. As Jim Morrison of The Doors famously put it: Break on through to the other side. It's a liberating question that can unleash much societal dynamism, some of it quite valuable. It's a question that seeks to shift the burden of proof. Is the concern divorce or unwed childbearing? Selling human eggs? Same-sex marriage? Prove that it's harmful. It's also a question that relentlessly challenges the validity of absolute judgements. Pornography? Define your terms. Cloning? Surely you admit that the issue is complicated. Forbidden fruit? Surely there are some cases, under some conditions...

"So what?" is the decadent child of "Why not?", perhaps the final answer to "Why not?", emerging most vividly in late modernity, or as part of what is sometimes called (mistakenly in my view) post-modernism. It's a profoundly pessimistic question, bragging about its cynicism while heading toward despair. It's a question not for the rebel or skeptic, but for the nihilist. It does not seek to expand limits; it denies the presence of limits. It does not seek to argue for a new truth, but instead suggests that truth itself, especially when posited as objective truth, is a meaningless idea. Why get so worked up? It doesn't really matter. Big deal. Who cares? So what?

In this moment of national reckoning regarding the sex-allegation controversy surrounding President Clinton, many people, I believe properly, have questioned some of the inquisitors, cautioned those who would judge the president too quickly or harshly. Let the facts come out. Don't turn these events into an excuse for titillating sex-talk. Don't believe whatever we hear on TV or read on the web. Most of all, worry — not just for the president, but for all citizens — whenever judges, prosecutors, and journalists can so totally invade people's personal lives, destroying any boundary between public and private and effectively undermining the constitutional guarantee that protects all citizens, even public officials, against unreasonable searches and seizures. These are important points.

And yet, in some of the commentary and public reaction, another point of view has also emerged, strongly and unmistakably. That point of view is: So what? Adultery? As long as the guy does his job, who cares about his sex life? Weren't they consenting adults? Lying? Don't they all lie? Nixon did, Kennedy did. So what?

To me, this is terribly sad. "So what?" does not redirect our search for moral truth. It declares that the search itself is purposeless. When all or at least most of the important facts in this matter are known, and we as a society move toward a considered public judgement, I cannot believe that most of us, or even many of us, will essentially be saying, So what? Surely there are better angels in our nature.

A Cultural J-Curve?

William Bennett recently said that it was time for us Americans to grow up, face reality, and admit that there is some good news. Okay, I'll admit it. Less crime. A humming economy. A slight leveling off, and perhaps the early signs of turn-around, in divorce, unwed childbearing, and teenage sexual activity. Impressive grass-roots activities like Promise Keepers and the fatherhood and marriage education movements. Even a growing agreement on the need for what the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb calls "re-moralization."

Yet it is hard for me to shake the feeling that the economy is getting better while the culture is getting worse. Which is another way of saying that we are getting richer while our ways of living together are getting poorer. I feel it as an analyst and I also feel it personally.

Take the issue of divorce. I keep in my office a file labeled "Normalizing Divorce." The file contains whatever evidence I happened to have come across recently, mostly from advertising and popular culture, which suggests that our society has more or less cheerfully accepted a fifty percent divorce rate as normal. The file is always fat.

There's a recent ad from a company that wants to buy your jewels. Under a picture of a diamond ring, the ad reads: "Don't think of it as a reminder of your lousy ex-husband. Think of it as a down payment on a Porsche." There's a liquor ad featuring one attractive woman talking to another: "He's crazy about my kid. And he drinks Johnnie Walker." There's a TV ad from Tylenol pitched to single mothers: "When your kids depend on you to be both mother and father, you can't let them down." There's the first issue of a new magazine called, yes, *Divorce*. There's a story from the *Washington Post* entitled "A DMZ for Feuding Ex-Spouses," describing how a growing number of private companies and other groups are setting up formal "child transfer centers," so that divorced parents don't actually have to go to one another's homes when dropping off or picking up children.

A lot of divorce culture material is aimed directly at children. There's a Father's Day card from American Greetings: "You've been just like a father to me." There's an ad from Ladybug Press for "My Two Homes," a special calendar for children of divorce. There's an ad in *Modern Dad* magazine for a book called *How to Survive Your Parents' Divorce: Kids' Advice to Kids,* which gets a rave review from a children's magazine. Nickelodeon, the children's TV network, advertises a program for children whose parents are divorcing. The host, Linda Ellerbee, urges the children: "Let's see how to turn what *seems* to be the end of the world into a new experience."

Of course, these are only a few shards of reality from a big, diverse society. And I know that good intentions, or at least other than bad intentions, drive the creation of much of what ends up in my file. But still, this stuff makes me want to weep, and also makes me fear that the trend toward a post-marriage society is beyond reversing, at least for the foreseeable future. Moreover, this trend defines so much of who we are precisely because it stems so clearly from the upstream question: "Who are we?" Are we individuals, ordinated toward individuation and

autonomy? Or are we also persons, ordinated toward connectedness with others and with God?

A few months before he died, I heard the historian and social critic Christopher Lasch say that it is possible to win the debate and lose the culture. We can be persuaded intellectually that, say, the divorce rate is too high. But meanwhile, the way we actually live our lives does not change. I also recall Leon Kass of the University of Chicago warning me a year or so ago: "You can tear down a culture with talk, but you can't build one with talk." Not the most reassuring thing he could have said to a guy who talks about culture for a living, but maybe a wise thing to say.

Breaking up your marriage is especially tough if your assets are tied to your business. To make sure the company will survive, create a divorce contingency plan now.

Your Company
February/March 1998

So I will put the question to you, gentle reader: Particularly from the perspective of family well-being, is our culture in 1998 getting better or worse? Please share some thoughts on this question. In our next issue I'll report on interesting answers, especially those disagreeing with me, and especially those engaging this theme of how our society understands the definition of the human person.

Divorce, Fall 1997. Jacqueline L. Salmon, "A DMZ for Feuding Ex-Spouses," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, July 14, 1997. Chris Woodward, "Father's Day cards evolve with times," *USA Today*, June 12, 1997. *Modern Dad*, December 1996-January 1997.

Sincerely,

David Blankenhorn
President

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Now available for purchase from the Institute, two reports from our Council on Families. The first is *Closed Hearts, Closed Minds: The Textbook Story of Marriage,* an examination of twenty leading college-level textbooks on marriage and family, by Norval D. Glenn, our Council's Research Director. This report has caused, and is still causing, quite a stir. The second is *Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation*, a broad look at the state of marriage that includes dozens of recommendations for strengthening marriage, written jointly by the members of the Council. This report has been particularly useful for state and local legislators and for grass-roots, civic, philanthropic, and religious organizations.