

# The Family in America

A JOURNAL OF PUBLIC POLICY

## **The Family in America: Retrospective and Prospective**

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**EXACTLY THIRTY YEARS AGO**, I wrote and saw published my first substantive essay on the family crisis in modern America.<sup>1</sup> I had recently completed my doctoral dissertation, which had investigated the origins of family policy in Sweden during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>2</sup> A National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, provided through the American Enterprise Institute, represented an opportunity to apply aspects of my Swedish analysis to family trends in America.

There was, to be sure, much to be troubled about in 1979. My essay noted that the divorce rate had risen by 150 percent between 1958 and 1974, with the number of annual breakups reaching one million, and affecting well more than that many children each year. The marriage rate remained reasonably high at 10.6 marriages per 1,000 persons as of 1980, close to the record of 10.9 set in 1972. However, the fertility rate (births per 1,000 women, ages 15–44) had tumbled almost in half from the post-war high of 122.7 in 1957 to the postwar low of 65.0 in 1976, bringing a

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1. Allan C. Carlson, “Families, Sex, and the Liberal Agenda,” *The Public Interest*, No. 58 (Winter 1980): 62–79.

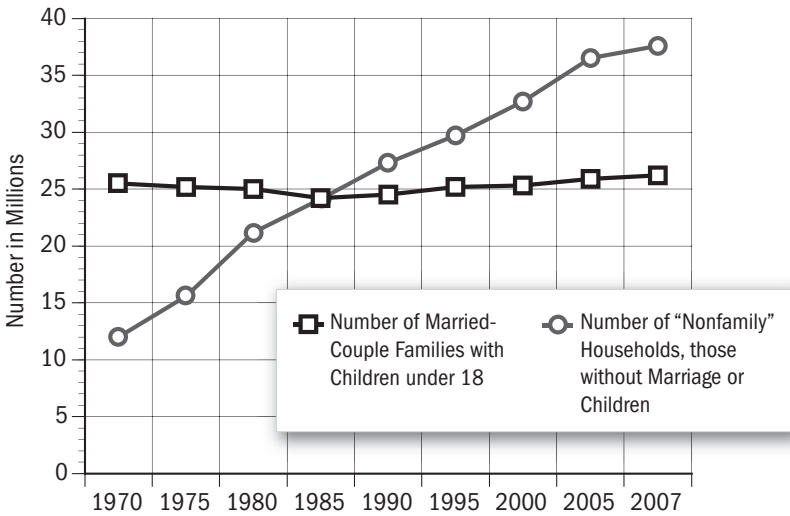
2. Published in revised form as Allan C. Carlson, *The Swedish Experiment in Family Politics: The Myrdals and the Interwar Population Crisis* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1990).

stunning end to the “Baby Boom.” The proportion of illegitimate births, as a percentage of live births, had reached 17 percent in 1974, double the figure for 1960. Nearly 18 million children lived in one-parent homes during 1977, up from 9 million in 1960.

My essay noted the spate of expert attention given to these signs of family strain. Recent reports had come from the Carnegie Council on Children, the National Commission on Families and Public Policies (a project of the National Conference on Social Welfare), and the Advisory Committee on Child Development of the National Research Council. They shared common traits. Describing causes, they all tended to indict the “American myths”—as one document put it—of family independence, personal responsibility, economic growth, and *laissez faire*. They faulted the rigid American family model of a breadwinning father and husband married to an isolated, socially dependent housewife. More broadly, they saw family breakup as the consequence of poverty, racial and sexual inequality, poor housing, unemployment, lack of transportation, and poor education. Their family policy agenda was also fairly uniform: greater income security for low income families; legally guaranteed jobs delivering “full employment;” “affirmative action” for racial minorities and women; more comprehensive federal health programs; more and better social services; government funded daycare; more sex education and government provided birth control; greater legal autonomy for children; and “family impact statements.”

I was puzzled by these reports, unable to see the connection between effect and cause. For example, the percentage of children living below the poverty line had actually fallen during the 1960s from 27 to 15 percent. Meanwhile, the unemployment rates for white and black workers were at near record low levels during the same decade. How could poverty and unemployment be causes of the dramatic demographic shifts recorded? In addition, the proportion of married women in the labor market had been climbing steadily since 1950, with an especially strong increase after 1960. At the same time, Medicaid and other new welfare programs had vastly expanded the social service network serving families. I concluded: “Under the causal analysis and policy recommendations advanced by recent family-policy advocates, the 1960s should have evidenced a new blossoming of family life. But exactly the opposite happened. Why?”

### Composition of U.S. Households



Sources: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1986 Edition, Tables 53, 65; 1990 edition, Table 66; 2009 Edition, Table 58.

I focused on two alternate explanations. First: “The sexual revolution has made it vastly more difficult to retain monogamy’s monopoly on sex. Marriages predicated mostly on sexual capability and erotic arousal prove fragile. Parents abandon and adolescents reject all sense of lineage, which monogamy alone can provide.” Second: The “Nuclear Family Norm,” rooted in the modern middle class and reinvigorated after World War Two, came under active assault during the 1960s, and collapsed thereafter. “Revealing evidence of desertion from the old normative family concept,” I wrote, came from “a comparison of successive editions of family sociology textbooks. Those published before 1972 continue to view the middle-class family as the American norm. Those appearing after 1972 abandon normative concepts altogether.” Discarding the husband-wife-children model, a new wave of family professionals favored instead the values of mutability in morals and social structure, choice, experimentation, self-fulfillment, and sexual gratification and also highlighted “the problem of children.”

I saw few prospects at the time for changing the trajectory of social change. I doubted that state intervention could be of much help, offering

evidence “that state social intervention on behalf of families actually weakens or destroys families.” I also cited Harvard sociologist Carle Zimmerman’s prediction in *Family and Civilization* (1947) that the collapse of the traditional Western family system would occur before the end of the century. As he put it: “The results will be much more drastic in the Untied States because, being the most extreme and inexperienced of the aggregates of Western civilization; it will take its first real ‘sickness’ most violently.”

### **Toward Optimism**

On further reflection over the next few years, however, I resolved that matters could be improved. While the social sciences of the era were corrupted by political correctness, I was impressed by the number of honest and compelling research results still being reported. The common messages from this work were that:

- *Children do best when born into and reared within a household composed of their two natural parents who are married; any deviation from this model—single parenting, step-parenting, divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, same-sex households, adoption—raises the risks of negative outcomes for children.*
- *Conventional marriages of men to women produce abundant positive results—from better health and more wealth to greater happiness—for both husbands and wives.*
- *Healthy and stable families are essential to the preservation of a free society. They limit the size and intrusiveness of government, promote public engagement, stabilize neighborhoods, and build the institutions of civil society.*

I came to believe that if persuasively presented, such arguments—based on solid empirical evidence—could advance the public debate, convert skeptics, reinforce those in positions of influence already favorable to the natural family system, forge careful policies that respected family autonomy, and avoid the end predicted by Carle Zimmerman. This conviction led to the creation of THE FAMILY IN AMERICA as a monthly monograph series in 1987, and especially to its NEW RESEARCH

supplement. In each issue, the latter featured abstracts of eight to ten new books or journal articles that elaborated on the three common findings cited above. Bryce Christensen, followed by Christopher Check, edited *THE FAMILY IN AMERICA* for the first ten years; I have shouldered that task since 1997. Robert W. Patterson becomes editor with this issue.

Of course, others of a similar persuasion joined in this campaign to alter the terms of public debate and to reconnect the shape of public policy to the authentic findings of social science. The names of some of those persons are found on the editorial board of this journal. Other notable figures included David Popenoe, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, David Blankenhorn, Norval Glenn, Maggie Gallagher, and the late Steven Nock.

Importantly, some positive results have been recorded. One remarkable episode was the crafting of the final report of the National Commission on Children, entitled *Beyond Rhetoric* and issued in 1991. Created by Congress in late 1987, the commission had thirty-six members: twelve appointed by the president; twelve by the speaker of the House; and twelve by the president pro tem of the Senate. The latter two positions were held by Democrats at the time; their appointments to the commission included the “first team” of liberal policy activists on children’s issues, including: Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund; T. Barry Brazelton of Harvard University, “America’s Pediatrician;” Mary Hatwood Futrell, recent president of the National Education Association; Gerald W. McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; and Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas. Senator Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia chaired the panel.

I was one of twelve presidential appointees, placed in an awkward minority position. Yet a core group of us resolved to place before the commission the evidence underscoring the importance of the intact two-parent family to the well being of children. To our pleasant surprise, Senator Rockefeller proved to be a generous and fair chairman who did want to produce that rarest of products: a coherent, content-rich, bipartisan report backed by a unanimous vote. A recent article in *The American Prospect* summarizes the process and results:

The blue-ribbon commission has an inauspicious history in American public policy. Most often, assembling a dozen or two bipartisan *grandees* to deliberate soberly about a problem is merely a way of evading a problem.

But there are exceptions. Though it will probably pass unnoticed, Dec. 22 of this year will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of one of the most successful policy commissions in modern U.S. history, The National Commission on Children. . . . While the unanimity [behind the report] was impressive, the report's reception suggested that the title *Beyond Rhetoric* was meant ironically, since the recommendations and the \$52 billion annual price tag, seemed hopelessly unrealistic at the time. . . .

But then a funny thing happened on the way to irrelevance. Almost every one of the recommendations became law.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, grounded in social science, the report broke with the usual call by study commissions for the nation to "express its moral commitment" to children "by expanding public services" for them.<sup>4</sup> Instead, *Beyond Rhetoric* declared that

*Parents* bear primary responsibility for meeting their children's physical, emotional, and intellectual needs and for providing moral guidance and direction. It is in society's best interests to support parents in their childrearing roles, to enable them to fulfill their obligations, and to hold them responsible for the care and support of their children.<sup>5</sup>

Again referring to the findings of social science, the report also broke with the usual refusal to point to "the forms of private family behavior that ought to be valued and pursued as cultural norms."<sup>6</sup> Instead, it affirmed the principle that:

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3. Mark Schmitt, "Life Chances," *The American Prospect*, December 2007, at <[www.newamerica.net/publications/articles/2007/life\\_chances\\_6396](http://www.newamerica.net/publications/articles/2007/life_chances_6396)>.

4. Noted in Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "What Families Must Do for Children," *The Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1991.

5. The National Commission on Children, *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 65.

6. Whitehead, "What Families Must Do for Children."

Children do best when they have the personal involvement and material support of a father and a mother and when both parents fulfill their responsibility to be loving providers. 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.<sup>7</sup>

Designed to reinforce parental responsibility for children, the Commission's primary recommendation was to create a new \$1,000 per child tax credit. Approved by Congress five years later, the credit was initially set at \$400 per child. It rose to \$1,000 through the tax reduction package of 2001. As I will explain later, it appears to have had a positive effect on American fertility.

### **Lessons Learned**

These years also taught me lessons regarding the causes of family change. To begin with, I gained a much deeper appreciation for the lasting effects of the industrial revolution on family life. Called "the great transformation" by Karl Polanyi in his 1944 book with the same title, the process severed the place of living from the place of work for most people in developed countries, a profound revolution. To this day, issues surrounding gender roles, childcare, and elder care derive from the hunger of an industrial economy for specialized labor. The industrial revolution also altered the nature of marriage, displacing the natural division of labor between husbands and wives in a productive home economy. Moreover, the market-based economy requires that ever more tasks once done within homes be transferred into the commercial sector, and it uses advertising to whet appetites for these new, industrially-produced products. Taken together, these forces tend to leave family homes stripped of function, with husband-wife and even parent-child relationships subject to the bonds of emotion alone.

The second lesson learned over the last three decades is the complicity

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7. National Commission on Children, *Beyond Rhetoric*, p. 66.

of the state in family decay. The U.S. Supreme Court, which prior to 1960 showed basic respect for marriage and family relationships, shifted toward a steady and hostile deconstruction of the natural family home. The discovery of the “right of privacy” in *Griswold v. Connecticut* stands in ever-sharper relief as a profound break in American history. Ostensibly, the decision defended the “intimate” and “noble” institution of marriage from regulation. Yet seven years later, the same “privacy” principle led the court to declare, “The marital couple is not an independent entity with a heart and mind of its own but an association of two individuals each with a separate intellectual and emotional makeup” (*Eisenstaedt v. Baird*). In 1976, the Court ruled that fathers—even married fathers—had no rights relative to the life or death of their unborn children. State court decisions during the 1970s (e.g., *Marvin v. Marvin*) came close to equating non-marital cohabitation with marriage on questions of financial obligation.

Another line of court decisions (e.g. *Levy v. Louisiana*, *Weber v. Aetna Casualty Insurance*, and *New Jersey Welfare Rights Organization v. Cahill*) eliminated the concept of “legitimate” birth as conveying distinctive rights and protections. As early as 1979, legal scholar Mary Ann Glendon could describe “the modern attenuated nuclear family with loose blood and conjugal ties, where . . . a person’s status in the ‘feudalism of the new property’ is derived from his occupation or his dependency relation with government.”<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, federal intrusion into the child-support enforcement business since the 1970s has done nothing to limit out-of-wedlock births, while creating new incentives for divorce.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, I came to see how the post-World War Two family model, the family of “the 1950s,” should not be used as a complete normative baseline for future policy. Some aspects of this family system worked very well and might be replicated in the future: federal tax policies that favored marriage and larger families; a broad culture of marriage that raised many new households into the middle class and served the interests of children; and an economic system that protected marriage. Other public policies,

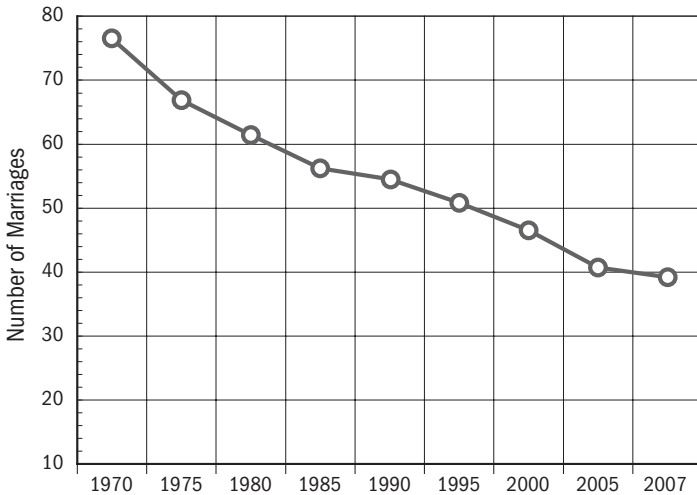
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8. Mary Ann Glendon, “The New Family and the New Property,” *Tulane Law Review* 53 (1979): 709–10.

9. Stephen Baskerville, “The Dangerous Rise of Sexual Politics,” *The Family in America* 22 No. 2 (2008): 1–23.



**U.S. Marriage Rate**  
(Number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried women)



Source: “The State of Our Unions, 2008: The Social Health of Marriage,” National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, February 2009.

however, favored the narrow conception of family life embodied in “the companionate marriage” and encouraged the further deconstruction of the productive household economy. Consequently, this family model proved to be a one-generation wonder, rooted in unique circumstances and unable to survive the challenges raised against it in the 1960s.

**A New Pessimism?**

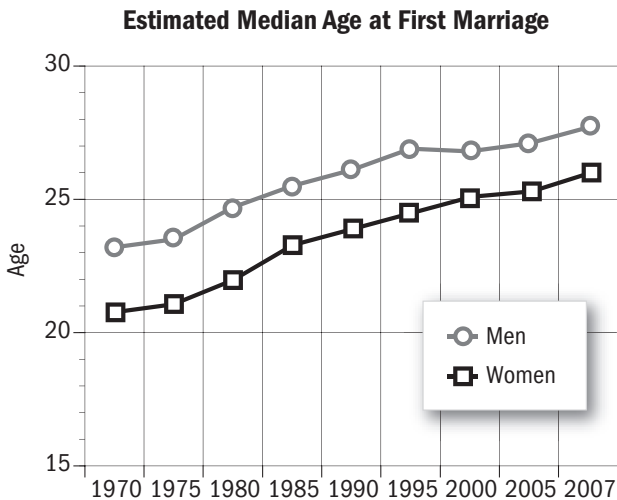
Viewed through a statistical lens, how does the family system in America in the first decade of the new millennium compare to its equivalent of thirty years ago? Relative to marriage, the trend lines are not healthy. The marriage rate has fallen from 61.4 (per 1,000 unmarried women) in 1980 to 39.2 in 2007, a decline of 36 percent. Even the absolute number of marriages has fallen from 2.39 million in 1980 to 2.16 million in 2008. The median age at first marriage was still relatively low in 1980: 24.7 for men; 22.0 for women. By 2007, the respective figures were 28 and 26. In 1980, 65.5 percent of persons, 18 years or older, were married; in 2007, 58.2 percent. Married-couple households composed 61 percent of

all households in 1980; but 51 percent in 2007, a bare majority. Replacing marriage is living alone (31.1 million persons in 2007, compared to 18.3 million in 1980) and “unmarried-partner households,” numbering 6 million in 2006, compared to 1.6 million in 1980.

Relative to divorce, the good news is that the rate has fallen by 31 percent since 1980, reaching 3.6 (per 1,000 persons) in 2006. The bad news is that much of this decline can be attributed to the prior fall in the marriage rate.

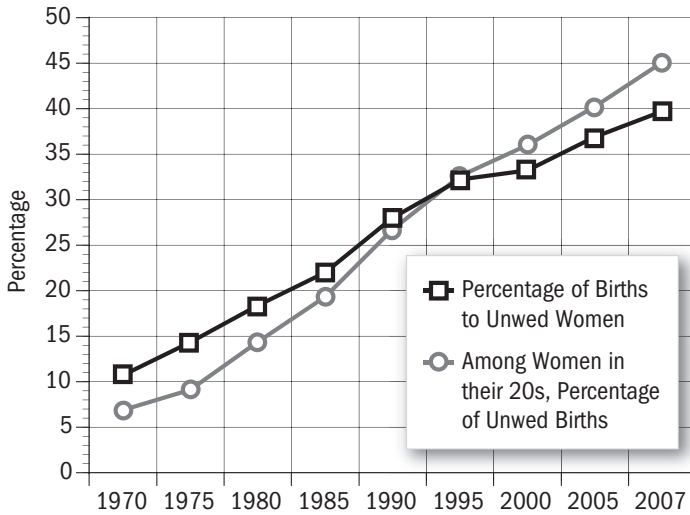
As an institution, we may conclude, marriage has experienced a sustained decline. During the 1950s, the United States could be said to have had a culture of marriage. In the 1980s, perhaps we had a “culture of divorce.” Today, we seem to be moving toward a “post-marriage culture” somewhat like the one found in Scandinavia.

Turning to fertility, the picture is complex. The absolute number of annual births has actually climbed by 19.5 percent since 1980, reaching a record of 4,317,119 in 2007, the highest number ever registered in the United States, even surpassing the postwar peak in 1957. Meanwhile, the U.S. total fertility rate (TFR) has risen by 15 percent, from a statistical average of 1.84 children born per woman in 1980 to 2.1225 for 2007, the second year in a row in which the rate has been above replacement.



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

### U.S. Births to Unwed Women



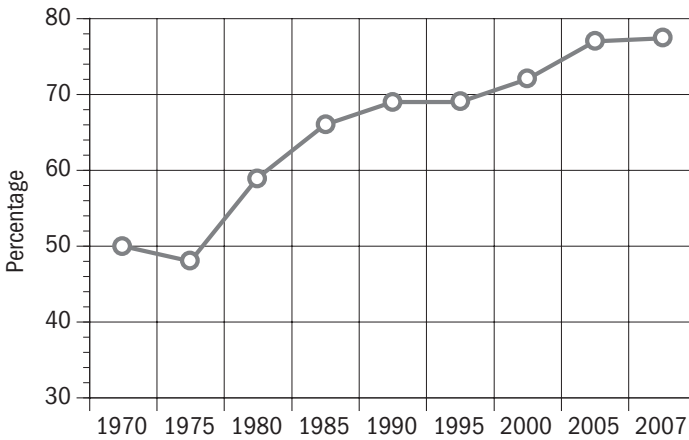
Sources: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*: 1986 edition, Table 93; 1990 edition, Tables 82, 90; 2003 Edition, Table HS-14; 2009 Edition, Tables 79, 84, and 85; “Births: Preliminary Data, 2007,” *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 57, No. 12, March 18, 2009.

The TFR for whites has increased by 16 percent between 1980 and 2005; among African Americans, though, it has fallen by 5 percent. Hispanics (who may be of any race) recorded a TFR of 2.99 in 2007, roughly unchanged from 2.96 in 1990 (a figure for 1980 is not available).

Meanwhile, a dramatic change has taken in what used to be called the “illegitimacy ratio.” In 1980, 18.4 percent of births were to unmarried women; in 2007, 39.7 percent, an increase of 115 percent. Moreover, 77 percent of these births occur to women more than 20 years of age. Contrary to popular and media misperceptions, these women have been increasingly more responsible for unwed births than their teenage sisters since at least 1980, when their share of unwed births was 59 percent.

In brief, American fertility has recovered from the startling lows found in the 1970s. Part of the explanation is the growing number of high-fertility Hispanics living in the United States. Another reason appears to be the rise in the real value of the tax benefits attached to children, including an increase in the value of the personal exemption in 1986 and the creation and expansion of the child tax credit in 1996

**Percentage of All Unwed Births to Women  
More than 20 Years of Age**



Sources: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*: 1986 Edition, Table 94; 1990 Edition, Table 90; 2009 Edition, Table 84; “Births: Preliminary Data, 2007,” *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 57, No. 12, March 18, 2009.

and 2001.<sup>10</sup> A third part of the explanation may be what University of Michigan researchers Ron J. Lesthaeghe and Lisa Neidert call the “demographic exceptionalism” to be found in a “non-negligible section” of the country: “the Midwest, the Great Plains, and the South.” There, marital fertility runs relatively high among groups who are “on average more rural than metropolitan [and] less well-educated” and who “adhere more to Evangelical Christianity or Mormonism.”<sup>11</sup>

The status of children in some respects has worsened over the last thirty years. Where 20 percent lived with just one parent in 1980, the figure for 2007 was 25 percent. In 1980, there were 1.45 million delinquency cases handled in juvenile courts, representing a case rate (cases per 1,000

10. See: Leslie Whittington, “Taxes and the Family: The Impact of the Tax Exemption for Dependents on Marital Fertility,” *Demography* 29 (May 1992): 220–21; and L. A. Whittington, J. Alan, and H. E. Peters, “Fertility and the Personal Exemption: Implicit Pronatalist Policy in the United States,” *The American Economic Review* 80 (June 1990): 554–56.

11. Ron J. Lesthaeghe and Lisa Neidert, “The Second Demographic Transition in the United States: Exception or Textbook Example?” *Population and Development Review* 32 (2006): 669–98.

persons, ages 10 to 17) of 46.4. For 2005, the respective figures are 1.68 million and 53.2.

Overall, and except for certain pockets of relatively high fertility, family dissolution has continued at a steady pace. Marriage is close to losing its normative status among adults; non-family households represent the growth sector in American society; and American children exhibit growing signs of stress.

When I mentioned earlier that children do best when living with their natural parents who are married, it was with a certain sense of weariness. I have written and said what nature, history, science, and reason affirms a thousand times before. So have others. And I wonder again, as I did in 1979, is anyone listening? Do enough Americans care?

The reconfiguration of this publication as a quarterly journal is, at least for me, an expression of hope. I do believe that a sufficient number of people of influence still *do* care to make it possible to craft legal and policy conditions that will encourage the flourishing of the natural family in this land and time. As in prior years, this journal will be edited from a distinctive, and openly acknowledged, point of view. It will also be informed by new research in the social and biological sciences. On these two points, we see no conflict.

We also anticipate a lively debate in the years ahead as a new generation of young scholars and policy analysts grapples with the implication of recent demographic, cultural, and social changes when measured against the natural family model. We seek to place *THE FAMILY IN AMERICA: A JOURNAL OF PUBLIC POLICY* squarely in the center of that debate.

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