

The war on wedlock

The word "war" really gets kicked around these days. When the House considers a block grant to the states we instantly hear rumblings of a war on children, women, the poor, the elderly or whatever.

These aren't really wars, naturally, nor was Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" (to be fought "for the duration," if you please). But if I had to pick a "war" this country has been engaged in for the last three decades — in the sense of



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inflicting grave damage on a domestic institution — it seems to me that in the name of the most ethereal compassion we've been waging a relentless war on monogamy.

Surely you remember monogamy: one husband, one wife, married, usually with children — a family, with one mother, one father? Utah was denied entrance to the Union until it banned polygamy. Those were the days, eh? Nowadays Utah could forget marriage entirely, simply call a man living with four or five women an alternative lifestyle, and it would be admitted to the Union like a shot.

With all the tralala about "self-expression" and "self-fulfilment" — not to mention trend-setting female movie stars who feel having children out of wedlock's a positive badge of honor — the popular culture nowadays seems to consider a man and woman married for life a couple of fuddy-duddies.

In devaluing the monogamous family unit we're thus embarked on a journey on uncharted seas, for no major Western society has ever done such a thing — although England and Sweden, with varying results, seem to be along for the ride. The first clarion warning of where we were headed was sounded 30 years ago by Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his now celebrated "Moynihan Report," unquestionably one of the most momentous social studies in American history. Mr. Moynihan attributed the behavior of the black underclass to the breakdown of the black family — at the time an insight of positive genius — for which he was cudged mercilessly for recognizing too early what today almost everyone accepts. And now that this family breakdown is spreading fast in the "new white underclass," things are really going into high gear.

A columnist should be grateful for letters, I suppose. I've received indignant reprimands for discussing major industrial countries with high illegitimate birth rates (Sweden leads with 52 percent, the U.S. and England could pass 50 percent within a few years) while neglecting such major civilizations as Sao Tome and Principe (90 percent), St. Lucia (86), and French Guiana (83). In all, over 25 such societies have illegitimacy rates of over 50 percent.

Other than Sweden, the only other country in the group even remotely comparable to the United States is Iceland (54 percent), which has the archaic but still widespread custom of celebrating a marriage only after the birth of the first child. As for Sao Tome and Principe, tiny islands off the coast of Africa with a population of

120,000, descended mostly from slaves from Angola, I frankly don't have the foggiest idea of how it cares for the nine-tenths of its children who are illegitimate. I suspect its customs aren't very far removed from those of tribal Africa. But these pre-industrial, tropical micro-states, or homogeneous Iceland and Sweden, can hardly serve as social models for the United States.

In mankind's early days, during the "hunter-gatherer" stage, men did the hunting and women did the gathering (which must vex Gloria Steinem). At the beginning of the "agricultural revolution," as hunting declined in importance and agriculture increased, women in the tropics simply did all the work, with men lying about, occasionally hunting or engaging in recreational warfare.

In west and central Africa this pattern persists to this day: wives (workers) are purchased and polygamy thrives — far more so than in Arab Islam. But in the temperate zones to the north, from Europe to China, where tilling the soil was far more difficult and men did the hard agricultural work, monogamy — where women tended the hearth and were treated with more respect — became deeply entrenched.

With the odd exception of Mormons, no society where the monogamous family unit was for thousands of years the sole model has ever abandoned it for another system. And indeed today we might well ask: for what system are we abandoning it?

A female-and-children family is generally not self-supporting. Such a family might be viable in Sao Tome and Principe where the extended family (or tribe, or village) might serve as father. I've known families (in Vietnam) where

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more than 30 members lived in the same house. But a female-and-children family in an atomized modern world with the "father-state" simply a disbursing agent? The results so far, in increased poverty, school dropouts, urban pathologies and violent crime of all sorts including homicide and suicide, have been appalling.

When Mr. Moynihan wrote his famous report 30 years ago, one quarter of all black children were illegitimate and 14 percent were on welfare. The country was horrified. It's a measure of the catastrophic failure of our compassionate social policies since the 1960s that today the country's overall illegitimacy rate — white and black together — is far higher than the black rate of 1965, and that the black rate itself is pushing 70 percent. If we could only reach Mr. Moynihan's old figures today it would be considered a miracle.

Social engineering is exhilarating, heady stuff. But once the new engineering machine has gotten under way, people's lives change, and getting the machine to turn back and un-invent itself is daunting. It came with no instruction booklet.

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