Two and a Half Cheers for the 1950s!
Rediscovering the Virtues of a Maligned Decade

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Within what cultural historian James Billington has aptly labeled “the academic-media-foundation complex,” aversion to the 1950s is now de rigueur. The decade of the Fifties is an era that must trigger—at its very mention—shudders of revulsion at its “social regressiveness,” a regressiveness manifest by a “rush to marry and buy homes, the reinscription of traditional gender roles, and . . . overinsistence on the pleasures of family life.” Particularly because of these marriage- and child-centric patterns, the guardians of progressive orthodoxy see the Fifties as a time when Americans were subject to a “pressure to conform” so pervasive and retrograde that it constituted “a symptom of national malaise.”! But was the mid-twentieth century really as bad as progressives make it out to be? Was American life and culture in the Fifties, in particular, the unmitigated horror they insist it was?

No one who has studied the decade carefully and soberly will claim

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that it was an idyllic period, free from serious cultural and social problems. Indeed, any serious review of the 1950s will remind historians of the justice in Jacques Barzun’s comment that the label “An Age of Troubles” is one that “fits every age in varying degrees.” It was an era of profound anxiety over the international Communist threat, a threat rendered particularly ominous by the growth of the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal and by the Communist invasion of South Korea. Though the economic problems of the period seem mild compared to those of the early twenty-first century, many Americans were hurt when the economy went into recession in 1954 and unemployment rose to above 6 percent, and virtually all Americans had to cope with a troublingly high inflation rate, especially during the Korean War years.

And, yes, some of the defining problems of the time were, in fact, family problems. As social historian Allan Carlson has pointed out, the burgeoning new suburbs of the Fifties were often “incomplete and ultimately inadequate communities, in which poor development design made the creation of household-to-household bonds very difficult” and in which “a family life [emerged] that separated men’s labor from family living and left women in their houses as professional childcare workers and home managers.” The separation of men’s labor from family living exacerbated the problem historian John Demos has in view when he speaks of how, under the modern economic circumstances, “family life was wrenched apart from the world of work—a veritable sea-change in social history.” Though this sea-change was well under way before the 1950s, that decade’s suburban migration inevitably made the separation of work from family life even more pronounced, forcing men to commute relatively long distances to their employment and leaving women behind in functionally diminished homes.

Predictably enough, the advertisers, manufacturers, and educators of

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the decade conspired to take advantage of the social and economic isolation of the homemaking wife by making the isolated homemaker into a “machine operative” and “general purchasing agent” for a household that had lost many of its productive functions. By the 1950s, the home’s surrender of productive functions had become so complete that Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin saw it becoming a “mere incidental parking place” for consumption and relaxation. Many wives consequently experienced what one social historian labeled the “festering contradiction of modern womanhood” as their traditional homecrafts lost economic value and cultural legitimacy, so threatening to reduce their social status to that of menial parking-place attendants.

The problems of the Fifties—including most especially the family problems—were real and difficult, and no number of Leave It to Beaver reruns should obscure those problems. Yet those problems should not themselves obscure the social and cultural achievements of the decade, many of which are traceable to a remarkably vibrant family life that was—for all of its real defects and inadequacies—demonstrably stronger and healthier than the family life of the early twenty-first century.

An Exceptional Time in So Many Ways

First, let it be remembered that despite the worrisome inflation throughout the period, despite the recessions of 1953–54 and 1957–58, the Fifties were generally a period of prosperity—and a remarkably inclusive prosperity at that. For although poverty rates remained stubbornly high during this period among some groups—notably African Americans in urban neighborhoods and whites in Appalachia—these rates, which had fallen from their Depression-era highs by only 27 percent during the War


Boom of the 1940s, fell a remarkable 36 percent during the 1950s.⁸ With good reason, economic historians refer to the Fifties as “the decade that eliminated poverty for the great majority of Americans.”⁹ (By comparison, it should be remembered that during the 1980s—a decade usually remembered as a boom decade—the U.S. poverty rate actually rose.)¹⁰

The period’s prosperity was not merely a matter of income for immediate consumption: housing supply surged by a remarkable 27 percent during the decade, with manifest improvements not only in the number of American houses but also in their quality.¹¹ The long-term benefits of this prosperity were also evident in a U.S. saving rate that averaged over 9 percent for the period, compared to under 5 percent in the 1980s and under three percent in the 1990s.¹² And like private citizens, government officials managed—for the most part—to live within their means: The federal budget accrued cumulative debt for 1950 to 1959 of only 0.5 percent of Gross National Product (GDP) and actually ran very sizable surpluses in 1956 and 1957.¹³ By comparison, the federal budget now runs an annual deficit of well more than $1 trillion, or about 10 percent of GDP.¹⁴

While bank accounts may have been filling up, jails were not, for the Fifties was a period of low crime rates. As criminological researchers

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14. See Budget of the U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2012, Historical Tables: Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 (Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits as Percentage of GDP: 1930–2017), U.S. Office of Management and Budget.
point out, crime rates in the 1950s were essentially comparable to those of the 1930s and 1940s, and much lower than those seen beginning in the early 1970s. The murder rate in 1960, at the tail end of the Fifties, stood at 5.1 per 100,000 Americans per year, compared to 10.2 per 100,000 in 1980. Though murder rates have dropped sharply since 1980, the murder rate in 2002 (the last year for which data are available) still stood 10 percent higher (5.6 per 100,000) than it was in 1960.

The relative tranquility of the era stands out even more sharply in the rates for other crimes. The per-100,000 rate for forcible rape stood at just 9.6, compared to 36.8 in 1980 and 33.0 in 2002. The per-100,000 rate for aggravated assault was just 86.1 in 1960, but had risen to 298.5 in 1980 and had risen even further to 324.0 in 2002. The per-100,000 rate for burglary was only 508.6 in 1960, but had risen to 1684.1 in 1980 before moderating to 746.2, still well above the 1960 rate. Without question, men and women could feel more secure in their property and their persons in the Fifties than they could in the 1980s, or the 2010s.

Americans can be grateful for substantial advances in the medical treatment of physical illnesses since the 1950s; however, they may wonder if the trend lines have not actually gone the wrong way in psychological illnesses. Writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, researchers acknowledged that “the rate of utilization of professional mental health services has at least doubled, and maybe tripled, between the 1950s and today.” The researchers interpret this trend as evidence that Americans with mental problems now turn to professional psychologists more readily because there is now “less stigma attached to these problems and their treatment.” But other evidence suggests that Americans are simply suffering from more mental illness than in the 1950s. Mental-health authorities speak frankly of “an epidemic of mental disorders” in recent decades, an epidemic not manifest in the Fifties. This epidemic has hit the young

with particular force: psychiatrists in recent years have been reporting “an earlier onset of depression” among their patients than they and their colleagues had seen in the past, an earlier onset evident in “a sharp rise in rates of depression among adolescents and young adults.” Worse, the problem extends even to pre-adolescents, with pediatricians limning a three-fold increase in psychosocial problems among patients between the ages of 4 and 15.18

_De minimus_ analysts might explain away some of these statistical trends as the result of more inclusive new definitions of mental illness and of greater public willingness to seek professional help. But such interpretations utterly fail when the statistics focus on the cold figures produced by suicide, the grimmest outcome of psychological distress. Between 1960 and 2003, suicide rates rose by more than 85 percent for young Americans between 15 and 24 and more than 100 percent among young Americans ages 15 to 19, with most of this grievous rise coming among young men.19 Less grim but still compelling evidence that mental health has worsened in the United States comes from a 2000 Case Western University Study establishing that “both college student (adult) and child samples increased almost a full standard deviation in anxiety between 1952 and 1993.” For those mystified by the jargon of statistics, the study author puts it in plainer terms: “The birth cohort change in anxiety is so large that by the 1980s normal child samples were scoring higher [in anxiety] than child psychiatric patients from the 1950s.”20

The reasons that Americans found themselves remarkably prosperous, solvent, safe, and mentally balanced during the 1950s are numerous and complex, too numerous and complex to fold entirely into an analysis of family trends during this era. However, any analysis that omits family trends is ignoring a potent influence on American well-being—then, and now. Even after making all due allowance for considerations such as

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America’s singular status in the Fifties as the only major industrialized country not ravaged by war, the sober analyst must acknowledge that the country’s relatively strong family life during that era powerfully fostered economic, civic, and psychological health. Indeed, the evidence that family life affects a nation’s financial, civic, and mental well-being just keeps growing, providing ever more reason to appreciate many of the family patterns that prevailed then.

Robust Family Life, Robust Economic Life

Historians would no doubt see in the relative prosperity of individual households and the remarkable solvency of the federal government during the 1950s much more than the impact of the era’s family life. But important studies completed during the last quarter century make it clear that the relatively strong family life of the Fifties did enrich Americans and lighten their tax burdens. In a representative 2003 study, Cornell and University of Washington scholars limn a strong linkage between marital status and income, finding a “substantial marital effect on the likelihood of experiencing one or more years of affluence during the life course.” The researchers suggest that the wealth-fostering effect of wedlock crosses racial and gender lines, showing up for whites and blacks, men and women. Indeed, in statistical terms “the power of marriage to deliver affluence for women is extremely strong.” The researchers see matrimony fostering affluence by eliminating some of the household expenses that two single individuals would incur and by making possible “a division of labor that maximizes family income” by “enabl[ing] the partner with higher earnings [usually the husband] to devote relatively more energy and attention to remunerated work.”

Comparable findings appear in a 2002 study completed by Purdue University economists using nationally representative retirement data. These data indicate that “being married has a large effect on household wealth,” with unmarried individuals experiencing a 63-percent reduction in total wealth over the life course when compared with married

peers. Separated, never-married, divorced, cohabiting, and widowed men and women all have “significantly lower wealth than the currently married,” the differential being most pronounced for the separated and never married and least pronounced for the widowed. The investigators reason that marriage fosters the accumulation of wealth because “it provides institutionalized protection, which generates economies of scale, task specialization, and access to work-related fringe benefits, which lead to rewards like broader social networks and higher savings rates.”

The wealth-generating effects of wedlock are further clarified by a 1988 Federal Reserve Board study finding that once men take on the role of breadwinner—a role traditionally defined as complementary to the wife’s homemaker role—they become more productive. That is, the researchers conclude, “marriage per se makes [male] workers more productive.”

Studies such as these mean that the high marriage rates and relatively low marriage rates of the 1950s translated into relative affluence for tens of millions of Fifties-era Americans. In fact, recent research indicates that the twenty-first century Americans most likely to enjoy relative affluence are those who have held onto that most Fifties-esque of social institutions: wedlock. As sociologist Steven Nock remarked in 2006:

The “haves” are generally those in stable marriages. The “have nots” are generally those who live outside of marriage, especially with children. So vast is the difference, one is tempted to replace the traditional notion of social class with the more descriptive term marriage class. Marriage now divides the population in much the same way social class once did. Indeed, it may do so more profoundly. Neither education nor occupation so clearly discriminates between those at the two ends of the economic spectrum as marital status does.


Five Decades of Growth

Other studies indicate that the wealth-fostering effects of wedlock extend beyond a single generation. These studies establish beyond any reasonable doubt that, compared to peers from single-parent, cohabiting-couple, and stepfamily homes, children from intact families do significantly better in school and climb significantly higher in their young-adult careers.\(^{25}\) Summing up a number of these studies, Princeton sociologist Sara McLanahan notes that “children who grow up in non-intact families are disadvantaged not only during childhood, but during adolescence and young adulthood as well.” Clarifying what kind of long-term disadvantages children from broken homes face, McLanahan points out that “children from mother-only families are more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to attend college than children from intact families” and that, not coincidentally, “these children have lower earnings in adulthood and are more likely to experience unemployment and poverty.”\(^{26}\) Such research findings clearly indicate that the family patterns of the 1950s fostered wealth not only for the parental generation but also for the children’s generation. In other words, Americans have reason to attribute a significant fraction of whatever prosperity the country enjoyed in the decades of the Sixties, Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties to the family patterns of the Fifties.

Indeed, the Fifties gave America the *summum bonum* that any nation must have to prosper in any way. For the decade gave America life itself, life so abundant that it overflowed the country’s maternity wards. The pricelessness of the postwar Baby Boom has grown ever clearer as

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America has struggled to come to grips with the economic, social, and cultural costs of the Birth Dearth that set in during the 1970s in the wake of Roe v. Wade. As the number of young people has dropped, the nation’s leaders have lost access to some of the intellectual vitality, imagination, and energy characteristic of youth, while despair and depression have spread among the childless geriatrics. “The Birth Dearth,” in the opinion of social commentator Ben Wattenberg, “hurts us in every conceivable geopolitical way: militarily, economically, politically, and culturally.”27

More recently, demographer Phillip Longman has expressed fears about “America’s vanishing labor supply” in a social landscape reshaped by “the low birthrates of recent decades.”28

Besides fostering the wealth of individual households, the family patterns of the Fifties also helped protect the solvency of state and federal governments. Quantifying just how much these patterns shielded the public purse, a 2008 study sponsored by the Institute for American Values highlighted the “extraordinary costs” that divorce and unwed parenting place on taxpayers. After careful research, the Institute’s researchers estimated that “family fragmentation costs U.S. taxpayers at least $112 billion each and every year, or more than $1 trillion each decade.” The researchers calculate that the annual public costs incident to family fragmentation run to almost $5 billion just for California, and approach $4 billion for New York. These staggering figures the researchers regard as “‘lower-bound’ or minimum estimates” based on “cautious assumptions” about “increased taxpayer expenditures for antipoverty, criminal justice, and education programs,” and about the “lower levels of taxes paid by individuals who, [grew up in non-intact families and who] as adults, earn less because of reduced opportunities as a result of having been more likely to grow up in poverty.” Given the magnitude of the costs involved, the study notes that “even very small increases in stable marriage rates . . . would result in large savings for taxpayers.”29

When Social Capital Was King

Economists could identify a number of reasons that the Fifties included years in which the federal government actually ran a surplus, but the Institute’s study makes it clear that the relatively strong family life of the period belongs on any short list of such reasons. Likewise, any short list of reasons that the federal government and many state governments are now awash in red ink must include our national retreat from such family life. For family decay increases taxpayers’ burdens not only because of all the bad things such decay causes but also because of the good things that disappear when families fall apart or weaken.

For example, sociologists have established that men and women contribute less volunteer service in the community when their marriages fall apart—or never form in the first place. In fact, a 2002 study at Emory University established that in a nationally representative sample “married adults averaged 1.4 times more volunteer hours than unmarried individuals.”

Also relevant in this context is research showing that homemaking wives and mothers offer significantly more volunteer service than do peers employed outside the home. Indeed, a 2008 study found that between 1965 and 1998 American women markedly reduced their involvement in volunteer work, with the shift from homemaking to out-of-home employment clearly implicated as a cause of this reduction. In other words, the homemaking mothers who kept PTAs and other community-service organizations vibrant in the 1950s were just not there by the end of the twentieth century. Of course, when volunteers stop helping the community through goodwill service, then government employees often have to fill the gap—at taxpayers’ expense.

Inevitably, as family disintegration extinguishes the beneficent social impulses of volunteerism it incubates the malign social impulses of crime. A raft of recent studies has established that vandalism, drug use, robbery, and violent crime—including homicide—all become more common.

when family life erodes.\textsuperscript{32} Surveying the impact of surging divorce and illegitimacy rates in the 1960s and the 1970s, two prominent criminologists remark, “Changes in patterns of family structure have important implications for the volume of criminal violence.”\textsuperscript{33}

Looking particularly at violent crime among inner-city African Americans, a disturbed criminologist can only write, “The effects of family structure are strong and cannot be easily dismissed by reference to other structural and cultural features of urban environments.”\textsuperscript{34} So strong are the effects of family structure that two other criminologists have complained that some of their colleagues “mistakenly attribute to racial composition an effect that is actually due to the association between race and family structure.”\textsuperscript{35} Not inclined to consider “racial composition” as the reason that violent crime rates surged in the inner cities in the 1970s, historian David Courtwright identifies a “breakdown in the familial mechanisms for controlling young men” as “the root cause” of the crime surge Americans witnessed in the 1970s and 1980s. Courtwright explains this breakdown as the inevitable consequence of “the decline of stable two-parent families and the institution of marriage in the context of an


entrenched culture of poverty."³⁶

With the annual cost of fighting crime now running at about $200 billion,³⁷ it is no wonder that Courtwright would stress that “the voice of family-instilled conscience is always more cost-effective than that of a police officer.”³⁸ At a time when federal officials report that the incidence of tax evasion is surging sharply upward,³⁹ honest taxpayers bear an increasingly heavy burden in paying for police officers and other law-enforcement officials. Like the violent kind of crime, much of the rise in the non-violent offense of tax cheating probably reflects family breakdown, since researchers find that children growing up in fatherless homes are particularly likely to evince incomplete moral development.⁴⁰

Twenty-first century sociologists, then, can draw on a mountain of research explaining why the strong families of the 1950s meant a decade when America’s streets were menaced by far fewer criminals than police see now, and when tax collectors had to contend with far less dishonesty in collecting the much lower tax levies needed to pay for law enforcement.

**A Healthier Frame of Mind**

Those same sociologists also have access to studies that identify strong family life as one of the principal reasons that average Americans, young and old, enjoyed better psychological health at mid-twentieth century than do their twenty-first century counterparts. For a raft of studies shows that married men and women are more likely than unmarried peers to live happy and psychologically robust lives. These studies also indicate that the psychological benefits of an intact parental marriage spill over to happy and well-adjusted children.

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³⁷. See “State and Local Government Expenditures Per Capita by Criminal Justice Function and State: 2007,” Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2012 edition, Table 345. This source does not include federal government expenditures for criminal justice, except for those federal expenditures that pass through state programs.


Sophisticated and multi-faceted, these studies clearly identify marriage itself—not merely Fifties-style social conformity—as the wellspring of psychological well-being. Indeed, precisely because they recognize that marriage no longer defines social patterns in the way it did in the postwar era, the authors of a 2005 data confined their analysis of marital effects to quite recent psychological data. “We find,” these researchers report, “that marriage continues to be beneficial for mental health.”41 To understand just how psychologically beneficial marriage still is, readers can turn to another recent study finding that married men and women are significantly more likely to enjoy “very good or excellent” mental and emotional health than are their unmarried peers.42 Singles, on the other hand, especially divorced singles, are much more exposed than married peers to “psychological distress”43—including the lethal depression that ends in suicide.44

The psychological benefits of wedlock, and the psychological risks of singleness, appear particularly pronounced for parents, so accounting for researchers’ reports of a distinctively “higher rate of psychiatric illness” among single mothers.45 The shadow of mental illness falls not only on single mothers; in all too many cases that shadow falls on the children of single mothers—and stays with them well into adulthood. A 2006 study concludes that “men and women who lived through a parental divorce when they were children are decidedly more depressive than

people who have not gone through such an experience." Unfortunately, the psyche-lacerating effects of parental divorce too often mean suicide.

What is more, researchers have established that the risk of suicide grows in a particularly ominous way among young men (who are more suicide prone than young women in any case), when rates for both divorce and out-of-wedlock birthrates rise.

As Americans contemplate the benefits—economic, civic, and psychological—that strong family life delivered in the 1950s, they may gain a new appreciation for the public policies that fostered such family life. As historian Allan Carlson has stressed, federal policymakers strengthened family life during this decade not only through what they did but also through what they did not do. These policymakers actively assisted families through the Housing Act of 1949, a measure actually intended to give families a home, not to give investors a remunerative return on surplus income, and through the establishment of a generous child tax exemption (pegged at $500 in 1948, or about $7,500 today). But these Fifties-era policymakers also passively assisted the family by accepting the conventional gender roles that sustained an informal “family wage” system allowing a breadwinning married father to earn enough to support his wife and children.

Beginning in the 1960s, American policymakers have done far, far worse by the family, making it very difficult for a typical one-income family to get into a home, increasing the tax burdens on young parents, and actively attacking the gender assumptions that made the family wage possible.

The policymakers of the Fifties deserve praise for their social wisdom in supporting measures creating social and economic space for the family, and the nation’s ordinary men and women deserve even higher


praise for filling that space with child-rich, maritally stable families, families that delivered tremendous economic, civic, and psychological benefits to the nation. To be sure, neither policymakers nor ordinary Americans seem to have figured out how to ameliorate dangerous social isolation of the newly suburban family home, how to reverse that home’s dangerous loss of productive functions, or how to resolve the “festering contradiction of modern womanhood” created by isolating women in such a function-poor home. No doubt these failures help account for the spectacular unraveling of the 1950s family in the maelstrom of the 1960s. An awareness of these failures and their consequences can only dampen our twenty-first century enthusiasm for the Fifties. So we raise not three but only two and a half cheers for the family-centered achievement of that decade. Nonetheless, that achievement looks so very good compared to the economic, civic, and psychological malaise we have made for ourselves in the opening decades of the twenty-first century that we will voice our cheers loudly—and hope that policymakers and ordinary Americans alike hear them.

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