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When Marriage Disappears: The Retreat from Marriage in Middle America

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Abstract: *In high-rent urban neighborhoods and the prosperous suburbs of the nation's major cities, divorce is down, marital satisfaction remains high, and non-marital childbearing is still an exotic activity. It is not upscale America but Middle America that is experiencing marital troubles: From small towns in the heartland to working-class suburbs outside the nation's major cities, divorce, marital dissatisfaction, and non-marital childbearing are on the rise. In a word, marriage is in much better shape among Whole Foods regulars than it is among Wal-Mart shoppers. To fix this problem, our public policies must strengthen the employment opportunities of high school-educated Americans, cultural reforms must seek to reconnect marriage and parenthood for all Americans, and we must try to strengthen religious and civic institutions that lend our lives meaning, purpose, and a regard for our neighbors.*

CHUCK DONOVAN: We have an interesting set of facts to discuss this morning, and I'm sure we'll have some interesting assessments from our two panelists. The title of the talk is "When Marriage Disappears: The Retreat from Marriage in Middle America," and it is the title of the report from the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.¹ I'm pleased this morning to have the director of that project with us, Professor Bradford Wilcox, who is an associate professor of sociology at the university.

He is extremely well qualified to talk on this issue. The National Marriage Project has a long and auspicious history, from 1997 when it was at Rutgers

Talking Points

- The marriage troubles in Middle America strike at the heart of the American experiment in democracy. High school-educated Americans still constitute the majority of U.S. citizens and have long been a bulwark of conventional family life. If they cannot get and stay married, these ideals may stand in jeopardy, and so too may the American experiment.
- Americans should be concerned about these marriage troubles because when marriage disappears, children are less likely to thrive, and in some cases even survive.
- It also means pursuing cultural reforms that seek to reconnect marriage and parenthood for all Americans and efforts to strengthen religious and civic institutions that lend our lives meaning, purpose, and a measure of regard for our neighbors.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/hl1179>

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University and was headed by David Pope and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. In the summer of 2009, it was translocated to the University of Virginia under Brad's leadership, wherefrom it has continued to produce seminal reports about the state of marital unions in the U.S. with an interesting twist on the themes. This year it's a searching examination of the state of the middle class with respect to marriage and analysis of some of the things that are trending in that direction which are of concern.

Brad has his undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia and his Ph.D. from Princeton. He's been a distinguished fellow at Yale University and has done fellowship work at Princeton as well as the Brookings Institution. He's the author of a book called *Soft Patriarchs*, about how Christianity shapes fathers and husbands,² and he's got a new one coming out titled *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Children, and Marriage Among African Americans and Latinos*, co-authored with Nicholas Wolfinger.³

The respondent to my left is Paul Taylor. We're very honored to have Paul with us this morning. He's the executive vice president of the Pew Research Center here in D.C. and has had an extraordinary career—has held almost as many jobs as I've had over the years. He's the director of the Pew Center's Social and Demographic Trends Project and also director of its Hispanic Center. From 1996 to 2003, he was the president and board chairman of the Alliance for Better Campaigns, something we all probably would appreciate, and before that he had a 25-year reportorial career, very distinguished, the last 14 years of which he was the head of the *Washington Post* Bureau in South Africa during an incredible time in the transition from apartheid. He has covered four presidential campaigns, national politics, you name it.

Of particular importance this morning is the work he's done with the middle class in terms of analyzing demographic trends there. He's testified before the Senate Finance Committee on tax policy and is the co-author of a report, *Inside the Middle Class: Bad Times Hit the Good Life*.⁴

So we have a lot of ground to cover this morning, and I'll turn immediately to Brad, and then we'll have a response from Paul.

—*Chuck Donovan is Senior Research Fellow in the Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at The Heritage Foundation.*

W. BRADFORD WILCOX, Ph.D.: I want to thank the Institute for American Values, which has cosponsored this report both this year and last year.

Americans are acutely aware of the marital misadventures of folks like Madonna, Mel [Gibson], and Mark [Sanford]. Indeed, these high-profile divorces contribute to the popular impression that the richer you are, the more likely you are to divorce.

Dramatic changes in the cultural, economic, and civic fabric of the U.S. have eroded the strength of Middle American ties to marriage. By contrast, the ties that upscale and highly educated Americans enjoyed in marriage have remained resilient in the face of these changes. Hence the growing marriage gap between these two Americas.

While it may be true in celebrity culture, it's not the case for affluent and educated Americans in the real world. In high-rent urban neighborhoods and the prosperous suburbs of the nation's major cities, divorce is down, marital satisfaction

1. See W. Bradford Wilcox, "When Marriage Disappears: The Retreat from Marriage in Middle America," in *When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America*, ed. W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt, published jointly by the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and the Institute for American Values, December 2010, pp. 13–60, at <http://stateofourunions.org/2010/SOOU2010.pdf> (February 1, 2011).
2. W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
3. W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Wolfinger, *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Children, and Marriage Among African Americans and Latinos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
4. Paul Taylor *et al.*, *Inside the Middle Class: Bad Times Hit the Good Life*, Pew Research Center Social & Demographic Trends Report, April 9, 2008, at <http://pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/MC-Middle-class-report1.pdf> (January 21, 2011).

remains high, and non-marital childbearing is still an exotic activity.

It's not upscale America but Middle America that is experiencing marital troubles: From small towns in the heartland to working-class suburbs outside the nation's major cities, divorce, marital dissatisfaction, and non-marital childbearing are on the rise. In a word, marriage is in much better shape among Whole Foods regulars than it is among Wal-Mart shoppers.

The marriage gap is placing the American dream beyond the reach of many in Middle America, imperiling the social and economic welfare of countless children from Middle America and opening up a social and cultural divide that does not augur well for the American experiment in democracy.

It wasn't always this way. Up until the 1970s, marriage had a stronghold among both middle and upscale America. But over the last four decades, dramatic changes in the cultural, economic, and civic fabric of the U.S. have eroded the strength of Middle American ties to marriage. By contrast, the ties that upscale and highly educated Americans enjoyed in marriage have remained resilient in the face of these changes. Hence the nation's witnessing a growing marriage gap between these two Americas.

Moreover, this marriage gap is placing the American dream beyond the reach of many in Middle America, imperiling the social and economic welfare of countless children from Middle America and opening up a social and cultural divide that does not augur well for the American experiment in democracy. This is the fundamental message of "When Marriage Disappears."

Before I go forward with the rest of my talk this morning, I want to define my terms briefly.

When I'm talking about the highly educated Americans, I'm talking about Americans who have a college degree, who have completed a B.A. or B.S., and they make up about 30 percent of the U.S. adult population.

When I'm talking about the moderately educated or the Middle American population, I'm talking about adults who have a high school degree, who may have some vocational training as well, and who may have completed some kind of college training but have not gotten a B.A., and they make up the majority of the adult population.

The least educated group is the high school dropouts, those who are about 12 percent of American adults, and also would be typically living in low-income communities.

In terms of mapping for you the key demographic trends that this report looks at in 2010, the first thing we did is take a look at divorce. Divorce remains much higher among less educated Americans, both the Middle American group as well as the least educated group, and about one in three of those marriages will break up within the first 10 years of marriage, whereas there's been a marked decline among highly educated Americans when it comes to divorce from the late 1970s to the present. You can see this marriage gap emerging when it comes to divorce, but these trends are even more salient when we look at non-marital childbearing.

There's been a dramatic increase in non-marital childbearing for both Middle Americans and the least educated cohort of Americans. To take Middle Americans, it goes from just 13 percent in 1982 to fully 44 percent in the last half of the 2000s.

It's important to note here that this is really being driven by cohabitation, that almost all of the childbearing in the last 20 years or so is being driven by the fact that more and more Americans are cohabiting and having children in cohabiting unions. From my perspective, I think the key family challenge facing us from a demographic viewpoint is the growth in cohabitation, which is becoming an increasingly popular context for both the bearing and rearing of children in the U.S.

The point here too is that divorce really was the biggest challenge to family life back in the '70s and '80s, whereas today I think the biggest challenge facing us is the fact that cohabitation now is an ever-growing context for the bearing and rearing of kids, and it's not a good one, as we'll talk about in a few minutes.

What this boils down to for me personally is just a concern about how these shifts in family structure affect children. There's a very marked stratification in family structure by class in American life, and that stratification has only grown in recent years. Kids who grew up in Middle American homes and in the least educated homes are much more likely today not to grow up with both their mom and their dad.

We're actually seeing more stability among the highly educated and the more affluent Americans. From 74 percent of Middle American kids growing up with mom and dad up to age 14 back in the '70s, now it's gone down to 58 percent. By contrast, among highly educated families, there's been an increase in the percentage of kids living with their married mother and father, from 80 percent in the '70s to 81 percent today. So there's more stability for kids in this educated affluent group and less stability for kids in both Middle American and the least educated groups.

When we put all this together, we're finding in this report, "When Marriage Disappears," that the retreat from marriage is most pronounced in recent years in Middle America, and as a consequence, Middle American marriage patterns increasingly resemble those found among the poor. I think most of us are aware of the fact that over the last 40 or 50 years there's been this retreat from marriage among the poor and among African-Americans, and what this report is showing us is that this retreat has moved up the social ladder into the heart of American social life.

What accounts for this growing marriage gap in the U.S.? It's important for us to acknowledge that liberals tend to stress economic arguments. Scholars like William Julius Wilson would point to shifts in the American economy as a key driver of this gap, whereas conservatives tend to stress cultural, legal, and policy arguments. Scholars like Kay Hymowitz, for instance, have talked about shifts in the culture in many working-class and poor communities.

So who is right here? The basic idea in this report is that both liberals and progressives have an important grasp of different dimensions of the story. So we find in the report that a changing culture is playing a

key role; we find also that the rise of the post-industrial economy is playing a key role in all this. Finally—and this is a point that I think is overlooked by everyone that's taken a close look at this—the retreat from civil society has also played a key role in this growing marriage gap in American life.

On the cultural front, there are a number of key points to make. The first is that, despite the fact that marriage trends are deeply stratified in American life, it's still the case that the vast majority of Americans still aspire to marriage and honor the ideal of marriage in theory, but—and this is a key caveat—they are increasingly tolerant of departures from that ideal in practice.

The retreat from marriage is most pronounced in recent years in Middle America, and as a consequence, Middle American marriage patterns increasingly resemble those found among the poor.

What we see, for instance, in the report is that Middle Americans are becoming more accepting of premarital sex and non-marital childbearing, and that, of course, has an impact on their behavior. But we're also seeing, when it comes to the cultural front, that there's been a decline in the power of an institutional model of married life and the rise of a kind of soul-mate model of married life. This soul-mate model of marriage is less accessible both to Middle Americans and to Americans from low-income or these least educated communities, in part because Middle America doesn't possess as many of the bourgeois virtues that make a soul-mate model of marriage possible.

Just to give you a sense of how these cultural changes are unfolding in American life, divorce attitudes among Middle Americans have actually remained fairly constant over the last 40 years or so, but they've become more permissive among the least educated group of Americans, and I'd say they've become more marriage-minded among the college-educated set. What we're seeing is college-educated Americans, who are often more socially progressive on issues like abortion, for instance, are, when it comes to this issue of marriage, becoming

more marriage-minded on this divorce issue. That, of course, is helping them form and sustain strong marriages in today's culture.

The vast majority of Americans still aspire to marriage and honor the ideal of marriage in theory, but they are increasingly tolerant of departures from that ideal in practice.

Another data point that leapt out at me in this research is that teenagers from the most educated homes are also the most likely to report that they would be embarrassed, either the girls for themselves or the boys for their girlfriend, whereas kids from Middle American homes and from the least educated homes were much less likely to report that they would be embarrassed by experiencing an unwed pregnancy. I think this suggests there's a normative climate that surrounds sex and pregnancy and marriage that is, in some sense, most marriage-friendly or most marriage-oriented among the most educated and affluent segments of our society.

Once again, regardless of how progressive they may be in the abstract, when it comes to their own marriages and their own kids, they're very marriage-minded, and they communicate that message in a variety of ways to their kids.

This is part and parcel of what we call a "bourgeois mindset" in the report, where there's a focus on the long term, on getting a good education, getting a good job, and there are virtues like delayed gratification and sexual restraint that are associated with this approach to life more generally. One indication of this in the report is just the fact that kids who are coming from highly educated homes are more likely to report that they are looking to get a college degree, so they have that kind of long-term strategic educational orientation that shapes their whole approach to adolescence and young adulthood.

One way I think it's connected to their approach to life more generally is that they're much more careful about how they approach issues like sex and relationships and that they're more so today than would have been the case even 15 years ago. What we're seeing basically is that young adults who are from Middle American communities are actually

more likely to have a number of sexual partners compared to young adults from highly educated communities or households. This is important because having more partners is linked both to an increased risk of having a child outside of wedlock and to a high risk of divorce later in life. These kinds of trends are indicative of the kinds of patterns that are putting young adults from both Middle American and the least educated communities at risk when it comes to a host of different family outcomes.

To put these things together, what emerges in the report is, there's kind of a striking pattern where we're seeing highly educated Americans moving in a more marriage-minded direction even as Middle Americans are abandoning what I call a "marriage mindset" in the report. So on things like teenage childbearing, divorce, premarital sex, what we're seeing is that highly educated Americans are becoming in a sense more marriage-minded, whereas less educated Americans are becoming less marriage-minded.

In the statistical analyses, these shifts in attitudes help to explain this growing marriage gap in American life. Of course, it's also important to point out that highly educated Americans are more likely to embrace the bourgeois virtues that are so crucial now to making a successful soul-mate marriage.

Young adults from Middle American communities are more likely to have a number of sexual partners compared to young adults from highly educated communities or households. This is indicative of the patterns that are putting young adults from both Middle American and the least educated communities at risk when it comes to a host of different family outcomes.

I've talked about some of the cultural shifts and cultural differences between the highly educated and the Middle American groups. Let me talk now about the institutional picture, because what we're seeing is that Middle Americans are becoming increasingly disengaged from the institutions of work and civil society, particularly religion. This is important for marriage because these institutions

have traditionally supplied money, moral direction, and social support to both marriage and family life in this nation.

If we begin with the economic story, over the last 40 years there's been a dramatic shift in our economic life from an industrial economy to a service or an information economy, and as the shift has unfolded, what we're seeing is that Middle American men are seeing their economic fortunes fall. They're seeing declines in their real wages, and they're facing increased spells of unemployment. These two trends are not true for highly educated American men. We're seeing an economic gap emerging between Middle American men and college-educated men, and that has implications for their marriages.

To be more precise, what we do is look at trends in long-term unemployment in the 1970s and the 2000s. Before the recession hit, the odds that a college-educated man would be unemployed did not increase from the 1970s to the 2000s. By contrast, the odds for Middle American men and for men with no high school degree were much higher. This is important because we know from the sociological literature that men who are not employed are much less likely to be marriageable material; they're less attractive, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of their partners, as potential husbands. Then, once they get married, men who experience spells of unemployment are much more likely to get divorced.

Middle Americans are becoming increasingly disengaged from the institutions of work and civil society, particularly religion. This is important because these institutions have traditionally supplied money, moral direction, and social support to marriage and family life.

Interestingly enough, the connection between unemployment and divorce is very strong for men and pretty weak for women. The story here is really about what's happening to men's employment. It's obviously not a good story for men from Middle America.

I've talked about the cultural piece of the story and the economic piece of the story, and I think one piece that often gets overlooked as we think about

this issue is the larger civic dimension. I think all of us are familiar, in the wake of Robert Putnam's work, with the marked decline in the civic and religious vitality of this country since the '50s or '60s. What's not been so clear is, we now know that this decline is concentrated to a large degree in both Middle American and low-income communities, and that has implications for marriage.

The shift in messages that are being communicated about things like sex and relationships and married life could have a real impact on how people, particularly young adults, think about how they should be ordering each of these important domains of their family lives.

If we look first at non-religious or secular civic organizations, we can see that the decline in participation in secular civic institutions has been most pronounced among both Middle American and the least educated communities in this country. This is important because these institutions give people access to social support, a sense of being part of something larger than themselves, of having friendships in these communities that can help guide them and connect them to things like jobs; but they also supply them with a set of social skills.

We know from the work of Sidney Verba, for instance, that one of the few places that low-income and African-American communities are able to access a lot of important social skills is in their civic institutions, because they often are not able to access them in their workplace. The fact that we're seeing this marked decline in secular institutions has implications for their success in marriage and family life more generally.

We also see this story illustrated even more powerfully in the religious sector. Back in the 1970s, it was Middle Americans who were most likely to be attending a church or some other kind of religious institution, whereas today it's the highly educated group that are most likely to be attending a church or synagogue or temple of some sort. This is important because, as my own work suggests, religion is a very strong predictor of marital quality, marital stability, and entry into marriage in the first place.

The fact that marriage has lost ground most markedly among Middle American communities is one of the explanations why we're seeing this growing marriage gap in American life, and the statistical models in the report are consistent with that basic idea. So religion is a key factor in explaining the declining fortunes of marriage in Middle America.

The question that comes up for me is, if there's this decline in civil society, how are Middle American adults reallocating their time? If they're not going to Kiwanis, if they're not involved in United Way, if they're not involved in the VFW, if they're not going to church, how are they spending their time? Obviously there's still time in the day.

My suspicion is that part of the story is that they're spending more and more time being plugged into our popular culture. I think this is problematic potentially, given in part the nature of the content of that popular culture. We're going from, if you will, *Leave It to Beaver* 40 years ago to *Jersey Shore* today, and the shift in messages that are being communicated about things like sex and relationships and married life could have a real impact on how people, particularly young adults, think about how they should be ordering each of these important domains of their family lives.

I do have some data on this. I looked at the General Social Survey, the GSS, and broke out TV viewing—four hours or more—by class. This is not in the report, but it's indicative of the stratification we're seeing here in the consumption of popular culture. You can see that Americans from high school educated and high school dropout households are much more likely to be spending a lot of time watching TV, so I think there could be something here that helps us to explain how there has been this shift away from a marriage mindset in Middle America and why, by contrast, those folks who are college educated are less likely to be succumbing to this shift in marriage mindset.

To add this all up, what we're seeing here is that Middle Americans are less connected to the institutions of work, civil society, and religion that have traditionally sustained strong marriages in this country. They're also more likely to be taking their cues, I think, about marriage and relationships from

places like Hollywood and Madison Avenue—places that haven't historically, at least recently, been sources of support for a strong marriage mindset. Finally, they're also less likely to have both the marriage mindset and the bourgeois values that are crucial to marital success in today's America.

As a consequence, they're losing faith in marriage. We had a sample of young adults who were asked if marriage has not worked out for people that they know, and only 17 percent of college-educated young adults said that this was the case, whereas 43 percent of Middle Americans and 53 percent of folks who are from high school dropout households had this view.

The bottom line here is, we should be concerned about these trends because when marriage disappears, children are less likely to thrive and in some cases even to survive.

When you talk about something like the marriage gap in American life, one of the questions you can get, especially in the Academy, is why should we care? There's this view among some scholars that the family is really changing; it's not really declining. Why should we be concerned about this? In general, what we know is that kids who come from non-intact homes are about two to three times more likely to experience serious negative outcomes like delinquency, depression, or an arrest. This is the big picture. As we move to more specific outcomes, we see a similar pattern.

Sara McLanahan, my adviser at Princeton, has found that young men who grow up in a home without their father are about twice as likely to end up in prison before they turn age 32. There's a link here between not having a father in the household and being more likely to succumb to the lure of the streets, if you will.

Marriage also matters for girls. Teenage girls are much more likely to become pregnant as teenagers if they're raised in a home without their married father. You can see it's particularly a dramatic trend when dad leaves before a girl turns age 6.

We hear a lot of talk today about the importance of getting a college education. What's clear in the

data is that kids who are from intact families are much more likely to go on to get a college degree; 38 percent of young adults today who come from intact families go on to get a college degree, whereas only 20 percent of kids from non-intact families will get a college degree.

On the outcome front, the final thing that's striking to me is what we see when it comes to patterns of child abuse—physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. This comes from the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect.⁵ What's very clear is that kids who are living in any other family structure besides the intact biological married household are much more likely to be abused—particularly kids who are living with their mother and her cohabiting unrelated boyfriend. Unfortunately, given the kinds of trends we're seeing in American life today with regards to cohabitation, we're going to see more kids spending time in these kinds of households.

The marginalization of marriage makes it more difficult for Middle Americans to realize the American dream.

The bottom line here is, we should be concerned about these trends because when marriage disappears, children are less likely to thrive and in some cases even to survive.

It's important also for me to telegraph to you that this is not a conservative viewpoint; I have here a quote from Sara McLanahan at Princeton and Gary Sandefur at Wisconsin, two leading family scholars in American life, that illustrates the more recent view that family structure matters for kids. They're

talking about kids being raised by their biological mother and father: "The fact that both parents have a biological connection to the child would increase the likelihood that the parents would identify with the child and be willing to sacrifice for that child, and it would reduce the likelihood that either parent would abuse the child."⁶

The point is, there's a new recognition on the part of many scholars that the family structure matters for both parenting investments, if you will, and for child outcomes.

Forty-five years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan first drew attention to the deteriorating position of the black family and to the growing racial divide in American family life with the release of his report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.⁷ Moynihan later noted that his report had just captured the first tremors of "the earthquake that shuddered through the American family" over the course of the last half century.⁸

Moynihan was right. This report indicates that the tremors associated with this family earthquake have moved well beyond families in African-American and poor communities. As we have seen, they are now rocking the foundations of marriage in Middle America, including high school-educated whites in Middle America.

Why should the declining fortunes of marriage in Middle America concern the nation?

First, the growing marriage gap is troubling because it puts Middle Americans at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to upscale Americans, who have seen no deterioration in the quality and stability of their marriages since the 1970s. That is, many Middle Americans are now doubly disadvan-

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5. See Andrea J. Sedlak, Jane Mettenburg, Monica Basena, Ian Petta, Karla McPherson, Angela Greene, and Spencer Li, *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation and the Children's Bureau, January 2010, at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/natl_incid/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf (January 31, 2011).
 6. Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 38.
 7. See Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, March 1965.
 8. Quoting Samuel Preston, "Children and the Elderly: Divergent Paths for America's Dependents," *Demography*, Vol. 21 (1984), p. 451.

taged, both by their difficult family situation and by their relatively meager socioeconomic resources when it comes to their ability to compete in the marketplace, to make a difference in the public square, and to take their place in our nation's houses of worship and voluntary associations.

Second, the marginalization of marriage makes it more difficult for Middle Americans to realize the American dream. Children and adults who are not connected to an intact married family are significantly less likely to strive to succeed and to save. They're also more likely to fall into poverty, idleness, and downward mobility than their fellow citizens who are fortunate to be supported by an intact family. Moreover, the children of broken families are much less likely to go on and successfully form happy marriages and families of their own.

The nation must now turn its attention to reviewing and renewing the economic, legal, civic, and cultural conditions that sustain strong marriages and families for a broad swath of our citizenry.

Thus, for progressives, this retreat from marriage should be an issue of central concern insofar as it is a major cause of economic inequality and child poverty in the nation. A recent study finds that 41 percent of the growth in economic inequality from 1976 to 2000 can be attributed to the retreat from marriage.⁹ We also know from the work of Isabel Sawhill at the Brookings Institution that most of the post-1970s increase in child poverty can be attributed to this retreat from marriage.¹⁰

Conservatives should be concerned by this retreat because marriage is really the original Department of Health and Human Services. When marriage disappears, the state has to step in as both a provider to broken families and a protector of the community against young men who have not been socialized by their fathers. Moreover, insofar as con-

servatives are committed to the idea of equal opportunity, the retreat from marriage seriously undercuts the odds that children from unmarried homes can go on to have a go at the American dream.

These developments are particularly worrisome because they strike right at the heart of the American experiment in democracy, which has long been predicated on the ideals of equal opportunity, upward mobility, and ordered liberty for the broad swath of Middle America. If high school-educated Americans, who still constitute the majority of U.S. citizens and have long been a bulwark of conventional family life in the nation, cannot get and stay married, these ideals may stand in jeopardy, and so too may the American experiment.

This is why the nation must now turn its attention to reviewing and renewing the economic, legal, civic, and cultural conditions that sustain strong marriages and families for a broad swath of our citizenry. We cannot and should not simply turn the clock back, seeking to recreate the social and cultural conditions of some bygone era.

But if we seek to renew the fortunes of marriage in Middle America and to close the marriage gap between Middle and upscale America, we must pursue public policies that strengthen the employment opportunities of high school-educated Americans and cultural reforms that seek to reconnect marriage and parenthood for all Americans and efforts to strengthen religious and civic institutions that lend our lives meaning, purpose, and a measure of regard for our neighbors.

The alternative to taking economic, cultural, and civic steps like these is to accept that the U.S. is devolving to a separate and unequal family regime where the rich and the privileged enjoy strong and stable families and everyone else is consigned to increasingly unstable, unhappy, and unworkable families.

9. Molly A. Martin, "Family Infrastructure and Income Inequality in Families with Children," *Demography*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (August 2006), at <http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/demography/v043/43.3martin.html> (February 17, 2011)

10. Isabel Sawhill, "Families at Risk," in *Setting National Priorities: The 2000 Election and Beyond*, ed. Henry J. Aaron and Robert D. Reischauer (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

PAUL TAYLOR: When I started out as a newspaper reporter almost 40 years ago, I was at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and there was a legendary young editor there who made it into a very, very good paper. One of the first things he did was set up the Trends Desk, and as he said in his slow Southern drawl, “These are stories that don’t break; they ooze.”

Gene Roberts was the editor, and he had, as a young reporter for *The New York Times*, sort of cut his teeth in the late ’50s and ’60s covering the civil rights movement, which was a transformative story that both broke and oozed, if you will. It had big events like a *Brown v. Board of Education* or the Voting Rights Act or the March on Washington or the assassinations that drove a lot of coverage and enabled journalists to tell this transformative story that we changed our laws, we changed our hearts to some degree, and we changed our mores.

Forty years later, it seems to me that we have undergone as a society a transformation as powerful and significant as the civil rights movement, and it is the transformation that Brad talked about. The institution of marriage has been around not for centuries but for millennia in virtually every society—sometimes in slightly different forms, but it’s always been there—and arguably, if you read the scholars on this, there has been more change in the last 40 or 50 years in the institution of marriage, and therefore in the family structure, than at any time in human history.

Yet it hasn’t gotten—I speak now as a former journalist who cares a lot about what journalists should do and how they should tell the stories of important things that have happened—as much attention as I think it merits, in part because it doesn’t have those milestone events. You could argue, again from a strictly journalistic point of view, the debate—legal, constitutional, moral—over gay marriage has attracted a lot of attention in the last decade, and I would argue appropriately so, but the larger debate that Bradford’s research gets to about the institution itself and how it has changed has gotten too little attention.

The Pew Research Center has something called the Social and Demographic Trends Unit; we look at the interplay of economic and demographic

change. The signature research we do is public opinion survey research; we also do it on politics and other matters.

This particular report—there have been a series of them—is very much an effort to look at the trends that Brad’s report looked at, understand them, and try to hear from the public about them. We did a survey quite recently; we were in the field in October. We did a national survey of 2,691 peo-

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ple, a typical national survey, but it’s bigger than we usually do because we wanted to be able to analyze the views of different subgroups. We oversampled certain subgroups to make sure we could hear from the public: What does it know about these changes, how is it reacting to them, et cetera?

It’s a big report, and it covers an awful lot of dimensions. It’s interesting because the theme that we chose to emphasize more than any other was exactly the theme that Brad talked about this morning: There is a growing marriage gap in this country, and it is aligned with the growing socioeconomic gap. We can see that from economic census data, demographic census data, and we can see it from attitudinal data as well.

The only statement that Brad made—I find myself mentally underlining everything you said: yes, yes, yes—I think the phrase is that highly educated Americans are becoming more marriage-minded while others in the middle and lower end are becoming less marriage-minded. Based on my reading of our own data and of the demographic data, I would phrase that a little bit differently.

Frankly, I think marriage is losing, if you want to use an economic term, market share across all strata of American society—a little bit less among the more highly educated than among others, and therefore a gap has widened between those, but it’s not doing well anywhere. And to the extent that there’s a lower divorce rate, that’s correct; divorce in this country peaked about 20 years ago and has come down since

and has particularly come down among those at the upper end. I think that's probably the result of delayed marriage and non-marriage.

Divorce is very high among young adults, kids, teenagers. They marry young; what do they know about life? Fewer of those marriages are happening. The average age of first marriage in the space of just 40 years has gone up five years. Fifty years ago, 67 percent of adults in their twenties were married. Today, 26 percent of adults in their twenties are married.

In some ways, we don't know the end of that story, but we do know the beginning of that story, which is delayed marriage. It's very much associated with economic circumstances. We all know, particularly in the last few years, what the economy is like. They just don't feel ready for marriage; marriage has become the last thing in the transition to adulthood rather than the first thing.

What is interesting, and Brad's research points to this too, is that marriage does remain an aspiration and an ideal almost entirely across the board. We asked a battery of questions of all adults, whether married or not and whatever age, and here are some reasons that people get married. "How important a reason would you say this is to get married?" and we had love and companionship and children and financial security and one or two others.

Love was up there at the top. There are some scholars who suggest actually that love has been the death of marriage, but love is at the top and companionship not far behind. You work your way down and you get financial security. Whereas 96 percent will say love is a very important reason to get married, only about a third will say financial security is a very important reason to get married. This is true of people who are currently married and people who are not married.

Then you look at differences by socioeconomic status about how people answer that question, and the answer to financial security jumps out at you because it is those at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale—whether measured by educational attainment or economic circumstances—who are twice as likely as others to say economic security is a very important reason to get married. These are the folks least likely to be married and least likely to

qualify as an economic entity to get married, least likely to be able to attract a partner who has an economic qualification, and they place the highest bar.

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There is a kind of catch-22 where the attitudes, the expectations, and the realities are helping to drive this gap. There's almost a sort of poignancy in this. Again, marriage is not disappearing, but it is really losing its grip at the lower end of the scale. Not because people don't aspire to it; it's because they don't think they're qualified to get from here to there.

We asked a lot of questions of the public about whether they "approve/disapprove of these changes in American life," whether it's single parenthood, cohabitation, gay marriage, decline of marriage, etc. You find that in some, the public is sort of suspended between acceptance and unease. People see the changes around them. They know they're happening in their own families or in their own extended families, and it's difficult to come down with a thundering wag of the finger and say, "This is terrible." But most people don't think these changes are good. We gave three response categories: good for society, bad for society, doesn't make any difference. Very few get "good for society"; most get some mix of "bad for society" or "doesn't make much difference."

The one behavior that stands out as the behavior that society wags a finger at and says, "This is really bad," is single parenthood: 69 percent of all adults in our survey say single mothers having and raising children is bad for society, 4 percent say it's good, and the rest say it doesn't make any difference. This is true across all realms, including in the African-American society where this is the most pronounced: 72 percent of African-American kids are born out of wedlock. More African-Americans will say this is bad for society than whites or Hispanics.

In a lot of areas, you see attitudes aligning with experience; here's a case where experience and attitudes and aspirations are very much in conflict. But then there's a further wrinkle to the story. One of the

things we tried to do in this survey was look at people's definition of family. Obviously, through most of human history, marriage is the conduit to family. It's the beginning. Then the next generation marries, has children, and the family tree goes off in this and that direction. Obviously, with lower incidences of marriage, higher incidences of divorce, and more stepfamilies, it's gotten more complicated.

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We gave people seven or eight different units—family units or not; that was the question we posed to them. Here are different living arrangements; in your view, is this a family, or is it not a family? First we started with mother, father, and child, and 99 or 100 percent say of course that's a family, and you work your way down. Now, single mother and child, this is the one that the public thinks is very bad, but 86 percent will say yes, a single mother with child is a family. About six in 10 will say a same-sex couple with children is a family. If you remove children from that equation, just a cohabiting couple, whether heterosexual or homosexual, lower shares will say it's a family.

This is a question we weren't able to trend. Some of these questions are new, so I'm not able to say Americans' view of the family has become more expansive, but just based on this snapshot, it is expansive.

The other thing we can find is that, despite all the changes and despite the unease that Americans have with a lot of these changes, family has not been knocked off its pedestal. Family in all its forms, in 2010 as it has been presumably through all of our history and much of human history, is absolutely at the centerpiece of people's lives. You ask, "How important is family to you?" You measure it against other dimensions in your life, whether your friendships or career or anything else, and it's at the top of the list. It is the case that married adults will place it on an even higher pedestal than unmarried adults, but it's up there in a realm by itself.

We had some interesting findings on gender within marriage. There's also a tension in public opinion. The marriage of the '50s, the *Leave It to Beaver* family in our living memory, was itself a moment in time and evolution of a lot of different changes in marriage. That was the breadwinner father and homemaker mother model. If you put that model in a question and you put it alongside the egalitarian model where both spouses work and both spouses share responsibility for child-rearing and taking care of the house, the public is now with the more egalitarian model.

But if you then ask, as we did in this survey, in order to be a good husband, how important it is that a man can provide for his family, two-thirds say yes, it's very important; in order to be a good wife, how important it is for a woman to be able to provide for her family, one-third say yes. So there is an acceptance of the egalitarian model. There hasn't been a complete abandonment of the older model, and I think we see evidence that Brad talked about in our report that for men who cannot meet that bar of being a good provider, to the extent that we've had these changes in our economy that are particularly tough on men and men with lower skills and less education, you see everything reinforcing itself.

Let me end with a note on a question. We tried to get at the definitional question of family in different ways, because—just to pick up on the theme that Brad ended with—here we are at the beginning of the 21st century. During the 20th century, as a society, perhaps the most important thing we did on the

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domestic front, the most lasting thing we did was build up a big public safety net, and through most of human history the family has been the safety net. Now we look forward to the 21st century and say to ourselves, that public safety net, we may not be able to afford it. We will have fights for the next decades and more about how we chip away at that.

It will put more pressure, of course, on the family to resume or beef up the role that it has played through human history, but the family is changing. How are we going to do that, and who's going to take care of whom and in what circumstances? If that dad who was never particularly attached to the family and was in and out of the lives of the kids is now in his 60s or 70s, and Social Security or Medicare may not be as robust as it is now, who's going to take care of him?

We asked a question that said, suppose somebody—and by this stage of the questionnaire we knew the family constellation of all our respondents, so we tailored each question to the relatives that respondents had—had a serious problem and came to you either for financial help or caregiving, how obligated would you feel to help this person? Your parent, your grown child, your sibling, your

stepparent, half brother, and on down—we had eight or 10 categories. The only one everyone got was your best friend.

The responses form a fairly predictable hierarchy where parent and grown child are at the top and you work your way down through stepparents and siblings and half brothers, and at the bottom of the list is best friend. I don't know whether I was surprised or not, but it is a reminder even of fractured families, family in all of its networks, quasi-families—scholars are struggling to come up with terms to describe the various arrangements that we have.

Is this lip service? Would this really be the way people would behave? Who knows? No survey instrument is perfect, but it is an insight into the centrality of family, or at least the idea of family, and I would suspect that it isn't going away any time soon.