Institute for American Values

A Letter of Ideas and Findings
Number 3, Winter 1999

Propositions

Dear Reader,

In my last letter, I wondered whether a child's longing for a father she has never known might point toward mystery, constituting what Peter Berger calls a "signal of transcendence" or a "rumor of angels." In reply, the Rev. Dr. David F. C. Wurster of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Lockport, New York, writes: "When marriage is present, the primary cell of the family is the husband and wife. Children are secondary to this primary relationship; they are not the center of the universe. The marital relationship places children in a different generational reality from their parents. Developmentally, a child starts out in a type of symbiotic and primary relationship with the mother, but the father's presence already transcends this relationship, and his presence with the mother in marriage already makes her a wife which transcends being only a mother. . .

The presence of a father whose primary love is for his wife, and a wife whose primary love is for her husband, places the child in a relationship of transcendence from the very beginning. This transcendence defines the child as a relational creature and makes it possible for all involved to hear a 'rumor of angels.' In the Bible, in places such as Matthew 10:37, when Jesus says that he who loves father or mother or son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me, Jesus is raising this issue theologically. . .It's easier to hear the rumor of angels when one is raised up in the reflection of the image of God."

Nonexistent

In a recent speech to the Democratic Leadership Council, Vice President Al Gore firmly embraced what growing numbers of political strategists, both in the U.S. and abroad, call "third way" thinking. As the Vice President put it, the basic idea is to go "beyond the false divisions and dichotomies of the past."

For third way thinkers, the answer to most questions is not one conventional position or the other, but a new blending of positions. What we typically face today are not zero-sum conflicts, requiring us to make decisions that necessarily produce winners and losers, but rather tensions that can be solved creatively in ways that permit everyone to win. Thus the Vice President's praise for President Clinton and himself for "inventing a new and vibrant politics of the center — a politics that moved not left or right, but forward."

As political rhetoric, I withhold judgement on this way of talking. As philosophy, I believe that it reflects a useful but limited insight. Sometimes opposites can be reconciled. But many times they can't. Some choices can be win-win. But many involve real trade-offs, often including what Isaiah Berlin called

goods in conflict, in which more of good thing A necessarily means less of good thing B, no matter how we might wish it to be otherwise.

Finally, there's this business of philosophical location: right, left, center, etc. Sometimes these can be helpful metaphors. But more often, as Vaclav Havel points out, it's simply weak-minded to define oneself in topographical terms. It's almost always fatuous to describe oneself as occupying "the center," since each person's perception of "the center" is largely subjective, dependent upon the angle from which it is viewed.

But philosophy aside, it's the Vice President's discussion of family issues and family policy that is particularly disappointing. Mr. Gore begins by citing two of those bad old "false dichotomies": "the individual versus the family" and "work versus family." Democrats are now learning to "balance and integrate" these once-competing tendencies. We then learn that "the highest of all disciplines" is "compassion," which means, among other things, "seeing the connections between a happy baby and a productive worker." The Vice President elaborates:

"The negative old conventional wisdom saw family-friendly policies as a drain on the bottom line; it was kids versus profits. Now we know that good policies that support families in the workplace are good for business too. Governing from that wisdom creates a win-win situation, particularly for working moms, whose schedules become a battleground. And we now know businesses that respect and accommodate their workers' responsibilities to their families have less absenteeism and higher longevity and profits."

Parents should no longer face the "bitter choice" between "being a good worker and a good nurturer." Therefore: "In a two-paycheck or time-off family, families need flexibility if they are going to stay strong and resilient." Some people, meanwhile, "talk a lot about the family, only to idealize it." But Democrats "see that it is too damn hard right now to pay the bills, juggle day care, and spend time with your kids; and instead of just sentimentalizing a family that no longer exists, we are giving the support you need to the families you really are." That's why Mr. Gore favors "child development policies, day care, and Family and Medical Leave" as the policies that will take families forward and upward.

The Vice President is putting two propositions on the table. The first is that corporate-sponsored child care programs — the Administration currently recommends new tax breaks for corporations that provide day care for children of employees — are both good for business and good for children and families. The second is that "two-paycheck and time-off" families deserve public support because they "really" exist, whereas the family type consisting of employed father and at-home mother "no longer exists."

These two propositions are closely connected, since accepting the latter is a precondition for defending the former. After all, some people might worry about the fairness of using public policy to subsidize the child care choices of some families, while effectively punishing the choices of others. But you can't unfairly discriminate against a family form that "no longer exists." The only two-parent families that we have left, according to the Vice President, are those

two-earner couples in which one parent (thanks to Family and Medical Leave) can take time off for a few weeks or months when the baby is born, then start "juggling day care," preferably with the assistance of an employer-sponsored child care program.

This is weak stuff. In the United States today, about half of all preschool children are cared for during the day by their mothers. Another 25 percent or so are cared for by fathers or other family members. Day care centers account for about 15 percent of all preschoolers; the rest are cared for by babysitters and other non-relatives. Among all married couples in the U.S. with at least one preschooler, only about one of every three mothers works full time outside of the home. Among all families with young children, those whom the Vice President describes as no longer existing, and therefore irrelevant for public policy, are in fact the largest single demographic group.

Conceding that families with only one breadwinner need tax relief too, President Clinton is proposing a credit to offset costs borne by parents who choose to stay home and care for their children.

Associated Press
January 18, 1999

(Just as this letter was going to press; I'll say more about this proposal in the next letter.)

But even leaving aside the fairness issue, Mr. Gore's unqualified praise for corporate child care programs — "a win-win situation" that requires greater support from the taxpayers — is unserious. He might as well have been reading from one of these company's press releases. Yes, some work-family policies allow parents to do what the pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton calls "cheating the workplace," through flexible working hours, telework, part time work, job sharing, working at home, and other policies that permit parents to spend more time with children. But the most extensive and important of these policies, including all of those singled out by the Clinton-Gore Administration as deserving of new tax breaks, aim explicitly at *increasing* the hours that parents spend at work, and at intensifying their focus and dependence on their jobs, by making it easier and cheaper to let other people care for their children.

From an employer's perspective, these programs make all the sense in the world, particularly in tight labor markets and for higher-wage employees. They do, as the Vice President reported, lead to less absenteeism. For example, even parents with sick children can now show up for work, thanks to employer-sponsored sick care programs with cute names like "Chicken Soup." But where is the "win" for the child with a sore throat who now gets dropped off at "Chicken Soup" instead of being home with Mom or Dad?

Instead of "win-win," think of most of these programs as intended to support one side in a battle. The battle being waged is for the time and attention of parents. One side consists of employers. The opposing side consists of children. More for one side means less for the other. Less absenteeism at work *necessitates* more absenteeism at home. In this generation, guess which side is winning? And guess who is cheering the winning side on, insisting that they deserve even more public money, all the while pretending, as if saying it made it so, that the conflict does not even exist? None other than the leader-in-waiting of the very political party which, last time I checked, was supposed to be at least a little suspicious of the idea that whatever is good for big business must also be good for ordinary people.

Sources: "Practical Idealism," Remarks of Vice President Al Gore to the Democratic Leadership Council, Washington, D.C., December 2, 1998. Vaclav Havel, *Summer Meditations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 60.

Marriage and Taxes

Unless the Clinton mess continues to use up all available oxygen, how the U.S. tax code treats marriage and child rearing is likely to emerge as a major policy debate in 1999. It's also one of the very few issues on which bipartisan agreement, both within the Congress and between the Congress and the Administration, might actually be possible.

When two people get married, they become something more than two separate individuals. In so many important respects — morally, socially, financially — the two become one. Taking account of this fact in the tax code is not primarily a matter of giving special breaks to married people or creating incentives for people to get married. It is essentially a matter of recognizing what marriage is: a union of body, soul, and pocketbook, a joint venture of enormous social importance in which husband and wife make equal contributions, possess equal value, andhave an equal stake.

A Call for Family-Supportive Tax Reform

I love this issue. It invites attention to what is arguably our society's most dangerous trend, the weakening of marriage, through the prism of our society's most fundamental family policy, the U.S. tax code. Here at the Institute, we recently helped to fashion *A Call for Family-Supportive Tax Reform* in which we seek to identify principles for tax reform that would strengthen marriage and help all parents. Those signing the *Call* include progressives such as Sylvia Ann Hewlett, president of the National Parenting Association; communitarians such as Robert Michael Franklin of the Interdenominational Theological Center and Professor William Doherty of the University of Minnesota, who is president of the National Council on Family Relations; and conservatives such Michael McManus, the founder and president of Marriage Savers.

Such a diverse group can find common ground on this issue because, as the *Call* puts it: "On the left, many of us recognize that the enduring problems of poverty and economic inequality are unlikely to diminish so long as divorce and unwed childbearing continue at these historically high levels. On the right, many of us recognize that if families continue to fragment, leaving a host of important and unmet social needs in their wake, government is almost certain to become larger, not smaller or more limited." By the time you read this letter, we'll have just publicly released the *Call*. Please contact us if you would like a copy or more information, or you can download it from our website at: <www.american-values.org>.

The Shift (cont.)

Among family scholars, what I called in letter one "the shift" — put simply, from optimism to pessimism regarding the effects of family break-up on children — is becoming ever more noticeable. The latest important scholar publicly to reorient his perspective on this matter is the sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University, and therein hangs a modest but revealing tale.

In 1991, Cherlin and six colleagues published an influential article in the journal *Science* in which they sought to discredit the view, widely believed by both experts and parents in earlier generations, that children's problems after divorce "stem mainly from the difficult adjustment children must make after their parents separate." In particular, Cherlin and his colleagues took aim at Judith S. Wallerstein, the clinical psychologist who had argued that "the central hazard which divorce poses to the psychological health and development of children and adolescents is in the diminished or disrupted parenting which so often fol-

lows in the wake of the rupture and which can become consolidated within the post-divorce family."

In contrast to this view, the main conclusion of the *Science* article is that "a substantial portion of what is usually considered the effect of divorce on children is visible before the parents separate." Consequently, "those concerned with the effects of divorce on children should consider reorienting their thinking. At least as much attention needs to be paid to the processes that occur in troubled, intact families as to the trauma that children suffer after their parents separate."

The *Science* article presents data from two studies of children of divorce, one from Great Britain, the other from the United States. Though margin of error considerations make the numerical estimates less than completely reliable, both British and U.S. data suggest that pre-divorce family problems (what Cherlin would later call "pre-disruptive effects") account for about half of the increased behavioral and school achievement problems experienced by boys from divorced families. For British girls from divorced homes, about one-quarter of the deterioration in school achievement (though none of the worsening behavior) was attributed by the researchers to family problems that predated the divorce. Among U.S. girls from divorced homes, Cherlin and his colleagues find that behavior actually improves after divorce, while school achievement remains about the same.

Widely discussed in both the academic and popular press, the *Science* article soon became, as it remains today, probably the single most important academic citation for those who believe that bad marriages are "at least," as Cherlin implies, as harmful as divorce. Cherlin and his colleagues had apparently established an intellectual foundation for one of the most frequently repeated ideas of the family debate of the 1990s: Better for unhappy parents to divorce rather than expose their children to ongoing marital conflict and distress.

Here is how the family scholars Philip and Carolyn Cowan of the University of California at Berkeley put it in 1997 in the *New York Times*: "Children are at risk when their parents fight a lot — and it is this conflict, not divorce, that is so harmful to children." Here is Arlene Skolnick touting the *Science* article recently in *The American Prospect*: "The results showed that, compared to those who remained in intact families, children whose parents had divorced in the interim did have more problems, but they had shown those problems at age 7, before the parents divorced."

Leave aside the fact that Skolnick misreports the findings of the *Science* article. Cherlin and his colleagues never said, as Skolnick implies they did, that *all* of the problems experienced by these children of divorce had "shown" themselves prior to the divorce. Nor has Cherlin ever put forward, as the Cowans do, the simple-minded slogan that "conflict, not divorce" is what harms children. Everybody, or at least almost everybody, agrees that both things matter. The important questions for scholars are ones of relative weight and, especially, causation. And on these matters the public influence of Cherlin and his colleagues has been widespread and unmistakable: We should "reorient" our thinking about the harmful effects of divorce. Marital problems predating divorce may be at least as important as divorce itself and therefore deserve at least as much of our attention.

Throughout most of the 1990s, Cherlin remained a steadfast supporter of the proposition that, while divorce may be a problem, people who worry too much about divorce are at least as big a problem. For example, he continued his criticism of Judith Wallerstein, especially disputing the significance of what Wallerstein called divorce's "sleeper effects": longer-term emotional problems affecting the children of divorce that emerge only during late adolescence and early adulthood.

We saw many young women with acute, delayed depression that is certainly a sleeper effect of divorce and that can be very dangerous . . . because it occurs at the crucial time when many young women make decisions that have long-term implications for their lives. . .Suddenly overcome by fears and anxieties, they begin to make connections between these feelings and their parents' divorce: "I'm so afraid I'll marry someone like my dad." "How can you believe in commitment when anyone can change his mind anytime?" "I am in awe of people who stay together." There are many other manifestations of the sleeper effect.

Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce,* 1989

In 1993, Cherlin strongly attacked Richard T. Gill, an economist who had criticized the *Science* article, primarily on methodological grounds, in *The Public Interest*. Like many observers of the family debate, Gill understood Cherlin's findings as essentially supportive of the idea, increasingly embraced by parents as well as experts, that "divorce or separation itself is not the real problem," since "divorce is an acceptable solution to problems that might have even more deleterious effects on children if the marriage continued." Yet for Gill, the *Science* article is methodologically "flawed" in several respects, thus rendering its argument "seriously incomplete."

For example, what about that strange finding that, in the U.S., but apparently not in Britain, parental divorce *improves* the behavior of girls? Since such a finding is flatly inconsistent with the weight of existing evidence, doesn't it cast technical doubt on the study as a whole? Try as he might, Cherlin could not, in his reply to Gill, come up with an explanation for this anomaly that both explained the girls' behavior and plausibly defended his study's methodology.

More fundamentally, Gill questions the failure of Cherlin and his colleagues even to consider what Gill calls the "indirect effects" of divorce on children and society. Drawing upon ideas developed by Norval Glenn of the University of Texas and others, Gill hypothesizes that, in a high divorce society, not only are troubled marriages more likely to end in divorce, but more marriages are likely to become troubled and unhappy. As the ideal of marital permanence gets weaker, and as the observed reality of marital permanence becomes rarer, people tend increasingly to hedge their bets with regard to marriage. Commitment becomes less complete; options stay more open. Consequently, marital satisfaction declines. Thus, a high divorce rate becomes one generator of precisely those "pre-divorce" problems that — let's see if we've got this straight — Cherlin then cites as a reason not to worry too much about effects of divorce.

In his reply to Gill, Cherlin first dismisses this entire theory as either wrong or unproven, then warms up to his real mission: denouncing Gill as a "conservative." For even though Gill "may not consider himself a conservative," Cherlin still finds him to be a member of that "largely male" group of "conservative observers" whose "entire program" is based on treating women unfairly, including "impoverishing women into staying married" and pressuring them to "quit their jobs and return home." Moreover, these observers are driven to do these things by something called "nostalgia," which fosters a world view based on "returning to the 1950s."

Never mind that none of these charges have anything to do with the *Science* article in particular, or with the effects of divorce on children in general. Never mind that Gill nowhere advocates what Cherlin calls the "conservative program,"

or anywhere says that we ought to pressure mothers to stay home, turn back the clock to an earlier era, etc. To learn what Gill actually believes, readers may wish to consult his 1997 book, *Posterity Lost*. The point for Cherlin at the time, it seems, was simply to change the subject by making broad political accusations.

Cut now to 1998. In the *American Sociological Review*, Cherlin and two colleagues, relying as they had in 1991 on data from Britain's National Child Development Study, seek to document the long-term effects of divorce on the mental health of children of divorce as they mature into adulthood. The news is not good. Yes, a "previous study" (Cherlin et. al., 1991) had concluded that some of the emotional problems experienced by the pre-adolescent children of divorce (children between the ages of 7 and 11) could be attributed to family problems that predated the divorce. But: "The present study suggests, however, these earlier findings should be modified."

For it turns out that, as these children of divorce enter into adulthood, the mental health gap separating them from the children of intact marriage *widens significantly,* with children of divorce suffering an increasingly disproportionate share of emotional problems. What could be causing this growing divergence? Cherlin says that he and his colleagues are not sure. Maybe something that the researchers can't put their fingers on, some "unmeasured factors," are now revealing themselves.

But it may also be true, Cherlin reports, that this "continuing effect" that is harming the mental health of the adult children of divorce is "a result of the divorce." If so, "it would suggest that this childhood event can set in motion a chain of circumstances that affects individuals' lives even after they have left home, married, and entered the labor force. The absence of a strong post-disruption effect at age 11 [the conclusion of the "previous study"] suggests that the long-term effect may emerge only in adolescence or young adulthood. Parental divorce could trigger events such as early childbearing or curtailed education that, in turn, affect adult outcomes."

Let's see, now. The act of parental divorce might cause multiple problems for children, some of which are long-term, and some of which surface only as the children get older. In short, for children, the main problem with divorce might be. . .divorce. Sounds very much like reoriented thinking, based on new and accumulating evidence, from one of the nation's most well-known family scholars. The shift continues.

Sources: Andrew J. Cherlin, Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Kathleen E. Kiernan, Philip K. Robins, Donna Ruane Morrison, and Julien O. Teitler, "Longitudinal Studies of Effects of Divorce on Children in Great Britain and the United States," *Science* 252 (June 1991): 1386-1389; Cherlin, "Nostalgia as Family Policy," *The Public Interest* (Winter 1993): 1-8; and Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and Christine McRae, "Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health Through the Life Course," *American Sociological Review* 63 (April 1998): 239-249. Philip and Carolyn Cowan, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, November 5, 1997. Arlene Skolnick, "Family Values: The Sequel," *The American Prospect* (May-June 1997): 86-94. Richard T. Gill, "For the sake of the children," *The Public Interest* (Summer 1992): 81-96; "Family Breakdown as Family Policy," *The Public Interest* (Winter 1993): 8-15; and *Posterity Lost: Progress, Ideology, and the Decline of the American Family* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

We do not doubt that many young adults retain painful memories of their parents' divorce. But it doesn't necessarily follow that these feelings will impair their functioning as adults. Had their parents not divorced, they might have retained equally painful memories of a conflict-ridden marriage. Imagine that the more troubled families in the Wallerstein study had remained intact and had been observed ten years later. Would their children have fared any better? Certainly they would have been better off economically; but given the strains that would have been evident in the marriages, we doubt that most would have been better off psychologically.

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. and Andrew J. Cherlin, *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part*, 1991

Hello?

Divorce, by itself, doesn't do anything to children. It is how the parents teach their children to regard the event and the children's relationship with the respective parents after the divorce that influences the eventual outcome. In addition, recent research suggests that the amount of parental conflict children are exposed to is central to the child's adjustment, self-esteem, and psychological well-being. Such conflict exists in intact families and may subside after a divorce. Hence, the processes of interaction and the quality of relationships the child is exposed to may be more important than family structure.

David Knox and Caroline Schacht, *Choices in Relationships: An Introduction to Marriage and the Family*, 4th Edition, 1994

But I can't let go of this issue yet. Yes, it's important that Andrew Cherlin has apparently shifted his thinking. It's also helpful for scholars to point out that some problems experienced by children of divorce have roots that predate the divorce itself, and that parental conflict, both before and after divorce, can be especially damaging to the emotional health of children. And thanks again to Paul Amato and Allan Booth for *A Generation at Risk*, in which they show that most divorces affecting children today involve the termination of relatively low-conflict marriages. But can we talk? This whole exercise of trying to isolate the effects of pre-divorce marital problems from the effects of divorce is largely a waste of time. Often, it's fraud.

The basic game here is to disassemble a social phenomenon into its constituent parts, then use the effects of one part to throw doubt upon the effects of another part, or upon the effects of the phenomenon as a whole. It's almost always an unjustified game. In this case, suggesting that the effects of pre-divorce conflict somehow oppose, or diminish, the effects of divorce itself is but one of several variations on what may be the worst intellectual dodge currently being practiced in family studies: the notion that something called "family process" overrides or negates the importance of family structure.

Thus, family scholars today frequently insist that what really matters for children is not how many parents live in the home (family structure), but instead the quality of the relationships among family members. But of course, in real life, *the two things are connected*. If I am ten years old, whether I live with my father, or whether my father moves to Oregon to marry someone other than my mother, surely affects my relationship with my father.

This same problem in logic confronts scholars who imply that the effects of "pre-disruptive" family processes (parents who squabble and can't get along) should soothe or qualify our concerns about the impact of divorce. Again, watch the disassembly. If "divorce" is too narrow a term, let's call the problem we don't like "family fragmentation." Part of this problem is parents who squabble and can't get along. Another part is the decision to divorce. Another part is parents trying to relate to one another after the divorce regarding the rearing of their children, a challenge that typically generates its own share of "post-disruptive" parental conflict.

Now, if our goal is to reverse the trend of family fragmentation, does it help us to be told by scholars that recognizing one aspect of this problem — parents who squabble and can't get along — means that the problem itself somehow becomes smaller or less worthy of our concern? Ultimately, then, the question of whether or not some new data from Britain prompt Andrew Cherlin and his colleagues to shift their scales a bit — a little heavier on divorce, a little lighter on parental conflict — is beside the point. The scales themselves are arbitrary and misleading, which in turn corrupts this entire way of arguing.

Here's the proposition: Scholars who seek effectively to pit parental conflict against divorce, as if they were competing candidates for a prize, produce more confusion than insight. They should consider reorienting their thinking.

Normalizing Divorce (cont.)

In a train station in Philadelphia, in the "Money" section of a newspaper and magazine store, I find a paperback book called *Divorce Dirty Tricks* (Hollywood, FL: Lifetime Publications, 1998). It's a how-to book for getting what you want out of your divorce. The Introduction does not mince words: "A friendly divorce, with cheap attorney fees and no fighting, is mostly a mirage." Moreover: "If you aren't already divorced, the odds are, sad to say, that one day you may be, or you may inherit an ex-____ from your spouse, or may have an adult son or daughter who faces *The Big D*." Accordingly, this book aims to give you "The Right Stuff" for "winning" your divorce, including mastering the art of "Thinking Down and Dirty." The editors conclude: "Dollars alone do not win divorces; the economic upper hand cripples in the face of psychological superiority. This book affords you the psychological and tactical upper hand." I go to the check-out counter to pay for the book. The woman taking my money looks at the book and laughs. Me, slightly embarrassed: "Amazing, isn't it?" She, with a sad smile: "Where was this book when *I* needed it?"

Former name: Marriage Guidance Council of Australia. Current name: Relationships Australia. Former name: Marriage Guidance Council (United Kingdom). Current name: Relate. Name of Relate's new magazine: *Couples*. Reason given by a U.S. textbook salesperson for why the word "marriage" seldom appears anymore in the the titles of college-level textbooks on marriage and the family: "It's a turn-off for the students."

Nonexistent, II

In my last letter, I discussed some of the themes of Alan Wolfe's recent book, *One Nation, After All*, but barely mentioned the book's central conclusion. Wolfe's main finding is that the culture wars do not exist. We are *not* a morally divided people. We are one nation, after all. For it turns out that what is often called the "culture war" is in fact a series of politically useful fictions perpetrated by certain (mostly conservative) intellectuals, having little to do with the real concerns of ordinary people.

Moreover, once we clear up this misunderstanding about alleged moral divisions, we Americans can roll up our sleeves and focus on the real task before us, which is reorganizing our messed-up economy. Thus the last sentence in the book: "By combining traditional ideals with modern realities, even if in ways discordant to intellectuals and ideologues, middle-class morality offers the best formula for making the United States the one nation economically it already is morally."

Wolfe is a well-respected intellectual and a graceful writer. But I believe that I am accurately summarizing his book's main idea, and I am certain that it is one the silliest and most intellectually thin propositions that I have ever come across.

Here is David S. Broder and Richard Morin of the *Washington Post* reporting on several recent surveys about values carried out by the *Post,* the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University: "The public sees a nation that lacks agreed-upon ethical guidelines for itself. More than six out of 10 said the country 'was greatly divided when it comes to the most important values,' rather than being in agreement. Ironically, on this one question there was unity. Republicans and Democrats, men and women, young and old all said they see a society split on moral and ethical issues."

The sharply divided public reaction to the impeachment of President Clinton has provided a dramatic showcase of a struggle for American values that goes back to the 1960s and remains unresolved today.

Washington Post, page one, December 27, 1998

Of course they see a society split on moral and ethical issues. That's the only society we have. Two or three generations ago, the United States was relatively divided on how to organize its economy, but relatively united on how to organize its families and its basic ethics. Today the situation has essentially reversed itself: we increasingly agree on how to live together economically, and increasingly disagree on how to live together sexually and morally.

Several generations ago, cultural conflicts in the U.S. derived principally from ecclesiastical and doctrinal disagreements that took place *within* a shared moral culture rooted in biblical religion. Today's cultural hostilities tend to derive from a more fundamental clash of world views, basically the conflict between moral orthodoxy and moral progressivism and subjectivism. This shift has been closely examined by James Davison Hunter in *Culture Wars*, an important book that Wolfe essentially ignores, just as he ignores most other evidence that would have challenged his thesis or that would have required him either to examine institutions or place his argument in historical context.

The result is that Wolfe's analysis is disturbingly disembodied and weightless. Methodologically, Wolfe is suggesting that one-time interviews with 200 people (carried out by a research assistant) can provide him with everything we need to assess our social morality and cultural conflicts. Sorry, not even close.

To me, *One Nation, After All* makes two valuable contributions. The first is that many Americans now believe in what Wolfe calls the Eleventh Commandment: "Thou Shalt Not Judge." For these people, morality is largely private and subjective; public moral judgement becomes all but impossible. The second is that some cultural conflict today takes place less between us than within us — less a case of me disagreeing with you than of what Faulkner called "the human heart in conflict with itself." These are worthy insights. But neither of them sustain the proposition that we are *not,* despite all the evidence to the contrary and despite what almost everyone thinks, "a society split on moral and ethical issues."

Surely the Clinton mess, if it tells us anything, tells us that we are ethically disunited. Despite the constant declarations that "the American people" do or don't favor some particular means of resolving this scandal, people are divided. About a third of the public wanted the president impeached. Another third favored censure. Another third wanted the whole matter dropped. A majority opposed impeachment, but a majority in some polls also said that, if the president were to be impeached, he should resign. Forty or even twenty years ago, I suspect that the public judgement of President Clinton's behavior would have been much stronger and overwhelmingly negative. Today, opinion is split.

Indeed, as my colleague Maggie Gallagher points out, it is precisely our growing moral divide that may help explain our growing embrace of the Eleventh Commandment. When shared morality no longer seems feasible, one response is to draw a circle around yourself and say: Here I stand, the rest of you do whatever you want, since you will anyway. If Gallagher is at least partly right, what Wolfe presents as his main evidence of moral unity is equally an example of moral disagreement leading to moral privatization and disengagement.

A final thought. When Wolfe insists that today's culture wars do not really exist, except in the form of a mirage generated by "intellectuals and ideologues," isn't he at least implying that certain kinds of *people* — say, people in fundamental moral-cultural disagreement with Alan Wolfe — don't really exist?

Sources: Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (New York: Viking, 1998). David S. Broder and Richard Morin, "Unresolved, a Schism Endures," *Washington Post*, December 27, 1998. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

These conflicts have arisen so virulently in recent years because questions about the nature of public virtue lie at the heart of such different movements as feminism and fundamentalism, countercultural liberalism and regional conservatism. . .I see what the outcome of these varied culture wars should be. But I would have to find a way of convincing everyone else. And they just don't get it.

Edward Rothstein, "Impeachment as Culture War," *The New Republic*, January 25, 1999

The DiIulio Proposition

In most neighborhoods, the great majority of criminal acts are committed by a relatively small number of young males. Everyone knows who these young guys are. Store owners are afraid of them; teachers know that they aren't in school; the police know where they live. Most people also know the names of the even younger criminals-to-be, the kids whom the social workers call "at-risk."

John DiIulio's idea is to peel off the 100 worst kids in every high-crime neighborhood and enroll them in some type of faith-based "get your life straight" program sponsored by a local church. Have you got a better idea?

I don't think I do. Will his work? I don't know. But DiIulio is intellectually persuasive when he insists that what happens in these neighborhoods is not the inevitable result of large structures or trends. (Even the trend of family disintegration, which I view as so important, is not determinative.) What happen there is the result of human agency, an event in freedom. No bad result for these children is preordained unless good people don't do anything. DiIulio is also morally impressive when he insists that "No child of God is forsaken."

John DiIulio is a middle-aged white guy from Philadelphia. Also a distinguished scholar, a tenured professor of politics and public policy at Princeton, and a big-wig at the Brookings Institution and other similar places. He spent much of the 1980s and 1990s arguing that we should get tougher on criminals.

A couple of years ago, he began saying things like "Build churches, not prisons" and making friends with urban black pastors. If you want a scholarly rationale for this new emphasis, he's got it. By the late 1990's, he says, we have already locked up so many people that simply continuing to lock them up will yield increasingly diminishing returns. Even as a broken clock tells the right time twice a day, we have now reached a moment when those people who always favor focusing on the "root causes" of crime are telling us exactly what we need to do.

But mostly, I suspect, DiIulio has increasingly come to believe in the power of faith to change lives. As far as I can see, he's pretty much abandoned Princeton, at least for now, in order to travel around the country raising money for his pastor friends, drawing much-needed scholarly and public attention to their work, and doing what he can to help them save those 100 troubled kids in each neighborhood.

If you have a charitable donation to make, or a conference that needs a topic, or some other gift of time or resources to offer, you could do worse than contacting him at Public/Private Ventures in Philadelphia. I spent almost all of this letter criticizing people and ideas, but my admiration for John DiIulio continues to grow.

Sincerely,

David Blankenhorn

P.S. Don E. Eberly, an Institute Affiliate Scholar and a member of our Council on Civil Society, is a leader as well as an analyst of civil society whose new book is *America's Promise: Civil Society and the Renewal of American Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). A number of Institute leaders contributed chapters to *The Family, Civil Society, and the State*, edited by Christopher Wolfe (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). Wade F. Horn, Mitch Pearlstein and I co-edited a new book of essays, *The Fatherhood Movement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999). Just in case you don't have anything to read.

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