

"Noble Failures": A Critical Interpretation of Family Commissions

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From 1972 through 1977, John Demos, a professor of history at Yale University, served as a member of the Carnegie Council on Children. The Carnegie Council was one of several expert or blue-ribbon panels on children and families to emerge during the 1970s, in what might be termed the first phase of national family commissions. At the time, the Council represented a remarkably ambitious venture. It sought to break new ground in shaping social policy. "The cause seemed transcendently right, the prospects hopeful, the process in every way engaging," Demos later wrote in a personal essay reflecting on the lessons of his experience.¹ Yet despite these favorable conditions, the Council's efforts did not succeed. "Seen in hindsight," Demos concluded, "the Carnegie Council may perhaps be described as a noble failure."²

Demos' phrase serves well, not only as a description of the Carnegie Council's work, but also as a rubric for all the family commissions of this period. Though bold in conception and elaborate in design, the nation's first family commissions did not succeed. They did not influence public policy or even shape public opinion in any lasting way. And although the next decade brought more and differently conceived commissions, these later elite panels were no more successful than their predecessors. What's more, they were far less ambitious in their aspirations, retreating from a broad inquiry into the state of families to a more limited investigation into the traditional areas of child health and poverty.

This interpretative essay offers some of the principal reasons for the "noble failure" of family commissions in the United States. Its thesis is that these commissions failed to answer, or sometimes even to recognize, the fundamental questions posed by the very subject of their inquiry. The problem is not, as Gilbert Steiner has insisted, that the family simply is too diffuse or ill-defined a subject for policy panels.³ The dilemma is more fundamental. To adopt the family as a legitimate subject for policy, the commissions had to come to terms, implicitly or explicitly, with the prevailing social norms, or what might be termed the public philosophy, regarding the family as a social institution. Equally important, they had to confront basic issues about the sources of knowledge and authority on the family in a democratic society. Some of the commissions did not confront these issues at all. None confronted them successfully.

Yet failure is itself instructive. First, the history of family commissions frequently parallels, in microcosm, the history of our larger public debate about the family. Understanding this particular failure, then, takes us to the heart of a larger social dilemma. This history illustrates not just the shortcomings of expert panels, but also the confusing, politically polarized and often virtually contentless quality of our entire public discourse on the state of the family.⁴

Moreover, after more than twenty years of commission activity, most of it disappointing, important lessons have been learned for anyone wishing to tackle this subject anew in the 1990s. These lessons, especially if they help inform the work of the Commission on the Family in America and other related inquiries, can serve as both warning signs and as shoulders to stand on -- an ambiguous but invaluable legacy inherited from the past twenty years of family commissions.

The Epic Era

Beginning in the late 1960s, a number of national commissions were created to study and report on the status of American children and their families.⁵ At least five national commissions appeared in the 1970's: The White House Conference on Children; the National Research Council's Advisory Committee on Child Development; the Carnegie Council on Children; the National Commission on Families and Public Policies; and the National Commission for the 1979 International Year of the Child.⁶

The following decade brought even more commissions and elite study panels. In a recent survey of published reports, the National Forum on the Future of Children and Families counted twenty-two for the period between 1983-88.⁷ Currently, the National Commission on Children, created by Congress and headed by U.S. Senator John D. Rockefeller, is conducting still another inquiry and is scheduled to issue its final report in March 1991.

These twenty years of commission activity fall into two periods, roughly corresponding to the decades of the seventies and eighties.

The 1970s was an epic era for family commissions. These commissions were large, even operatic, in their organizational scale. They featured multi-million dollar budgets, multi-year calendars, and casts of thousands. The Joint Commission for Mental Health, which met between 1965 and 1969, had a 54-member Board of Directors; 46 member agencies; 6 task forces, each with its own consultants and conferences; 500 scholars and practitioners in the field of child development; 23 staff members and a \$1.5 million budget. The 1970 White House Conference on Children boasted 100 planning bodies, 3700 delegates, and a technical assistance committee of 99 associations. Even the smaller 11-member Carnegie Council on Children employed more than 50 staff members and spent \$2.5 million over five years.

Another sign of the ambition of the early commissions is their publication and dissemination effort. The Joint Commission on Mental Health issued its summary report as a 578-page book entitled *The Crisis in Child Mental Health: Challenge for the 1970's*. Four additional volumes, combining the reports of the Commission's task forces, were also published as books.⁸ The National Policy Council's report, though a modest 133 pages, also aimed at a broad national audience, as did *All Our Children: The American Family Under Pressure*, the final report of the Carnegie Council. All three studies, particularly *All Our Children*, were widely reviewed and debated in professional journals as well as in the popular press. The Carnegie Council, for

example, counted 137 news stories, 23 books reviews, 7 journal articles and 16 editorials in response to *All Our Children*. Following the report's publication, the Carnegie Council issued five companion studies and pursued plans for a television documentary.⁹

The Carnegie Council papers, now housed at the University of Chicago, detail the scale of this dissemination effort. As one Council adviser explained: "The Council is in effect bearing witness to certain things, and the character of its witness will determine whether much or little interest is generated."¹⁰ To the strengthen its "witness," the Council hired a 6-member in-house staff to pursue media contacts, secure media interviews and speaking dates for Kenneth Keniston, (the Council chairman), mail out review galleys to publications, build and tend a 3500-name mailing list of press and organizational contacts, assemble press briefing books and take the press to lunch.¹¹

The recommendations of the early commissions were equally ambitious. The Carnegie Council spoke for most family commissions when it called for "a family policy as comprehensive as the nation's defense policy."¹² Among the commissions of the seventies, the list of recommendations were nearly identical in their scope. They called for sweeping reforms: full employment policies; a guaranteed family allowance; major welfare and tax reform; government-supported child advocacy centers; and greatly expanded services for children and families. Virtually all prescribed a central role for the federal government in funding and implementing a what was almost always called a "national family policy."

The 1980 White House Conference on Families (WHCF) stands as the culmination of the epic era of family commissions. Though superficially resembling earlier White House Conferences on Children -- the first held in 1920 -- the White House Conference on Families was, in truth, *a unique initiative*. It grew out of Jimmy Carter's 1976 campaign pledge, before a meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Charities, to "bring together leaders of government, leaders of the private sector . . . and ordinary citizens and parents to discuss specific ways we can better support and strengthen our families ..."¹³ When the Carter Administration initially appeared hesitant to keep this promise, the Coalition for the White House Conference on Families, an ad hoc organization of social service professionals and activist groups with an interest in the family, applied steady pressure to the White House. The Conference finally took place in 1980. During the course of the year, it held 500 state forums and hearings, brought together 2000 delegates from 48 states to each of three separate national Conferences, and produced a ranked list of the top thirty-four recommendations generated by the conference delegates.¹⁴

According to most contemporary accounts, the WHCF succeeded only in tossing a political match onto social tinder. Its entire four-year course was marked by controversy, from the unseating of its first Chairman, a divorced woman, to its emotional, enervating quarrel over the definition of "family," to its final national conferences, where an insurgent and self-styled "pro-family" grouping, under the leadership of Phyllis Schlafly, struggled bitterly with a coalition of feminists and advocates for nontraditional families over issues such as abortion and gay rights. The WHCF offered stunning evidence, at least to those who were looking for it, that the family

and politics were a volatile mix. Accordingly, 1980 marked both the beginning and the end of any efforts to identify a presidential administration with a national inquiry into family life.

At the policy level, too, the White House Conference seemed only to confirm the lesson of the earlier commissions. According to one writer, who conducted an (unscientific) survey of government policymakers, "the 'average bureaucrat' believes it isn't a wise use of time to get too involved with a White House conference because, once the noise is over, things get back to 'normal' quickly."¹⁵ There was little sustained interest in translating the Conference's recommendations into policy. As the focus for government action, "family" proved more symbolic than real.

Most strikingly, at the level of popular opinion, almost no evidence emerged to show that the basic concerns of the family commissions were at all similar to the basic concerns of ordinary families. Indeed a Gallup Poll commissioned by the WHCF found that fully half the respondents, far from proposing a "national family policy", believed that that the federal government already had an unfavorable influence on family life.¹⁶

In particular, the social welfare professionals -- who had traditionally dominated the children's commissions -- found cause for sober reflection in this poll. For example, only five percent of those surveyed ranked "family service agencies" among the institutions having the most positive effect on their own family lives. Family members, friends, books and the Bible all ranked higher than counselors and other professionals as valued sources of "advice, assistance and encouragement."¹⁷

The Era of Retreat

In the 1980s, in the aftermath of the White House Conference, commissions entered a new period, best characterized as an era of retreat. The 1980s commissions cut back, scaled down and narrowed focus. They reduced the scope of both their organization and their inquiry. Reversing the pattern of the epic era, many turned to a more traditional focus on children rather than families, or, even more narrowly, on specific groups of children: non-college-bound youth; premature infants; pregnant teen-agers, poor children and other subgroups.

Their final reports, issued in modest, soft cover format, aimed at the short run and the specific more than the long run and the general. They were targeted at policy elites and opinionmakers rather than the broader public. Far more than the first stage commissions, the commissions of the 1980s placed their faith in business, rather than government, as the chief agent of social change. Finally, their recommendations were modest rather than sweeping. They preferred to talk cautiously rather than boldly, proposing incremental change and programmatic adjustments rather than major structural overhauls.

Changing Times

What accounts for this story of failure and retreat? There are two types of reasons. One was acknowledged at the time. The second was scarcely discussed.

The first concerned the changing political mood of the country. As early as 1972, Carnegie Council member Marian Wright Edelman, soon to found the Children's Defense Fund, detected signs of a shift in social sympathy. "The country was tired of the concerns of the sixties. When you talked about poor people or black people, you faced a shrinking audience."¹⁸ By the mid-1970's, there were also stirrings of tax revolt and a growing rebellion against social spending programs.

As the 1970s unfolded, the nation's political center of gravity increasingly shifted toward ideas of nonintervention, deregulation, fiscal restraint, and reliance on market forces. Yet concurrently with this shift, the epic era commissions issued clarion calls for new government intervention, greater regulation, and more federal spending.¹⁹ Accordingly, many who analyzed the 1970s commissions viewed their recommendations as backward-looking, caught in something of a time warp. As *Time* magazine complained, "... the council appears to be advocating the same sort of reform that ... failed to solve the problems of the society in the 1960s."²⁰ Similarly, a *New York Times* editorial criticized the Carnegie Council's recommendations for family allowances and income redistribution as out-of-step with the times, noting that the report "unoriginally identified poverty, unemployment and discrimination as the worst enemies of America's children." Unfortunately, the editorial went on, the Carnegie Council's remedies are "not readily attainable."²¹

In short, these commissions pushed unsuccessfully against the times they lived in. (Part of this problem, perhaps, reflects an endemic feature of all blue-ribbon expertise in our society: its tendency solemnly to propagate yesterday's conventional wisdom.) As John Demos observes, "the early 1970s were a time of gathering hope and energy around 'family issues' (day care, flexible work schedules, nutritional adequacy for children, preschool education and the like). But by the late '70's and even more the '80's, much of that spirit was gone."²²

Yet changes in political climate do not fully explain the failure of, and subsequent retreat from, the ambition, scope and optimism of the epic era family commissions. A more fundamental set of reasons exists. These root causes, moreover, were only indirectly addressed -- or in some cases, not addressed at all -- by the commissions themselves. They concern the very nature of the inquiry: the inherent qualities of the subject of the family.

The Dilemma of Staking a Claim

It is important to remember how new the family debate is -- how recently the family has become a legitimate subject for public policy and political discourse. As late as the mid-1960s, Daniel Patrick Moynihan reminds us, it was an act of innocence, if not naivete, to suggest that

families should be the focus of national social policy.²³ For nearly two centuries, and in sharp contrast to Europe, the national tradition on families in the United States was a tradition of silence.

Two classic ideas account for this historical silence. First, much of classical liberalism views the individual as the basic unit of society. Accordingly, liberalism conceives social policy in individual, rather than family, terms. Related to this view is a second: that the family properly resides in a private realm outside the reach of governments and laws. In this view, intervention by the state is justified only in cases of extreme family breakdown, such as demonstrable injuries to dependent children.

In adopting these ideas as a reigning ethos, the United States has been virtually unique among nations. Most modern industrial democracies have long recognized family well-being as central to the national interest. Most have adopted a wide range of social programs which explicitly recognize the stability and well-being of the family as an important national goal.²⁴ As Mary Ann Glendon has observed, many European constitutions contain specific family protection language. By contrast, the word "family" appears nowhere in the constitution of the United States.²⁵

The early family commissions, then, faced a special challenge for which they needed a potent strategy. The challenge was: How does public policy stake a claim on the American family? By what argument, and on whose authority, might these commissions persuade U.S. policymakers to establish new interventions in a sphere of American life, the family, which has historically existed largely outside the mainstream policy debate? The question is fundamental. Without a successful answer to it, anything the commissions said or did would be little noted nor long remembered.

To address this basic challenge, two strategies were possible. The first was to win approval in the U.S. for an idea that many nations already accepted as a commonplace: that government has a necessary stake in family well-being. In Moynihan's phrase, "it would be enough for a national family policy to declare that the American government sought to promote the stability and well-being of the American family . . ."²⁶ Once it was asserted that family well-being was in the national interest, important political and policy changes might likely follow, such as family protection language in state and federal constitutions; a cabinet-level post on the family; a national family research institute, modeled after the institutes in Australia and western Europe; and an annual State of the Family report to Congress, perhaps even including a Rose Garden ceremony for the "National Family of the Year." In short, according to this strategy, the nation would establish family well-being as a national ideal and pursue it as a national goal.

The second available strategy was profoundly different. This strategy accepts the traditional U.S. view of the family as independent of the state. But at the same time, it greatly broadens the definition of family breakdown and dysfunction, which in turn provides a strong rationale for greater government intervention in family life. Accordingly, the objective of family policy is to "help" or "support" a growing number of "at risk" families. In the words of the

National Commission on Family and Public Policies, the task is "to delineate the support systems needed to buttress families' capacities to carry out (their) functions."²⁷

In a fundamental sense, this second strategy is the mirror opposite of the first. The first is rooted in a conception of general societal well-being; the second in a conception of specific familial crises. The first focuses on successes, or what works; the second on failures, or what does not work. Not surprisingly, these two approaches, applied to the same questions, lead to profoundly different policy and political answers.

Moreover, the "expanding family crisis" model also expands the power and control of professionals who serve as authorities on the dimensions, character, and consequences of family dysfunction. These family experts -- therapists, social workers, policy analysts, child development experts, service providers, and social welfare activists -- have a stake in expanding the constituency for their expert advice and services. Consequently, to pursue the family crisis rationale is also, in effect, to constitute families as a large and needy client class, increasingly dependent on the expertise and guidance of family professionals.

When the focus is on family well-being, on the other hand, there is less need for a large and powerful class of family experts to identify, classify, monitor, and interpret the symptoms of family dysfunction. Nor is it necessary to divide the nation into special family constituencies with different, competing, and often conflicting needs and interests. Finally, the family well-being model is more open to a consideration of the larger ecology of family life, including the social and cultural sources of family well-being.

The family commissions of the 1970s and 1980s almost uniformly adopted the second strategy. In some respects, it was a prescient strategy. In the 1970s, the nation had not yet seen its first crack babies. Child abuse was just beginning to be documented, following the "discovery" of the battered child syndrome by pediatric radiologists. The emerging divorce revolution had not yet produced its legacy of bitter custody battles, kidnapping, and family abandonment.

At the same time, the family commissions detected mounting evidence of an emerging family crisis. In particular, these commissions examined three social indicators: the rising rate of maternal workforce participation; the feminization of poverty; and the escalating divorce rate.

Interestingly, while the commissions focused on these and similar trends, most of remained quite insistent on refusing to view them as harmful to family well-being. Indeed, the growing workforce participation of mothers was generally regarded as a positive social good. And divorce, while not celebrated, was generally viewed as part of a progressive and welcome trend, and certainly an improvement over the old approach of unhappy spouses staying together for the sake of the children. For example, the Carnegie Council report finds that

many parents today believe *what research usually confirms*, namely that preserving an unhappy marriage "for the sake of the children" may be doing the children more harm than good. And finally, the financial effects of divorce on

children, though still very bad, are by no means disastrous as they once were. *The greater availability of jobs for women means that more middle-class children today survive their parents' divorce without a catastrophic plunge into poverty.*²⁸

Similarly, the 1977-1978 National Commission on Families and Public Policies, reviewing current research, offers this scientific conclusion: "Statistics support the contention that poor marriages are worse than broken homes: There is less delinquent behavior in broken but 'happy' homes (35%) than in unbroken but 'unhappy' homes (48%)."²⁹

The feminization of poverty, which led to a growing number of poor children, prompted much concern among the commissions. Yet on the obvious relationship between the growing ranks of poor mothers and the divorce revolution, the commissions largely refrained from critical comment.

Rather than criticizing divorce or lamenting family breakdown -- a direction that would have mired them into the quicksand of social norms and moral values -- the commissions simply reported, in seemingly value-neutral terms, that vast changes were occurring in family life throughout the United States. More and more families, they found, were experiencing divorce, single-parenthood, the plunge into poverty, child abuse and abandonment, and the strains of two-paycheck family life. The sheer magnitude and distribution of these changes, they concluded, demonstrated that America's family crisis was far broader and deeper -- and in far more need of urgent response -- than had been previously known or appreciated. Not only the poor were at risk. Current social changes even threatened to overwhelm the mainstay of the society, the middle class family. As the scope and gravity of family problems had grown, so had the need for government action -- not under the European banner of promoting family well-being, but rather under the traditional U.S. banner of intervention in cases of crisis and failure.

From the commissioners' perspective, the strength of this argument is clear. It does not directly challenge the prevailing U.S. ethos of family well-being as a private, rather than public, concern. Yet at the same time, it contains bold, even imperial, new claims on the family as the object of interventionist social policy. It seems to allow, even require, the family commissions to march into vast new territory -- the territory of society-wide family dysfunction. Suddenly, according to this perspective, most U.S. families were, or at least might become, "at risk", since virtually every family in America was experiencing new kinds of economic and social stress. Mobility, isolation, economic pressure, technology, the media -- all were cited as factors weakening the family.

For example, the Carnegie Council report, subtitled "The American Family Under Pressure," identifies the key problem as the growing loss of family autonomy:

Families were never as self-sufficient or as self-contained as the myth made them out to be, but today they are even less so than they used to be. They are extraordinarily *dependent* on "outside" forces and influences, ranging from the nature of the parents' work to the content of television programming, from the

structure of local schools to the organization of health care. All families today need and use support in raising children: to define the "needy" family as the exception is to deny the simplest facts of contemporary family life.³⁰

With such arguments, America's family crisis swiftly became universal. For the first time, a family worthy of public "help" or "support" need not demonstrate behaviors that directly threatened the physical safety and well-being of dependent children. It need only to be experiencing the strains of modern life.

This argument dominated the discussions of several early commission reports. The Joint Commission on Mental Health, for example, pointed to the pressures on parents as a new and disturbing element of family life. Powerful new social, technological, and economic forces were weakening the ability of parents to guide and shape their children's lives. "The strains, separatism and isolation of today's society place heavy burdens on parents. All but the very prosperous find that they must solve most complex family problems, whether chronic or acute, entirely on their own."³¹

Moreover, parents had their own "needs" to consider, according to the Commission report. Like their children, they were plastic, developing, changing creatures: "Eager as nearly all parents are to do an excellent job of child-rearing, they cannot deny their own human needs -- physical, psychological and social. Nor can they put aside the totality of their own life experience that has made them what they are and molded their behavior as parents."³²

The Carnegie Council study, too, focused on the diminished capacity of parents to carry out their child-rearing responsibilities. Their report opens with these words:

American parents today are worried and uncertain about how to bring up their children. They feel unclear about the proper balance between permissiveness and firmness. They fear they are neglecting their children, yet sometimes resent the demands their children make. Americans wonder whether they are doing a good job as parents yet are unable to define just what a good job is.³³

Therefore:

there is nothing to be gained by blaming ourselves and other individuals for family change. We need to look instead to the broader economic and social forces that shape the experience of children and parents.³⁴

In the final analysis, these commissions concluded, it was up to the state -- as the single force with the power to counteract the increasingly disruptive economic, technological, and marketplace forces in the society -- to shore up the family. And, as the commission recommendations made clear, shoring up the family required nothing less than the full deployment of government action in the areas of income maintenance, full employment, personal social services, health care, childrearing, education, and care of the aged.

The Dilemma of Expertise

Once a rationale had been established for treating the family as a legitimate new object of public policy intervention, the commissions faced a second set of fundamental questions: What can we know about families? Who is best equipped to speak authoritatively about the family experience in America? What should be the language of discourse about the family?

There is nothing to suggest that the family commissions addressed such questions in anything like a direct, rigorous, and systematic fashion. Nonetheless, several of the early commission reports acknowledge the limitations of their approach and admit to working in areas well outside of their disciplinary competencies.

For example, in the introduction to its report, *Toward a National Policy on Children and Families*, the National Research Council's Advisory Committee on Child Development states:

The translation of scientific information into prescriptions for public policies turned out to be a formidable task indeed. *It was a task that divided the Committee on essentially non-scientific issues and forced its members to exercise judgment about matters of politics and social philosophy and finally, to reach conclusions that, in the last analysis, are not always fully supported by scientific evidence.*³⁵

Similarly, the Carnegie Council noted that it was forced into uncharted territory in its investigations:

Since the trajectory of our investigations has taken us from individual children, where our competence lies, to broader issues about the organization and structure of the economic, social and technological setting of childhood, we often find ourselves addressing questions for which we do not have special background and knowledge ... But we believe that to have avoided issues to which our analysis led us -- on the grounds that we were not experts -- would have been far more irresponsible, and far more of a disservice to children and families ..."³⁶

These explanations, while perhaps necessary, are not sufficient. A more interpretive, and critical, look at the commission reports suggests two areas where the problematic nature of the inquiry was most keenly expressed. The first concerns sources of authority on the family.

The family, after all, is the most universal of human institutions. Nearly every American experiences family life, and nearly everyone is deeply attached, through history, memory, habit, feeling, and experience, to a family. In a certain sense, we are all family experts. Moreover, there exists no clear or widely shared set of criteria by which our society determines what constitutes expertise regarding the family -- sociological understanding? divine inspiration? moral reasoning? therapeutic skills? political vision? personal success in family life? -- or even who qualifies as a family expert. The same cannot be said about trade policy or defense policy -- or even about foster care policy or welfare policy. This very familiarity, then, presented a

problem to the commissions: What could be confidently asserted as an authoritative opinion on the family? Were experts uniquely qualified to speak about the American family or was the authoritative source of knowledge about the family to be sought within families themselves?

As a further complication, the family was underdeveloped as a "field of study" or an academic discipline. Scholarship on the family was scattered across disciplines, from sociology to home economics. As a recognized academic specialty, the family lacked legitimacy and respectability: as one expert told the National Council on Family Relations: "It is time that those whose training and education and practice focus primarily on the family should so identify themselves and accept the responsibility which accompanies knowledge. We have been deserving a 'title' for some time. Famology is fine. Familist is fine. Family Scientist is fine. Familigist is fine. Anything will be awkward for a time."³⁷ The early family commissions began as commissions on children and drew their membership from a well-established community of child development scholars and practitioners. As they sought to broaden their inquiry to the social ecology of childhood, they simply annexed the family as a subject of their investigations. The implicit assumption was that the child development community possessed the knowledge, the methodologies and the vocabulary to speak about the family as well.

Though understandable, this assumption is dubious. John Demos wondered how he, as a historian, could contribute to a commission whose principal ties were to a community of social workers, lawyers, nutritionists, and community workers: "I was scarcely a practitioner in the above-mentioned sense; indeed the methods of such practice and even its language was sometimes incomprehensible to me. I knew things about children -- children who had lived and died centuries ago -- but ... how to connect?"³⁸

However, more than other family commissions of the seventies, the Carnegie Council did attempt to come to terms with the problem of expert opinion. It did so in quite a remarkable way. It disavowed its claim to expertise. Although the Council members included a highly distinguished group of academicians, lawyers and social workers, their claim to authority did not reside in their disciplinary knowledge so much as in their attachments to the subject as caring family members themselves.

In his preface to the report *All Our Children*, Alan Pifer, president of the Carnegie Corporation, notes that Chairman Kenneth Keniston was "a man who is not a specialist in early childhood but who cares deeply about young people." Kenneth Keniston, in his turn, notes that the Council members are a distinguished and diverse group who were chosen, not as spokesmen for particular professions or constituencies, but "because we share a common concern with the needs of American children and their families."

Keniston goes on: "Most of us are parents ourselves; we are individuals from diverse backgrounds, professions, and perspectives; most of us are in our forties. All of us are Americans, born and bred in this country."³⁹

This is a revealing passage. In essence, Keniston is saying that the Council panelists are

qualified to speak about the family, not because of their expertise but because of their personal ties to family and nation and their membership in the human community. They are, in other words, just folks, like you and me. Imagine similar claims to authority from panelists on a policy group devoted to agriculture ("we're all just farmers") or energy ("we all heat with gas").

Emphasizing the familial roles of experts is one way to resolve the tension, or at least confusion, between elite knowledge and grass-roots knowledge of the family. A second attempt involved engaging opinion at the grass-roots. If you want to understand American families, this reasoning goes, you cannot simply convene a group of experts. You must talk to American families themselves. Ultimately, in a democracy, they are the most trust-worthy family experts. Yet this approach, too, proved more difficult than it first appeared.

Beginning in 1950, the White House Conferences on Children sought to involve citizens' groups in designing programs, a process carried out in step with the recommendations of the experts. In 1970, the decennial Conference brought together 1500 delegates to a separate youth conference and encouraged the adult delegates to experience childhood through "involvement in situations similar to those encountered by children." This exercise included the usual site visits to hospitals and schools as well as the not-so-usual efforts to simulate childhood experience by getting the adults to play in an environment made out of cardboard, dowels and pulleys.⁴⁰ The National Commission for the 1979 International Year of the Child promised to "attempt to learn from the principals [...] -- mothers, fathers, children -- how best to go about efforts to promote a dialogue at the grass-roots level" so that citizens will "address these needs right in their own communities."⁴¹ Nonetheless, as Rochelle Beck writes in her essay on the history of White House Conferences, the power of the experts grew in direct proportion to the call for popular participation: "As the number of lay people invited to the Conference increased, so did the impact of the professionals."⁴²

The White House Conference on Families carried the notion of popular participation to a new level. It sought the testimony of hundreds of "ordinary families" in a series of hearings and state conferences and then, through an elaborate selection process, invited delegates to meet at one of three national conventions. It also commissioned a poll from the Gallup Organization.

Dr. Robert M. Rice, then the policy director for Family Service America and a founding member of the Coalition for the WHCF, recalls that the principal goal of the Coalition was simply to introduce the family as the subject for policy debate rather than to produce a full-fledged "national family policy."⁴³ Accordingly, there were conscientious efforts to draw ordinary Americans into the process by limiting the number of delegates who were professionals. Inevitably, however, the effort to engage opinion at the grass-roots lost out to the struggle between contending political factions with well-defined ideologies and agendas. For the conservative "pro-family" coalition, in particular, the WHCF served as a crystallizing event. It served as the opportunity for a myriad of isolated, single-issue groups, devoted to issues such as abortion, ERA, and school prayer, to join forces, grab a microphone and become a national political movement. By comparison, whatever impact other ordinary grass-roots voices had on the deliberations went unreported and perhaps unnoticed.

"Talking Around the Edges": The Dilemma of Values

A third core problem confronted the commissions as they sought to fathom the subject of the family. It concerned one of the important functions of the family in America: its role as the transmitter of values.

The first stage family commissions offered a common diagnosis of America's family problem: a growing number of families were at risk because of major technological and economic changes. Such changes imposed enormous stress on families and created a threat to family stability. This diagnosis assumed that the family's inner life -- its values, norms and behavioral aspirations -- had remained stable and unchanging throughout this period of change. It was as if these first commissions viewed the family as a ship, buffeted by winds and tossed about in stormy waters, but still possessing a loyal crew, sound riggings, and a reliable compass. To a remarkable degree, the commissions were wholly unable or unwilling to consider another possibility: perhaps something was happening inside families to contribute to these changes. Was it not possible that American family values were not simply adapting to larger social changes but instead, at least in part, actively contributing to those changes? Perhaps, in short, the American family was undergoing a moral sea change. Perhaps the compass had broken.

Historically, as Tocqueville and others have noted, the family serves as the principal of civic virtue in a democratic society--the primary institution that fosters socially cooperative behavior and generates a set of values that oppose, and moderate, the marketplace values of competitive individualism. Therefore, to ignore the question of values is to ignore one of the most important functions of the family in American society.

For the family commissions, therefore, the fateful decision to evade this question necessarily created a conceptual ellipsis, a hole in the center of the inquiry. In an unpublished interview with a Council staff member, Kenneth Keniston reflected on this dilemma:

In a funny way, we spent most of our work talking about what I think is the only thing we really could properly talk about: namely, social forces, economic forces, public action and so on. And yet I think all of us were aware we are talking around the edges of the main thing. The main thing is what goes on between a baby, a child, an adolescent and one or more adults that constitute a person's family and that something that goes on in that very intimate relationship is very hard to talk about in general, very hard for a commission to deal with."⁴⁴

The unwillingness or inability to speak about values had profound negative consequences. It impoverished the language of discourse about families, limiting it almost exclusively to the seemingly value-neutral language of social science, particularly developmental psychology. It caused the commissions to neglect opportunities for empirical study of actual American family attitudes and values. It restricted the membership of commissions to specialists in certain

branches of the social sciences and to the practitioners and organizations in allied social welfare fields. If philosophers, theologians, novelists, essayists, or social critics -- or for that matter, a few grandmothers from Paducah -- had been invited to contribute, the dominant discourse on the family would almost certainly have included a lively discussion of social values and norms. Yet there is no evidence that such presences on a national family commission were ever seriously entertained.

Conclusions: Fathoming the Family in the 1990s

In the decade of the eighties, most family commissions, confronted with the core problems that had handicapped earlier commissions, chose largely to sidestep them. Rather than face the dilemmas directly, they preferred instead to retreat to narrow studies of well-charted areas, such as child health and poverty, and to avoid the broader subject of the family as an institution. Avoiding any further experiments with large-scale popular participation, they returned to the model of the expert panel.⁴⁵ And, to the "at risk" and "family breakdown" arguments, they added a second rationale for new interventionist public policies.

This new argument asserted that government and, increasingly, the private sector must intervene in family life in order to preserve the nation's standing in a competitive global economy. What most concerned the 1980s study panels and commissions was not the fundamental threat to the nation's future security posed by diminished family well-being. Instead, it was the specific threat to the nation's economy posed by growing numbers of poor and minority children. What began in earlier commissions as a traditional social welfare concerns became, in the eighties, concerns about economic growth and global competitiveness.

Finally, these commissions, like their predecessors, largely ignored the role of the family as the source and transmitter of character and values. For example, on an issue like teen-age pregnancy -- an issue any man or woman on the street would identify as a social problem with an obvious moral dimension -- the commissions contested this commonsense view. The National Research Council's Panel on Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing, for example, offered the summary opinion that: "There is no single approach to solving the problems of early, unintended pregnancy and childbearing. Sensitivity is needed to differences in values, attitudes and experience."⁴⁶

Among the reports of the 1980s commissions, this is a consistent and common failing. In case after case, the unwillingness to discuss family values -- the unwillingness to say anything that might be interpreted as an unwelcome "value judgement" -- leads to findings so general as to be almost meaningless, so morally bland as to be almost irrelevant. For example, the National Governors' Association study of "at-risk" children and families recommends that the solution to school drop-outs "requires cooperation among the many members of a community and the family."⁴⁷

However, the commissions of the past need not dictate direction for the future. The

Commission on the Family in America has a fresh opportunity to conduct an ambitious inquiry into the state of the American family and to do so with vision, breadth and imagination. But to do so, the experience of earlier commissions must not be ignored, for this history offers important lessons. These lessons suggest how the Commission might overcome the obstacles of the past and move in a more successful direction.

Lesson One: The conditions and requirements of family well-being should serve as the principal focus of the inquiry, not the spread of family breakdown and dysfunction as a rationale for new policy intervention.

Just as Worldwatch Institute has a sound working sense of what makes for a sustainable environment, the Commission might begin with some working sense of what constitutes family well-being. This definition of family well-being need not be exhaustive; it need only prescribe some common characteristics, much as David Popenoe has done for what he calls the "ideal childrearing environment":

a relatively large family that does a lot of things together, has many routines and traditions, and provides a great deal of quality contact time between adults and children; regular contact with relatives, active friendships in a supportive neighborhood, and contact with the adult world of work; little concern on the part of the children that their parents will break up; and the coming together of all these ingredients in the development of a rich family subculture that has lasting meaning and strongly promulgates such family values as cooperation and sharing.⁴⁸

Whatever its current state, the family is not merely a social problem that must be solved through policy interventions. It is also a vital social resource that must be protected and preserved and fostered, both by public policy and by the entire society. A focus on family well-being would underline the quite consequential difference between these two conceptual frameworks.

Lesson Two: Any inquiry into family well-being must include a discussion of family values.

Historically, the family in America teaches and transmits values -- individual, civic and religious -- and thereby defines and renews the republic itself. Consequently, the content, as well as the language, of discourse about the family must reflect this important moral dimension. If the experience of earlier commissions is any guide, an approach that is value-blind fails to deal with much that is central to the family. Prescriptions and recommendations for sustaining a strong family life must be informed by a consideration of the values that guide and animate family life.

Lesson Three: Elite opinion must embrace the experience of American families themselves.

In *Reconstructing Public Philosophy*, William Sullivan writes about one of the classical ideals of knowledge -- praxis, or practical knowing. Practical knowing grows out of the daily experience of living; it is an ongoing dramatic activity that shapes and is shaped by the practitioner himself. Sullivan continues: "Aristotle concluded from this that the possibility of coming to understand a form of cultural life requires competence in moving within that life. Practical involvement is the precondition for reflective clarification, which in turn plays its role in deepening the person's comprehension of how to live his life. Human affairs require practical experience to be understood; purely formal, mathematical knowledge is impossible here."⁴⁹

It seems possible and desirable to think about family life in the classical sense as a form of praxis. Knowing about families involves more than simply pursuing a science of family life. It also involves understanding the practice of family life. In an important sense, family only exists as it is lived; one of its most essential quality is its dailyness. (The decline in the quality of family life is partly the result of a loss of dailyness, as parents and children spend more time apart, as family meals become the exception rather than the rule, as domestic routine and ritual is sacrificed to the routines of the workplace and the marketplace.)

Therefore, it is worthwhile to employ those intellectual tools and approaches that can bring a better understanding of families as they engage in the practice of being families. Such approaches might include social survey research as well as complementary forms of qualitative social research: ethnography, cultural anthropology, oral history, autobiography, and other documentary approaches, such as focus group research, interviews, and longitudinal panel studies.

With these lessons in mind, the task now is to move beyond the "noble failures" of the past and conduct an inquiry that may merit the description "noble success."

Afterword

Several months after this paper was completed, the National Commission on Children, a 34-member, bipartisan study panel, issued its final report to the nation, *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families*. In important respects, the Commission report represents a return to the ambitious vision and scope of the first national commissions on children and families. Indeed, this Commission explicitly identifies itself with the 1977 Carnegie Council on Children, noting that the two bodies share a similar vision for the nation's children. Moreover, like the Carnegie Council, the National Commission rejects "piecemeal, programmatic approaches" to family and child well-being and offers instead the "bold blueprint of a national policy," including such measures as a \$1000 per child tax credit, expanded health insurance coverage for families, child support assurance project, and a fully funded Headstart program. Bold blueprints require bold commitments, and the National Commission's plan is no exception.

Its proposals carry a price tag of approximately \$52-56 billion a year.

However, the National Commission on Children also goes beyond earlier commissions, including the Carnegie Council, in one important respect. It acknowledges the importance of values in any consideration of national family policy. In a chapter entitled "Taking A Stand: Principles for Action," the report states that "Basic moral values are part of our national heritage and should guide society in its actions toward children and families."

This principle is applied to make both normative and prescriptive statements. For example, the report asserts that "there can be little doubt that having both parents living and working together in a stable marriage can shield children from a variety of risks. Rising rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and absent parents are not just manifestations of alternative lifestyles, they are patterns of adult behavior that increase children's risk of negative consequences." Throughout its 519 pages, the Commission report is filled with the language of moral values. It calls upon all Americans -- but particularly parents -- to foster a "culture of character" for children. It exhorts parents to spend more time with their children and to become better "guardians of their children's moral development." It worries about the influence of rock music and sex and violence on television. It urges parents to take to the phones, the schools, and the malls to protect their children against corrupting values, messages and images. In short, along with its call for a stronger public commitment to families, it insists on standards of private behavior that will ensure favorable outcomes for children.

This approach -- calling for both public and private action on behalf of children -- represents a major achievement, yet it is an achievement that generally has been overlooked or dismissed, particularly by the media. Commissions typically have one major opportunity to deliver their message to the public, and that opportunity comes at the end of their lifecycle with the release of the final report. Consequently, the media response to Commission reports is extremely, perhaps disproportionately, influential. In this most recent case, it is also instructive.

In its response to the National Commission, the media focuses almost exclusively on the political and legislative impact of the Commission recommendations. Thus, the first wave of press reaction to the report sought to answer the following questions: Will the White House continue to resist the proposal, endorsed by the majority of commissioners, to guarantee health care for all children? Will the Congress support the \$40.3 billion tax credit proposal in light of the growing federal deficit? Will the Democrats steal the family issue from the Republicans? Will Senator John D. Rockefeller, the Commission Chair, use the report to pursue his presidential ambitions?

At the same time, the press waved off the Commission's support for the two-parent family, its call for civic activism, and its critique of cultural values inhospitable to children and families. For example, an editorial in *The New York Times* complained that the Commission study "swims in platitudes." Other commentators cast the Commission concern with moral values in a political context, treating it as a necessary compromise by the liberal majority with conservatives on the panel.

Obviously, it is important to pay attention to the political and legislative dimension of the Commission's work. Nonetheless, the report's attention to norms and values represents more than behind-the-scenes political negotiations. It also reflects larger historical and intellectual developments. Such developments make possible an analysis that, a decade earlier, surely would have led to heated controversy, intense conflict, and eventual deadlock.

For one thing, the National Commission conducted its deliberations at a time when the social costs of two decades of family breakdown were becoming increasingly clear. Following a period of tolerance, if not support, for divorce, studies such as Judith Wallerstein's *Second Chances*, a longitudinal portrait of the children of divorce, and Lenore Weitzmann's *The Divorce Revolution* provided empirical evidence of the long-term negative financial and emotional costs of divorce to children. At the same time, the testimony of teachers, social workers, child psychologists, family therapists, judges, and law enforcement officials contributed to a growing body of powerful anecdotal evidence illustrating the harmful impact of family breakdown on children. Earlier commissions on children and families simply lacked such a compelling body of evidence.

Secondly, a number of prominent scholars and family researchers advanced theoretical support for an ecological understanding of child well-being. Urie Bronfenbrenner's work, cited frequently in the Commission report, was particularly influential in shifting the focus from discrete pathologies toward a concern with the social ecology of childhood.

This new approach had at least two consequences: it insisted on viewing children as members of families rather than as an independent constituency for social services. The ecological perspective naturally led to a greater concern with the relationship between parent and child and a consequent policy shift toward improving the lot of parents as the best way of improving the lot of children. (In this respect, the Carnegie Council's study was indeed visionary, anticipating by more than two decades many of the "parent-friendly" proposals outlined by The National Commission on Children.) The ecological perspective also provided an intellectual rationale for broadening the scope of the inquiry beyond a consideration of government intervention. It encouraged an inquiry into the sources of child well-being -- and that inquiry encompassed the moral and cultural, as well as the political and economic, realm.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the Commission's emphasis on the moral and cultural sources of child well-being was closely tied to the Commission's own field and survey research. Far from merely reflecting liberal concessions to conservative pressure, the Commission's cultural critique grew out of its inquiry into public opinion. During its two-year life, the Commission engaged in a series of activities designed to test opinion, gather information, and elicit public testimony. Its calendar of field activities included town meetings, field hearings, roundtable discussions, site visits, and focus group discussions at eleven cities and towns across the nation. In addition, the National Commission conducted a national opinion survey of children and families (as yet unpublished.)

According to the report, "The National Commission on Children's hearings, town meetings, site visits, and discussions with children, teen-agers, parents and other adults revealed much that was troubling about the values that many children learn from the actions of their parents and prominent citizens, from the media and other manifestations of popular culture, and from the subtle messages of the nation's social policies and institutional practices."

Again, at a later point, the report states: "In more than a year of hearings, town meetings, site visits and focus groups, the Commission received a consistent message from adults and children alike that too many Americans have drifted away from the values and beliefs that promote personal happiness, strong, supportive families, and a caring society. This message was highlighted by parents in Indiana, teenagers in Boston and Kansas City, and ministers in South Carolina." Presumably, if the field research had revealed high levels of satisfaction with contemporary values, with media messages, and with adult role models, the Commission would have faithfully noted such findings. Therefore, to dismiss these statements as platitudinous or politically expedient is to ignore and seriously distort the empirical evidence.

It is too early to offer a full assessment of The National Commission on Children's work. It is not too early, however, to note that in several important respects, it was able to come to terms with the dilemmas left unresolved by earlier such efforts. The National Commission did achieve an important breakthrough in finding both an intellectual rationale and a vocabulary for talking about norms and values. In this respect, its work may initiate a new period of public thinking about child and family well-being in America.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMISSIONS ON CHILDREN AND THE FAMILY, 1965-1990

<u>Name</u>	<u>Sponsor</u>	<u>Years of Activity</u>
Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children	U.S. Congress/ NIH	1965-69
White House Conference on Children and Youth	The White House	1969-71
Advisory Committee on Child Development	National Research Council	1971-76
Carnegie Council on Children	Carnegie Corporation	1972-77
National Commission on Families and Public	National Conference on Social Welfare/HEW	1977-78
National Commission for the International Year of the Child	United Nations/ U.S. Congress	1977-79
White House Conference on Families	White House/HEW	1978-80
Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development	Carnegie Corporation	1986-present
William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship	William T. Grant Foundation	1986-88
National Commission to Prevent Infant Mortality	U. S. Congress	1987-88
Working Seminar on Family and American Welfare Policy	American Enterprise Institute	1987
Panel on Adolescent Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing	National Research Council	1987
National Commission on	American Public	1988-90

Child Welfare and Family Preservation	Welfare Association	
Panel on Child Care Policy	National Research Council	1990
National Forum on the Future of Children and Families	National Research Council	1989-91
National Commission on the Role of the School and the Community in Improving Adolescent Health	National Assoc. of State Boards of Education/American Medical Association	1989-90
National Commission on Children	U.S. Congress	1989-91

Notes

1. John Demos, "History and the Formation of Social Policy Toward Children: A Case Study," *Past, Present and Personal: The Family and The Life Course in American History* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 186.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
3. Gilbert Steiner, *The Futility of Family Policy* (New York: The Brookings Institution, 1981), pp. 193-215, *passim*. See especially Chapter 7.
4. David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshstain, eds., *Rebuilding the Nest* (Milwaukee, WI: Family Service America Publications), p.3.
5. As Gilbert Steiner explains, the first commissions set out to study the needs of children but included families as a major part of their inquiry in their final reports. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
6. I am grateful to Robert Rice for calling my attention to the work of the National Commission on Families and Public Policies.
7. Deborah R. Both and Laurie Garduque, eds., *Social Policy for Children and Families: Creating An Agenda, A Review of Selected Reports* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1989), p. 1.
8. For a list of titles in the series, see Joint Commission on Mental Health, *Crisis in Child Mental Health: Report of the Joint Commission on the Mental Health of Children* (NY: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 562.
9. "Final Report of the Dissemination Unit to the Carnegie Corporation of New York," 1980, The Records of The Carnegie Council on Children, Special Collections, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Chicago, p. 37.
10. Memo from Frank Tippett, nd. *The Records of The Carnegie Council on Children*, p. 3.
11. "Final Report," pp. 30-32.
12. Kenneth Keniston and The Carnegie Council on Children, *All Our Children: The American Family Under Pressure* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977) p. 76.
13. Cited in Steiner, *Op.cit.*, pp. 33-34.
14. Voting and ranking procedures as well as the list of top delegate recommendations are detailed in: White House Conference on Families, *Listening to America's Families: Action for the 80's, A Summary of The Report to The President, Congress and Families of the Nation*

(Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1980) pp. 20-21.

15. John J. Dempsey, *The Family and Public Policy: The Issue of the 1980s* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes, 1981), p. 105.

16. White House Conference on Families, *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

17. I am grateful to Robert Rice for sharing his memo of September 8, 1980 summarizing the Gallup findings.

18. Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles (Marian Wright Edelman)," *The New Yorker*, March 27, 1989, p. 67.

19. Gilbert Steiner makes this point as part of his larger account of the failure of family policy, *Op.cit.*, p. 205.

20. *Time*, September 19, 1977, p. 18.

21. *The New York Times*, September 27, 1977, p. 38.

22. John Demos, *Op.cit.*, p. 187.

23. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Family and Nation: The Godkin Lectures* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 3.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

25. Mary Ann Glendon, *Abortion and Divorce in Western Law: American Failures, European Challenges* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 133-34.

26. Moynihan, *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

27. National Commission on Family and Public Policies, *Families and Public Policies in the United States: Final Report of the Commission* (Washington, DC: National Conference on Social Welfare, 1978), p. 18.

28. Keniston, *Op. cit.*, pp. 21-22. (Italics mine.)

29. National Commission on Family and Public Policies, *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

30. Keniston, *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

31. Joint Commission on Mental Health, *Op. cit.*, p. 177.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
33. Keniston, *Op. cit.*, p. 3.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
35. National Research Council, Advisory Committee on Child Development, *Toward a National Policy for Children and Families* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1976) pp. vii-viii.
36. Keniston, *Op. cit.*, p. xv.
37. James Walters and Ruth Jewson, *The National Council on Family Relations: A Fifty Year History, 1938-1987*, p. 126.
38. Demos, *Op. cit.*, p. 187.
39. Keniston, *Op. cit.*, p. xiv.
40. White House Conference on Children: Report to the President (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 6.
41. U. S. Congress, Senate Committee on Human Resources, *The Coming Decade: American Women and Human Resources Policies and Programs, 1979*, Part 1, 96th Congress, 1st sess., January 31, 1979, pp. 63-64.
42. "The White House Conference on Children: A Historical Perspective," *Harvard Educational Review*, 43 (4, November 1973), p. 96.
43. Interview with Robert Rice, July 30, 1990.
44. Typescript of interview with Adelina Diamond, nd, p. 8, The Records of the Carnegie Council.
45. Both and Garduque, *Op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
48. David Popenoe, "Family Decline in America," in David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, eds., *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family*, (Milwaukee, WI: Family Service America, 1990), p. 46.

49. William M. Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 66.