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HOW CLINTON IS KILLING A FAMILY-FRIENDLY FEDERAL POLICY

President Bill Clinton has emphasized repeatedly his desire to improve the status of America's children. Recently, however, he quietly rescinded an executive order on the family issued by President Ronald Reagan that has protected families from Washington bureaucrats for almost a decade. Buried in Clinton's new Executive Order 13045, "Protection of Children from Environmental Health Risks and Safety Risks," issued April 21, 1997, is language stripping away an existing set of directives to federal agencies to protect American families from harm in the formulation and application of federal policies.

President Reagan's admonition in Executive Order 12606, "The Family," was—borrowing the principle from medical ethics—"first, do no harm" to American families. The Reagan order, issued on September 2, 1987, after three years of deliberation among senior federal officials, placed special emphasis on the relationship between the family and the federal government.

President Reagan directed every federal agency to assess all regulatory and statutory provisions "that may have significant potential negative impact on the family well-being..." Before implementing federal policies, agency directors had to make sure that the programs they managed and the regulations they issued met certain family-friendly criteria. Specifically, they had to ask:

- Does this action strengthen or erode the authority and rights of parents in educating, nurturing, and supervising their children?
- Does it strengthen or erode the stability of the family, particularly the marital commitment?
- Does it help the family perform its function, or does it substitute government activity for that function?
- Does it increase or decrease family earnings, and do the proposed benefits justify the impact on the family budget?
- Can the activity be carried out by a lower level of government or by the family itself?
- What message, intended or otherwise, does this program send concerning the status of the family?
- What message does it send to young people concerning the relationship between their behavior, their personal responsibility, and the norms of our society?

Reagan's executive order also directed federal agencies to submit annual reports and recommendations for the family to the President through the Domestic Policy Council. The Bush Administration conducted the first review in 1989.

A Politically Correct Federal Family Policy. The evisceration of President Reagan's Executive Order 12606 is just the latest in a series of decisions that indicates the Clinton Administration's very different approach to family issues. From the outset of President Clinton's first term, it became clear that his Administration intended to pursue policies sharply at odds with traditional American moral principles. White House actions have ranged from the incorporation of homosexuals into the military to the protection of partial birth abortion procedures that repel most Americans and are broadly condemned by the medical profession.

Moreover, inspired by First Lady Hillary Clinton's notion that "it takes a village" to raise a child, the Clinton approach to family policy is one that seems to offer benign help but invariably ends up with government bureaucracies controlling much of family life. For example, the Clinton Administration's ill-fated Health Security Act specified in numbing detail what kinds of health plans, benefits, and medical treatments and procedures Americans were to have, even outlining in legislative language what shots and tests should be given. Likewise, the Food and Drug Administration for almost three years tried to keep home drug-testing kits out of the hands of American parents, ostensibly to prevent "family discord" over the merits of testing teenagers for illegal drug use. And on February 23, 1995, President Clinton signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a measure that ultimately makes the state—not parents—the arbiter of activities in which children may or may not engage.

Paradoxically, the latest action quietly rescinding Reagan's executive order is juxtaposed with a high-profile action seemingly designed to stress the Administration's commitment to families and children: President Clinton has asked the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to prepare, by this July, a report on indicators of children's "well being." Thus, he is asking his officers to gather data for these indicators at the same time he is rescinding an executive order protecting the family.

Time for Congressional Leadership. The continuing breakdown of the American family, with staggering levels of out-of-wedlock birth, divorce, child abuse, and abandoned children, threatens the future stability of America's communities. Because the Administration lacks a serious strategy to deal with this crisis, Congress needs to foster a thoughtful discussion of the erosion of the family and its consequences for children. Among other actions, Congress should take two steps to get the facts on the table for debate.

- **First**, by September 2, 1997, the day after Labor Day and exactly one decade since President Reagan issued his executive order, Congress should direct the President to issue a detailed report on the state of the American family. This should not be a quick "cut-and-paste" presentation of available statistics, as the OMB no doubt will produce in July, but a comprehensive assessment. The criteria outlined by President Reagan in Executive Order 12606 should form the basis of such an assessment.
- **Second**, Congress should embark on a major review of how federal legislation has affected the family since the end of the 1950s. A series of in-depth hearings is essential. Because there are divergent moral principles at issue, Members of Congress who claim that federal social programs have changed American family life for the better should have the opportunity to present empirical data in defense of their position. Those who disagree can conduct their own assessment and make the competing case. In either case, Members of Congress can evaluate the impact on the family of all three branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial.

Federal policy makers need to understand how and why the American family has been weakened, and where and how it can be strengthened. The impact of government policies on the family should be monitored closely, regardless of who occupies the White House. That is why President Clinton's rescission of the executive order forcing agencies to consider the family impact of agency decisions is so disturbing.

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