A Letter of Ideas and Findings
Number 12, Fall 2001

Propositions

In this letter

Dear Reader,

For more than a decade, the name "Institute for American Values" has been primarily an albatross around our neck, signaling to some that we are right-wing nuts, and to others that we are watering down the meaning of virtue by using a namby-pamby, everything-is-relative word such as "values." So either way, we usually lose.

But perhaps, in our ignorance, we were building better than we knew. For in the post-September 11th world, a serious discussion of American values is about as important as any discussion can be. These values largely incited the attack against us and were arguably the ultimate targets of the attack. The best of American values are also the organizing principles upon which we must fight back. Indeed, it seems crucially important, for both practical and principled reasons, to fight back only on the basis of core American values.

Seldom has the vocabulary of materialism — the assumption that material and especially economic interests are fundamental, whereas philosophical and especially religious ideas are essentially reflective and derivative — been more of an impediment to understanding human behavior. Few of us, I suppose, have much real knowledge of the inner lives and motivations of the people who attacked us, but based on their actions and public statements, it seems clear enough that they did not attack New York and Washington merely because of U.S. policy in the Middle East, U.S. ties to Israel, the economics and politics of oil, the activities and influence of the U.S. military, or the U.S. role in the world economy. These are but some of the rough outgrowths, partial by-products, of something else. That something else, fundamentally, is our values, our shared ways of living.

Let us be honest. For many people, including many Americans, some of these values are unattractive, especially in their pure form. Consumerism as a way of life. Crass commercialism. Rising secularism. Sexual libertinism. The notion of freedom as no rules. The notion of the individual as utterly sovereign, what John Rawls calls a self-originating source of valid claims. Plus an enormous, money-making entertainment and communications apparatus that relentlessly glorifies many of these ideas and parachutes them, whether they are welcome or not, into nearly every corner of the globe. Just as it is obscene for terrorists to believe that people living in a society that is flirting with these values should be murdered en masse, it is naive for us to pretend that these norms carry little weight in our society, or that they are benign, or are irrelevant to how others view us.

But core American values are different from these, and they are quite attractive, not only to Americans, but to people everywhere in the world. These more foundational values — the ideals that most define our way of life — were among the primary intended targets of our attackers on September 11th. At this

institute, we wrote about these values in a 1998 public appeal, *A Call to Civil Society*. Let us briefly consider four of them:

• First and foremost is the conviction that all persons possess transcendent human dignity, and that consequently each person must always be treated as an end, never as a means. The U.S. Founders, drawing upon the secular reasoning of the Enlightenment as well as upon the fundamental religious claim that all persons are created in the image of God, affirmed as "self-evident" the idea that all persons possess equal dignity. The clearest political expression and result of the belief in transcendent human dignity is democracy.

• Second, following closely from the first, is the conviction that universal truths (what the Founders called "laws of Nature and of Nature's God") exist and are accessible to all people.

• Third is the belief that, because our individual and collective access to truth is imperfect, most disagreements about values call for civility, openness to other views, and reasonable argument in pursuit of truth.

• And fourth is freedom of conscience and freedom of religion — the twin freedoms which many people, from George Washington to today's finest historians, believe to be the foundation and precondition of all individual freedoms.

What is most striking about these values is that everyone can participate. Because they apply to all persons without distinction, they cannot be used to exclude anyone from recognition and respect based on the particularities of race, language, memory, or religion.

This is not ordinary in human affairs. For example, it makes little sense to talk of someone "becoming Japanese" or "becoming French," since identity as Japanese or French is a status that is largely independent of choice. But anyone, at least in principle, can become an American. And in fact, anyone does. Muslims do it every day. People come here from everywhere with a yearning to breathe free, and soon enough they are as American as anyone whose family came over on the Mayflower. We are the only country in the history of the world defining itself and organizing its affairs principally on the basis of an abstract and universally invitational philosophy. No other fact about this country is more amazing. It is the thing about America that I am most proud of.

The power of core American values is also the reason why millions of people who do not live in the United States identify with them. In the days immediately following the September 11th attack, I got calls from several friends who live in other countries. They told me about the mood, the feeling, in those cities. The whole place is pretty much shut down, they said. People are very subdued and quiet. A bit stunned. Watching everything on TV. Hardly any shopping or eating out. People are being very kind and considerate with one another. I said, *that's exactly how it is in New York.* Just why the mood in Toronto and Frankfurt and Melbourne would so closely resemble the mood in New York on September 12th

and 13th is a question that I can't fully answer, but here is one possible explanation: an attack on the symbols and citizens of the United States is widely viewed as a world-scale transgression, an attack on all people of good will.

I recognize that those in the world who hate us, hate us for reasons that are multiple and complex. But here is one proposition. This network of terrorists, along with their sponsors, financial supporters, and (sadly, many) cheerleaders in the Muslim world, emphatically deny the equal dignity of the human person, emphatically deny that truth is accessible to all, and unequivocally reject the principle of freedom of conscience and of religious expression. Indeed, these rejections are the foundation of their current case against us, the philosophical rocks upon which they are building. Moreover, this repudiation of human universals in the name of religious particularism is openly violent, frequently involving state-sanctioned and religiously authorized calls not only to individual murder (as in the case, for example, of the novelist Salmon Rushdie, who wrote a novel mocking the Koran) but also to the mass murder of innocents.

Perhaps these facts point to some of the ways in which intellectuals and think tanks can contribute to our new, post-September 11th national mission. First and foremost is the need clearly to define, both morally and as matter of strategy, who is the "us" in this conflict and who is the "them." This struggle is not between two societies, or two coalitions of societies. It is not a struggle between Islam and the West. It is ultimately a contest between all people in the world who would embrace certain universal human values — let's call them transcendent human dignity, natural moral truth, civility, and freedom of conscience — and those who, in the name of an exclusivist and highly repressive theology, would carry out or support mass murder in order to destroy those values.

A related possible contribution from intellectuals is to help us as a society to clarify the ways in which fighting back effectively is consistent with, and in large part dependent upon, fighting back in ways that embody rather than violate our basic values. For example, acts of violence against Arab Americans (there have been many since September 11th) and expressions of contempt toward Islam as a religion, or Islamic culture as a whole, make us weaker, not stronger, since such behavior flatly contradicts our reasons for prosecuting this campaign in the first place. Another example is our level of concern about civilian casualties in the armed conflicts that appear to be imminent. Since the indiscriminate murder of non-combatants is the primary method of our enemy, we are under a special obligation, it seems, both morally and as a matter of building world support for our mission, to wage war justly, confining our killing as strictly as possible to the terrorists and their immediate sponsors and collaborators.

A third possible intellectual task is to engage and even seek out the battle of ideas about the nature and justness of our cause. We all need to know why we fight, and why we must fight. Moreover, notwithstanding our current sense of national unity, there are genuine disagreements among us on these matters. Some people, perhaps disproportionately represented among those who have never attended graduate school, may view the conflict as "American" versus Arab, or as the true religion of Christianity versus the false religion of Islam. Others, perhaps disproportionately represented among those who *have* attended graduate school, will view both September 11th and our national response to it as yet more

evidence that the United States is a bad country that does bad things in the world. The former is old-fashioned chauvinism, another version of ethnic and religious particularism; the latter is another expression of the anti-Americanism that is well-represented in U.S. higher education today. To me, both perspectives are misguided, and both are worth publicly opposing, since both are largely blind to the universal values that in fact are at stake, and for which we fight.

A fourth task is engaging the views of intellectuals and leaders in Muslim countries. Culturally, within Islam itself, there is an important conflict between the (let's call them) modernists, whose embrace of Islam tends to be consistent with universal human values, and fundamentalists, who tend to favor or turn a blind eye toward the killing of unbelievers, starting with Muslims deemed to be insufficiently fundamentalist. Can't we, shouldn't we, do more to reach out intellectually and culturally to those many Muslim thinkers and leaders who are on the humanitarian side of that struggle?

A fifth task is facing honestly what is unattractive about current American values — consumerism, hedonism, all the rest — and doing what we can to change them for the better. Some analysts have argued that the world's two largest, fastest growing, and most politically potent value systems today — the two world views capable of making a serious play for some sort of hegemony — are fundamentalist Islam and western-style market capitalism. Well, if I must choose, I know which side I'm on, but I'd rather, please, have a third choice.

So would a lot of people, including, for example, both Pope John Paul II, who himself runs a pretty influential global organization, and Vaclav Havel, arguably the most important philosopher-politician of this generation. To me, their ideas clearly point the way toward this third alternative: a society embracing freedom as a condition for human flourishing, while guided by fundamental moral norms and human values, and ordinated with humility (not arrogance) toward faith, hope, and the search for transcendent or religious meaning.

Renewing our moral foundations and the ways of living that make our democracy both possible and noble was a task important enough to spend one's life on (or so I thought) prior to September 11th. Today, as we undertake our new mission, we find another reason to believe in the worth of this task.

John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism Moral Theory," Journal of Philosophy *77 (September 1980).* A Call to Civil Society *(New York: Institute for American Values, 1998).*

Changed?

From Jean Bethke Elshtain, Chairwoman of the Board, Institute for American Values; Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics, University of Chicago:

The events of September 11th have profoundly shaken us. But have they changed us? That remains to be seen. Perhaps it is the Augustinian strain in my thinking that tells me we ought not expect too much, not even from the effects of such a cataclysmic tragedy. There is always a tendency in human life — each individual life and our lives with and among one another — to "backslide," as I learned to call it as a child. Our wills are weak. The terrible truth may be too much to bear.

What is the truth that has been revealed to us? First, that we had grown complacent about our way of life. True, we might not see the usual level of growth in our mutual fund account or a rise in the stock market for a quarter or two, but that we anticipated. We were convinced, however, that things would chug along unchanged and uninterrupted for the most part. Our complacency is temporarily shattered. What emerges from the rubble may — may — be a keen awareness of our finitude, and our inability to control events. We may — may — as a result, grow more grateful for the very ordinariness of things.

Gratitude and complacency are profoundly different attitudes. One permits us to take things for granted; the other compels us to recognize, each and every day, and to be profoundly grateful for, life itself, and life's simple pleasures: a passing smile, a friendly greeting, the aroma of coffee in the morning, a child's delighted squeal, a friend's reassuring voice over the phone.

Second, we had forgotten, or many of us had, what it means to be a neighbor and a citizen. We weren't called upon that often as neighbors because we were far too busy rushing to and fro to tend to neighborliness, whether as one who offers help to a neighbor or accepts that help. Offering and receiving help implies an acknowledgement that we need one another. We have been enjoined for many years to see ourselves instead as little sovereigns in our own domains. Sovereign selves neither need nor solicit help.

As for citizenship: given our widely shared conviction, before September 11th, that politics was either sordid or boring or both, it made good self-interested sense to ignore it and to adopt a cynical attitude toward any notion of civic duty or responsibility. We paid scant attention to those among us charged with the public responsibility to help keep us safe and secure in our homes, schools, places of work, and neighborhoods. No more. That awareness is seared into our collective consciousness as surely as a hot branding iron sears the rump of a ranch animal. The result may — may — be a perduring awareness of the fact that we are indeed our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

We are not all called to be heroes. But we are linked by bonds of civic affection. A terrible tragedy effaces all distinctions. The minimum-wage custodian and the $500,000-a-year broker find themselves in the same boat. They lean on one another for help. This was an attack on America and because America is in many ways the world — people from over 60 countries were killed in the attack on the World Trade Towers — it was an attack on humanity.

Before September 11th, Americans from Main Street in Iowa and New York City were separated by a huge gulf. Now we are all Americans. That means we are all citizens. We recognize our ties to, and responsibilities for, one another. We rightly honor our much-derided politicians as they rise to the occasion, from Mayor Rudy Giuliani to President George W. Bush. We are so grateful to know that, as a friend of mine put it, "there are adults in charge." Does that mean we will henceforth put our shoulders to the civic wheel? Go to the polls in larger numbers? Insist that schools take up what we used to call "civics" in their curricula?

Terrible wounds to body and spirit are as likely to corrode the fabric of life as to enhance and ennoble it over the long haul. Will the goodness we have seen in the wake of the attacks have staying power? Maybe. Let us hope. That means tending explicitly to how things are going with us even as the horrific memories of September 11th fade, as they must, into the background.

The First Step

From Dan Cere, Institute affiliate scholar; director of the Newman Center at McGill University in Montreal:

In the aftermath of the catastrophe of September 11th, there have been many interfaith prayer services. These services have followed a familiar pattern: general denunciations of terrorism, and readings and prayers for the victims, for justice, and for peace. These services are typically marked by strong affirmations of the deep commitment of Islam to peace and justice, along with firm and oft-repeated denials of any linkage between Islam as a religion and terrorist extremists.

As director of the Catholic Newman Center at McGill University, I participated in these interfaith services, and after they were over, I was left with a nagging sense that something important was being left unsaid. Religious traditions such as Christianity and Islam, which proclaim the saving grace of confession, often have some difficulty in actually confessing.

Despite the prudent caution of current political and religious rhetoric, in the final analysis the vicious terrorists acts of September 11th cannot be dismissed as the product of some form of "pure terrorism" devoid of any context. They were, at least in part, the product of beliefs which have, in recent years, been disseminated or tolerated within certain sectors of the Middle East society.

Islamic terrorist organizations such as Al-Qa'ida clearly do stir religion into their confection of fervor, cynicism, and murder. Given this fact, it is curious, and distressing, that the determined and partly successful efforts of these people to wed their faith to terrorism have not been countered by equally determined efforts by leading Muslims clerics to break up such a marriage. While *fatwas* (formal religious opinions by religious scholars) against the United States and in support of suicide missions have been issued and endorsed by a number of prominent Islamic organizations and prominent Muslim religious leaders, Muslims in leadership positions publicly opposing these pronouncements have been relatively few and far between.

Immediately after September 11th one Islamic academic living and working in the West did take an important stand. Ziauddin Sardar warned: "The terrorists are among us, the Muslim communities of the world. They are part of our body politic. And it is our duty to stand up against them." Sardar continues: "So, let me take the first step. To Muslims everywhere I issue this *fatwa*: any Muslim involved in the planning, financing, training, recruiting, support or harboring of those who commit acts of indiscriminate violence against persons or the apparatus or infrastructure of states is guilty of terror and no part of the Ummah. It is the duty of every Muslim to spare no effort in hunting down, apprehending and bringing such criminals to justice."

Sardar's action is decisive and profoundly right. However, his introductory comments about taking "the first step" suggest that, to date, Muslim religious authorities have been slow to reject terrorism. In fact, for a generation, some Islamic religious authorities have been courting the possibility that various forms of terrorist activity could be safely harbored within jihad teaching. Do they need to take a hard look at this dangerous innovation to Islamic teaching? They do.

Ziauddin Sardar, The Observer *(London), September 23, 2001.*

Secularism, Anyone?

For a surprising number of people, one of the things that the United States is now apparently fighting to defend is "secularism." George F. Will in the *Washington Post*: "And they hate America because it is the purest expression of modernity — individualism, pluralism, freedom, secularism." Joshua Micah Marshall of the *American Prospect*: "What our enemies hate about us is not so much our freedom and democracy as our diversity and materialism, our secularism and our tolerance." Katha Pollitt in *The Nation*: What would happen if the West took seriously the forces in the Muslim world who call for education, social justice, women's rights, democracy, civil liberties and secularism?" In the days since September 11th, I have heard several commentators on TV, including the columnist Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, speak almost patriotically about the importance in our society, and by implication in any good society, of "secularism."

"Ultimately, the struggle of the fundamentalists is against two enemies, secularism and modernism. The war against secularism is conscious and explicit, and there is by now a whole literature denouncing secularism as an evil neo-pagan force in the modern world and attributing it variously to the Jews, the West, and the United States."

Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic*, 1990.

Let's try to untangle this one. For starters, Joshua Marshall in his essay defines "secularism" as "a willingness to disagree about life's most profound truths." That's wildly inaccurate. The word "secular" comes from the Latin "saeculum," meaning "world," and suggesting the idea of "in the world." A secular activity, therefore, is one that occurs outside of the church ("in the world"). A secular officer is one who is not an officer of the church. It is correct, therefore, to say that the United States has a "secular" government, since U.S. government officials do not simultaneously serve as church officials. What is being described is function, not faith. Saying "secular" tells us nothing about whether the persons involved are pious or impious, or whether they are "willing to disagree" about something.

Then there is the quite different matter of "secularism." The main thing to know about secularism is that it is an "ism" — it's an ideology, a way of seeing the world. Secularism means the rejection of religion or hostility toward religion. The term dates largely from the French Revolution of the late 18th century, in which anti-clericism ran so strong that, according to one popular slogan of the day, it would be a fine thing to hang the last aristocrat "with the guts of the last priest." Marshall's confused claim notwithstanding, secularism is *not* another way of saying that you believe in tolerance of religious differences, or that you believe in the separation of church and state. A secularist, or someone who believes in secularism, is a person who dislikes and distrusts religion.

Now, there are certainly some people in the United States, citizens in good standing, who dislike and distrust religion. And it does not surprise me to hear certain Islamic militants, including some who support or participate in terrorism, cite this phenomenon as an example of our decadence and corruption, and as one reason why they hate us.

But do these facts mean that, in this new campaign against terrorism, we are suddenly marching as a society under a flag called "secularism?" Has hostility to religion become one of the things we are fighting for? Surely, for the great majority of Americans, the answer is no.

So here's the proposition. We obviously reject violent religious extremism, whether Islamic or otherwise. And as a society that values freedom of con-

science, we do not assault or withhold respect and recognition from those who are philosophically hostile to religion. But as a society overwhelmingly comprised of religious believers — indeed, as a society in which the individual's freedom to seek and worship God is widely viewed as the most important freedom of all — we need not define ourselves, in war or in peace, as a society that draws strength and purpose from an ideology called "secularism."

George F. Will, "A Strike at the Pillars," Washington Post*, September 14, 2001. Joshua Micah Marshall, "The Enemy Hates What We Are,"* New York Post*, September 21, 2001. Katha Pollitt, "Put Out No Flags,"* The Nation*, October 8, 2001. Iain T. Benson, "Secular Confusions,"* Centrepoints *8 (Ottawa: Centre for Cultural Renewal, Spring 2000).*

Called

"And in our grief and anger, we have found our mission . . ."

President Bush, address to Congress, September 20, 2001

As leader of the new mission to which he was called on September 11th, I suspect that President Bush will perform splendidly. His first words upon establishing phone contact with Vice President Cheney that morning — "This is what we're paid for, boys" — suggests that, even in those first shocking moments, he sensed what lay before him and was readying himself to embrace the mission. Since the tax cuts became law earlier this year, the Administration had been openly casting about for new ideas, apparently unsure, only a few months into this presidency, of exactly what to do next. Now these guys know exactly what to do next. My sense is that Bush was made for this project, just as his father seemed made for the project of ending Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. Or so I hope.

Is the Family Structure Revolution Over?

Let's try another topic. Drum roll, please: After more than three decades of relentless advance, the family structure revolution in the U.S. may be over. A series of recent independent reports, based largely on data from the 2000 Census, all suggest that the trend of family fragmentation that many analysts had assumed to be unstoppable — yearly increases in unwed childbearing and divorce, resulting in ever greater proportions of children living in one-parent homes — suddenly stopped in its tracks in about 1995.

Here are the data. The proportion of all U.S. families with children under age 18 that are headed by married couples reached an all-time low in the mid 1990s — about 72.9 percent in 1996 and 72.4 percent in 1997 — but since then has stabilized. The figure for 2000 is 73 percent. Similarly, the proportion of all U.S. children living in two-parent homes reached an all-time low in the mid 1990s, but since then has stabilized. In fact, the proportion of children in two-parent homes increased from 68 percent in 1999 to 69.1 percent in 2000.

Looking only at white, non-Hispanic children, a study by Allan Dupree and Wendell Primus finds that the proportion of these children living with two married parents stopped its downward descent during the late 1990s, and even increased slightly from 1999 to 2000, rising from 77.3 to 78.2 percent. Another study from the Urban Institute finds that, among all U.S. children, the proportion living with

their two biological or adoptive parents increased by 1.2 percent from 1997 to 1999, while during the same period the proportion living in stepfamilies (or blended families) decreased by 0.1 percentage points and the proportion living in single-parent homes decreased by two percentage points. (The study finds that in 1999 about 64 percent of all U.S. children lived with their two biological or adoptive parents, while about 25 percent lived with one parent and about eight percent lived in a step or blended family.) Among low-income children, the decline in the proportion living in single-parent homes was even more pronounced, dropping from 44 percent in 1997 to 41 percent in 1999.

Here is perhaps the most dramatic statistic. From 1995 to 2000, the proportion of African American children living in two-parent, married-couple homes *rose* from 34.8 to 38.9 percent, a significant increase in just five years, representing the clear cessation and even reversal of the long-term shift toward Black family fragmentation.

These changes are not large or definitive. But they are certainly suggestive. And if they continue, they will change the lives of millions of U.S. children and families for the better. Moreover, the potential implications for our national debate are enormous. Instead of saying endlessly that we need to *reverse* the trend of fragmentation, what if we will soon be able to say, for the first time in decades, that our national priority is to *sustain* the current trend of reintegration?

U.S. Census Bureau, "Families, by Presence of Own Children Under 18: 1950 to Present," Internet Table FM-1 (Internet Release date: June 29, 2001); and "Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present," Internet Table CH-1 (Internet Release date: June 29, 2001). Allen Dupree and Wendell Primus, Declining Share of Children Lived With Single Mothers in the Late 1990s *(Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 15, 2001). Sharon Vandivere, Kristen Anderson Moore, and Martha Zaslow,* Children's Family Environments: Findings from the National Survey of America's Families *(Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2001).*

Plan B (cont.)

In my last letter, I described several strategies currently used by those scholars who, despite all the evidence, still seek to deny or minimize the effects of family structure on child well being. One of those strategies (I called it "Plan B") is first to concede the worrisome correlations between one-parent homes and poor child outcomes, then perform some methodological hocus-pocus intended to make these correlations seem insignificant and misleading. Last time, I did my best to beat up on Robert W. Blum of the University of Minnesota, who deserved it. This time, the prize for the most brazen reliance on Plan B goes to Lynne C. Huffman and her colleagues at Stanford University, whose research on "Risk Factors for Academic and Behavioral Problems at the Beginning of School" is featured prominently in a recent report, *Off to a Good Start*, commissioned by the Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network, a group of leading bigwigs from private foundations and U.S. government agencies concerned with families and children. The purpose of the report is to evaluate the "risk factors" that can undermine children's social and emotional development and compromise their readiness for school.

Huffman and her colleagues conducted a comprehensive review of academic articles published on this general topic between 1986 and 1998. Based on this review, they identify 22 separate "risk factors" facing U.S. pre-schoolers, from low birth weight to low socioeconomic status. None of these risk factors will surprise you. And sure enough, one of them is "Family Composition." Under this heading, we are briefly informed of several studies suggesting the harmful effects of divorce on children. The authors conclude: "Marital status and family composition, then, may be an important factor in school success or failure."

Sounds reasonable so far, doesn't it? But grab your wallet. Here comes Plan B. Huffman and her colleagues want us to understand that there are risk factors, and then there are *risk factors*. Some require immediate attention and urgent societal action. Others, however, hardly matter at all in any practical sense. These safe-to-ignore risk factors are "not a reasonable basis for structuring targeted interventions."

How can this be? Watch this. There are actually *three kinds* of risk factors. Some are "fixed markers." Their distinguishing trait is that they are "not amenable to intervention." An example is race. Even if a child suffers (is "at risk") for this reason, nothing can be done to change his or her skin color. Other risk factors, we learn, are "variable markers." Even if changed, they are unlikely, in and of themselves, directly to affect outcomes for the child. They are interesting, but ultimately irrelevant. Finally, there are "causal risk factors." Now we're *talking*. These are the real deal. They are associated with poor outcomes, they are amenable to change, and, if changed, they are likely to improve child outcomes measurably. These let's-get-busy risk factors for pre-schoolers include: learning problems, behavioral and emotional problems, conflicts with peer groups, poor relationships with teachers, age at school entry, poor parenting practices, and parents' psychological problems.

"Family composition," it turns out, is purely a non-starter. Granted, it "may be" important, but family structure is classified by these scholars as a "fixed marker," just like skin color. Sorry, nothing can be done about it. Policy makers, philanthropists and social service agencies should therefore focus instead on factors that are actually "amenable to intervention."

This is very silly stuff. First — as was also the case with Robert Blum — quite a few of the "causal risk factors" enumerated by these scholars (especially poor parenting practices, parents' psychological problems, and children's behavioral and emotional problems) are themselves causally linked to family structure. Yet according to these scholars, the problems disproportionately associated with one-parent homes are high priorities for intervention, whereas the demographic trend helping to generate the problems is a low priority for intervention. Go figure.

Second, notice the odd way in which many of the alleged *causes* of these problems ("causal risk factors") become virtually indistinguishable from the problems themselves. We huff and we puff with our research, only to discover that having problems learning in school comes from . . . learning problems. Having trouble behaving in school come from . . . behavior problems. In practical terms, are we really making much progress here?

In fact, these almost comically tautological "findings" reveal an underlying conceptual problem that is widespread and anything but funny. For academics who study these issues, and for professionals who design and staff programs for children and families, there is constant pressure, when deciding where and how to

intervene, to go causally as far downstream as possible, where a broad societal problem (such as family disintegration) can presumably be reconceptualized as a series of much narrower problems, each amenable to specialized treatment in clinical or quasi-clinical settings. Almost all current incentive structures in our society — financial, political, intellectual — encourage these professionals to adopt and defend this way of thinking. The model is essentially medical. The goal is always to make a narrowly scientific diagnosis, like a doctor identifying a disease, so that resources aimed at remediation can be carefully (here is a favorite word in this vocabulary) "targeted."

This conceptual framework has obvious advantages when the issue is an actual disease, or when children suffer from problems that require drug prescriptions or specialized therapy. But this way of thinking is deeply flawed when the source of the problem — the "factor" that actually puts children at risk — is not little, but big; not narrow, but broad; not a medical disease, but a values-laden social trend. Rigidly attempting to specialize and medicalize the problem of why so many six-year-olds are not ready for school is an exercise that, under the aegis of specifying and "targeting" everything, takes us further and further away from social conditions which, a few miles upstream, are actually causing the problem.

As a result, good intentions notwithstanding, this whole approach ends up being a too-cheap solution, the easy way out. More and more children not ready for school? Well, let's begin by making it clear that a 33 percent rate of unwed childbearing and the world's highest divorce rate are subjects to which attention, in this regard, specifically need *not* be paid. Instead, let's hire more specialists with advanced degrees, who can be in charge of a few more "targeted interventions." Raise your hand if you think that this approach will solve the problem.

Third and finally, we come to the curious idea of family structure as a "fixed marker," an unalterable phenomenon. Now, obviously the majority of U.S. infants and toddlers in one-parent homes on any given day are also likely to be in one-parent homes the next day. Certainly very little of what help we currently offer these families — no prescription from the clinic, no parenting class for mom — is likely to return fathers to those homes from which they have been missing. So if we think *only* in terms of immediate casualties and current programs, and never in terms of prevention or longer-term attitudinal and behavioral change, then the "not amenable to intervention" label is partly defensible. I will also concede that, in our free society, government is well equipped to do some things, but directly shaping the pair-bonding and marrying behavior of people is not one of them.

At the same time, if I were one of the philanthropic or government leaders who commissioned this report, and based on its analysis I concluded that strengthening family structure was a legitimate and important national goal, I bet I could think of a dozen things to do. I might start by phoning someone in the state of Oklahoma, where a governor-led, public-private "Marriage Initiative" is now impressively mobilizing people and resources across the state to act on the idea that divorce and unwed childbearing rates in Oklahoma are "amenable to intervention."

Bottom line? Forget the academic goobledy-gook about "targeted interventions" and "fixed markers." It's just smoke. If we as a society know that family disintegration harms children, then we ought at least to try to do something about it.

"My eldest brother sees the spirit of sickness and removes it before it takes shape, so his name does not get out of the house. My elder brother cures sickness when it is still extremely minute, so his name does not get out of the neighborhood. As for me, I puncture veins, prescribe potions, and massage skin, so from time to time my name gets out and is heard among the lords."

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (translated by Thomas Cleary, 1988)

Lynne C. Huffman, Sara L. Mehlinger, and Amy S. Kerivan, "Risk Factors for Academic and Behavioral Problems at the Beginning of School," in Huffman, et. al, Off to a Good Start *(Chapel Hill, N.C.: FPG Child Development Center of the University of North Carolina, 2000).*

The Paper of Record and the Two-Parent Home

For at least three decades now, the question of whether one-parent homes are generally worse for children than two-parent homes has been treated by leading journalists essentially as an open question, subject to debate. Typically, therefore, journalists refrain from reporting a clear answer, choosing instead to dance around the question, often by quoting several "experts" who disagree with one another. You've seen these stories many times. The entire question is presented as controversial and politically charged. As an empirical matter, one expert (often described as "conservative") is quoted as having concluded that family fragmentation is bad for children and society, while other experts are quoted as having reached different conclusions. In addition, we are typically told that the issue is complicated, more research is needed, blah, blah, blah.

But in a page-one story on August 12, the *New York Times* broke decisively with this tradition, reporting that "a powerful consensus has emerged in recent years among social scientists, as well as state and federal policy makers. It sees single-parent families as the dismal foundries that produced decades of child poverty, delinquency and crime. And it views the rise of such families, which began in the early 1960s and continued until about five years ago, as a singularly important indicator of child pathology." Moreover: "From a child's point of view, according to a growing body of social research, the most supportive household is one with two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage."

At a minimum, a journalistic corner has been turned. What had been treated for decades as an empirically unsettled question (despite the fact that the evidence has consistently and almost entirely pointed in one direction) has finally become, in the U.S. paper of record, at least for now, an empirically settled question. A moment worth noting.

Blaine Harden, "2-Parent Families Rise After Change In Welfare Laws," New York Times, *August 12, 2001.*

Sincerely,

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President

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