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Values vocabulary overhaul

Bill Bennett wants America to talk more about divorce, less about homosexuality. "I understand the aversion to homosexuality," he told the Christian Coalition conference. "I understand the difference between approval and tolerance. But if you look in terms of the damage to the children of America, you cannot compare what the homosexual movement, the gay rights movement, has done with what divorce has done to this society."

This carefully constructed paragraph is no ringing endorsement of homosexuality or the gay agenda, just a plea for a new ordering of priorities. In one form or another, the idea seems to be sweeping through the social conservative movement, Republican division.

Asked about homosexuality recently, Dan Quayle answered, in a straightforward and banal way, "That's their choice."

"Politically Incorrect," a new book by Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, contains only a glancing reference to homosexuality in 267 pages. And

David Boaz of the Cato Institute has scolded the American Spectator, National Review and the Family Research Council for being "obsessed" with homosexuality. He too wants to talk about divorce. He points out that Cobb County, Ga., which passed an antigay resolution, has a 20 percent illegitimacy rate and two divorces for every three weddings. "Surely," he wrote in a New York Times op-ed piece, "the 1,545 unwed mothers and the 2,739 divorcing couples created more social problems in the county than the 300 gay men and women who showed up at a picnic to protest [the antigay resolution]."

Some of this shift in emphasis can be viewed in very practical (or, perhaps, cynical) terms. A kinder, gentler image won't hurt the Republican Party at the polls. Jim Pinkerton, the columnist and former Bush aide, has said several

times that it's foolish for Republicans not to court gay voters.

The Christian Coalition, depicted by its enemies as an army of fanatics, wants to show that its social agenda isn't confined to a few familiar issues and that gays aren't being scapegoated for family decline. So Ralph Reed explains that the coalition isn't "just concerned with abortion and homosexuality."

But some of this rhetorical shift also seems to stem from a simple sense of fairness. If we are going to talk about the no-father homes of the underclass, let's talk about the middle-class, post-divorce version, too.

After so much targeting of gays, women (for abortion) and blacks (for illegitimacy), it seems appropriate to talk about a form of social devastation indulged in regularly by straight white males, with little criticism and absolutely no stigma. As Mr. Bennett said: "If you leave

your wife and get yourself a 'trophy wife,' you're not going to be greeted with condemnation or even a raised eyebrow by most people, because it has become a convention. But what has the convention done to America society?"

Like Mr. Boaz in his op-ed article, Mr. Bennett's speech talks about illegitimacy as well as divorce. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's famous Atlantic Monthly article, "Dan Quayle Was Right," did a lot to make a joint discussion of these two subjects possible. Much of the devastating evidence she poured forth about the no-father home applied just as well to Great Neck, N.Y., as it did to Harlem.

But another piece of writing, only now beginning to affect policy discussions, has had even more to do with depicting divorce and soaring illegitimacy as different aspects of the same problem: Myron Magnet's

1993 book, "The Dream and the Nightmare."

Mr. Magnet argues that culture counts and helps to shape society. As a result of the liberation movements of the 1960s, he says, "mainstream culture began to be intoxicated with its own sexual liberation — premarital, extramarital, you name it. If marriages broke up, as increasingly they did, that was OK, because individual, personal fulfillment was more important than family stability."

No need to stay together for the sake of the children. That was an unjustifiable restraint, and besides, kids are resilient. Quality time would make up for the old-fashioned quantity time, and kids would be happy if their parents were happy. Mr. Magnet writes: "We could hardly turn to the poor and say, 'OK, fellas, all this is fine for us, but not for you. You have to cleave to the straight and narrow.' So we destigmatized for everybody much sexual behavior that formerly had been kept in check by strong social disapproval. In the case of the poor, we destigmatized getting pregnant

out of wedlock, even for 15-year-olds, even for 13-year-olds."

The haves began abetting the proliferation of single-parent families among the have-nots, gradually helping the current ideology evolve that no-father homes are just as good as any other kind. Mr. Magnet argues that the new culture devalued all the things necessary to escape poverty, like hard work and family stability, while glamorizing things that keep the poor poor, such as drug use and casual, uncommitted sex.

Echoing Mr. Magnet, Mr. Bennett said in his Christian Coalition speech: "When we loosened the marital bond on the middle class of this country, we destroyed it for many of the poor."

Mr. Magnet's approach enables us to blur the lines of class and race when talking about the family decline we have wrought. It also has the advantage of being correct.

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