

*If we could first know where we are,
And whither we are tending,
We could better judge what to do,
And how to do it.*

Abraham Lincoln
Springfield, Illinois
June 17, 1858

Section I: Introduction

In the 19th century, the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville attributed the strength and prosperity of the American people to the “superiority of their women.” Singular praise indeed. As we begin the 21st century, America is as prosperous as it has ever been. There is a question however that begs asking: Is there still such a dynamic relationship between America and its women? And has that relationship been a reciprocal one?

This report documents the trends in well-being of American women in the 20th century in seven categories: demographics, health, family, education, economics, attitudes and religion. While women have made phenomenal strides forward in life-expectancy, economics, education, and in maternal health, the areas of personal well-being are cause for concern.

The human drama of birth, life, and death is far more than mere numbers. But step back. Consider the broad outlines and contours revealed by the trends reported in this study: Behind the data you can see an incredible mosaic of the lives of American women in the 20th century. Landmark events have reshaped American culture and society, and thus the lives of American women. Changes in the population reflect the effects of wars, waves of immigration, epidemics, advances in medical technology, economic booms and depressions. Then, in turn, these historic events have effected dramatic shifts in attitudes, values, and cultural norms.

In these fundamental paradigm shifts, we can see the results of forces that have been at work changing the landscape, altering forever what once was . . . into what is today.

At the intersection of these turbulent forces resides the societal institution that historian Christopher Lasch has called our “haven in a heartless world” – the American family. And, for many, home has been a fortress providing refuge against the relentless vicissitudes of history. But for others, home is no longer their castle: The strength of the American family has eroded seriously in the 20th century, particularly in the post-World War II period. Despite certain recent hopeful signs, there can be little doubt that a crisis is in the making if the trend in radical individualism continues.

An intrinsic component of our humanity lies in our social connectedness; the most fundamental expressions of this are the institutions of marriage and the family. But the trends in marital status and “living arrangements” data reveal that the cultural norms of the post-World War II period have significantly reshaped marriage and the role of family in America.

Decay, whether in the natural or the social realm, is a tenacious and merciless adversary. Equally dangerous is the invisible, paralyzing lassitude of ennui. Reclaiming the married two-parent family for the children of the 21st century will require a concerted sustained effort, or the forces of deconstruction and postmodernism will continue their ruinous onslaught.

If we hope to respond convincingly to this challenge, we must understand the forces that are shaping our society. As in all of history, citizens must navigate dangerous rapids of change. The stream of American popular culture is swirling with violence and death. Abrasive elements are slowly and relentlessly assaulting the character of American society wearing down and reshaping those features that buttress moral restraint and responsibility. It is by no means certain at the beginning of the 21st century whether virtue will flourish or whether decadence will overwhelm and prevail. It is clear, however, that for women and children to have a safe and healthy future, the forces of virtue will have to carry us forward.

The Past: Foundation of our Future

The question we must ask, in the face of the historical data, is whether the picture is one of overall progress, or whether on balance entropy is prevailing. Will we see a continuation of the boundless energy, amazing productivity, and endless possibilities that have grown from the fertile soil of liberty and moral virtue cultivated by earlier generations? Or, is a waning supply of moral capital leading to an increasingly more brittle, vulnerable society – a society that, having lost vitality and cohesion, is rushing onward to an uncertain future? If our society becomes like a building with a cracked foundation, it may, at best, gradually crumble, becoming a tired shadow of its former greatness; at worst, it may collapse dramatically under the onslaught of unanticipated challenges, of which history provides many examples.

Certainly data from the end of the century indicates that we are living longer and more comfortably, but just as surely with less and less connectedness, despite the technological advancements that afford us unparalleled opportunities for instant communication. At the beginning of the century young people were constrained to remain single by economic considerations and demographic circumstances. In contrast many of today’s singles – the growing multitude of unmarried persons not living with any related individual – have the economic resources to marry, but they lack other essential elements that make for strong marriages.

Some are scarred by their parents’ failure to sustain an enduring marriage; others, wounded by their own promiscuity and unable to imagine a happy shared life, lack the will to attempt a life-long commitment. Some think a family is in their future; they assume it will happen eventually . . . *someday*. However, many of today’s young people – during the period of life with the best odds of marriage and childbearing – are influenced by our materialistic culture to focus on career advancement and unencumbered lifestyles, thus ignoring their window of opportunity for establishing a family. Others, who desire marriage and children, are living in a culture that has been stripped of the social networks provided by extended family and community and are left adrift and lonely, simply unable to find a suitable mate.

One important cultural and social marker is the shift in the ratio of males to females – which historically has changed dramatically and sometimes quickly on a massive scale. Wars, natural disasters and epidemics kill hundreds of thousands in relatively short periods of time – for example, today’s culture is familiar with the pervasive demographic effects of the Baby Boom generation. But for a previous generation, the seminal event was the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918, that swept away 200,000 people in one month alone. This epidemic was unusual in its severity – both here in the United States and around the world – and in the fact that it took a larger than normal proportion of its victims from those in the prime of life, ages 20 to 40.

The effects of changes in the pace and character of family formation – the marriage rate, the divorce rate, the married and unmarried birthrate, cohabitation, and single motherhood – come more slowly, often taking one or more generations to play out. These effects, combined with changing roles for women in the economy and society at large, produce a picture of society as the 21st century begins, that is enormously different from the culture that prevailed 100 years before.

While advances in the practice of medicine brought down the maternal death rate in a phenomenally short period of time, the effects of certain other changes become evident only gradually over a long period. The Great Depression, followed by all-out mobilization for World War II, shook the nation like a series of earthquakes in slow motion, alternatively decreasing and increasing marriage, divorce, and child-bearing on a massive scale. It also lays the ground work for radical changes, both in cultural expectations and the legal and judicial framework of society, in the second half of the century. We are discovering that when the foundation shifts, the framework is weakened and, often, the walls soon tumble.

A Century of Progress. . . or Decline?

The trends of the 20th century are affecting marriage and child-bearing in four areas: (1) **potential** – war, demographic and other trends determine the male-female ratio and thus the presence or absence of possible mates; (2) **feasibility** – economic conditions, and the availability of advanced health care technology, affect the viability of choosing marriage; (3) **motivation** – cultural values and norms affect attitudes toward marriage; and (4) **desirability** – the value ascribed to marriage and child-bearing, as opposed to the pursuit of careers, leisure, or other activities that compete for time and resources determine whether marriage is a priority.

The picture that evolves as we examine the data is one of complex inter-relatedness. It is not possible to classify events simply as cause and effect: An outcome in one generation becomes a cause in the next. Thus marriage, or the lack thereof, may be an effect of economic conditions. Marriage then affects fertility. Then, in turn, the subsequent changes in population effect the labor supply and rate of economic growth in the next generation.

So, was it a century of progress? Certainly in the areas of health, education and job opportunities American women enjoyed tremendous opportunities and improvement. Life expectancy alone increased dramatically. The lowered risk of death during childbirth is nothing short of astonishing. Educational opportunities have expanded enormously. Job opportunities have increased, and equal pay for equal work is a near reality.

Still, what of quality of life? Are women doomed to a treadmill life of two jobs – career and homemaking – the “second shift” drudgery that mimics the toll taken on pioneer women who grew old before their time? To the loneliness of demographic singleness and the degradation of bar-hopping? To the betrayal of being usurped during middle age by a trophy wife? Women are living longer . . . but to what end? To spend many years in assisted-living with occasional visits from family and younger friends?

Connectedness has decreased markedly even among younger women. Having been affected by the loss and pain of divorce as children, the Baby Boomers did not marry to the degree that their parents did, and the aptly-named current generation, “Generation Why?” even less so – the percentage of singles has returned to the levels that existed in the late 19th century, a far less prosperous time when income levels were far lower and a much smaller percentage of men could afford to support a family.

What an irony: In an age of unparalleled economic prosperity and opportunity, a large percentage of women are not able to find a man willing to make the commitment of being a husband and the investment of being a father of longed-for children. Some women are choosing single motherhood . . . some cohabitation . . . still others resort to the cold embrace of brave-new-world technology.

Today, women prepare for childbirth by painting a nursery; in an earlier age they wrote heartwrenching goodbye letters to loved ones in case they did not survive childbirth. In the first half of this century, advances in medical science brought relief from this omnipresent specter of motherless children and widowed husbands. The scourge of maternal mortality has been reduced by *more than 90 percent*.

But sadly counteracting that wave of progress, there’s been a riptide of decline. Children today still face the stark reality of families torn asunder – not by death, but by divorce. A loss that some child psychologists tell us wounds more deeply than death. Since 1968, the ravages of divorce have severed more families **each and every year** than did maternal deaths in childbirth throughout the entire period from 1915 to 1998; although many point to no-fault divorce as the virus spreading this epidemic, the beginning of the rising tide of divorce predates that legal change. The law responded to, and then accelerated, a more elemental change in mores: So, too, then we must look to the culture we ourselves have created to fashion a cure.

Media Messages

The message from the media is a seductive current swirling around us – life is all about exploring, experimenting, excitement . . . being the perpetual adolescent. No strings, moving on, the thrill of the surf. So what if you get burned – you haven’t lived if you don’t have memories of some wild times. Forget about the scars – it’s the memories of those moments of joyous madness that make life real.

Ironically, another generation was looking for “the real thing.” Today, you “gotta keep it real.” But have we lost the navigational system that points the way to the “real deal”?

One thing remains consistent, throughout time and across the years of history: Our humanity, from somewhere deep inside of us, calls us toward the meaning, the authenticity, that lies in lasting relationships. Even though the price is life-time commitment and life-time obligation, the appeal of relationship calls us to shed our freedom and independence and put our hands on the rudder of responsibility.

Our humanity drives us to take up a life-long relationship of interdependence; then it requires that we put the other person's needs and happiness ahead of our own. It is not without justification that we speak of the "bonds" of love. Love and obligation are inseparable. The obligation to provide and care for a loved one can be the North Star that guides us through the ethical dilemmas of our contemporary "throw-away" culture.

To be bonded to others is the essence of family, of connectedness. It is the very premise of social order. Unrelatedness is the very antithesis of family and social order.

The expression "unrelated individual," though not a particularly felicitous one, is the term used by the Census Bureau to designate someone who does not live in a "family group." This does not necessarily mean they are living alone – although about 70 percent do – but simply that they do not live with anyone with whom they have a legal relationship. They may hold very dear the person or persons with whom they live, but they are not obligated to care for the needs of those people. No commitment binds them. For many, no shared history bonds them.

The last 40 years have seen the percentage of persons living as unrelated individuals increase from six to 16 percent of all persons. By 1999 only 66 percent of the population lived in a married couple family. At what point does this institution cease to have enough critical mass to provide the foundational structure and stability of the social order? At what point does the tide of unrelatedness – fed by waves of unrestrained, excitement-addicted, narcissistic individualism – rise so high that it floods the societal levy being maintained by the remnant who are grounded in the bonds of love and connectedness?

The High Ground: Justice and Virtue

We see now, as Lincoln admonished us, "where we are" and "whither we are tending." It has indeed been a century of progress; but that progress is threatened by advancing decay. It is instructive to see what the data show of the nearly 50 million unmarried women at the end of the 20th century. Of the total number of "unrelated" women, more than one out of five lived in poverty. Of those with school-age children under 18, more than one-third lived in poverty. By contrast, less than one out of twenty married-couple families lived below poverty level.

Thus, while the indicators show substantial improvement in well-being for women over the last half of the previous century, the deterioration in marriage and family has produced significant disparities. While indicators of positive well-being such as life expectancy, per capita income, education and home ownership have increased, so have indicators that are not indicative of well-being – such as divorce, out-of-wedlock births, poverty and incarceration.

Standing at the dawn of a new century, our nation is reaping unprecedented prosperity accompanied, ironically, by a lack of connectedness. We have enough wealth to ensure compassion and to pursue justice, but our lack of connectedness is withering both our capacity for compassion and our passion for justice.

We would do well to remember history – our own history to be sure, but also the chronicles of defunct civilizations. Our Founders read those histories, and they believed that only a society built on the sure foundation of virtue and braced by justice would endure. They echoed the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who asked: “Where is the man who owes nothing to the land in which he lives? He owes to it the most precious thing possessed by man, the morality of his actions and the love of virtue.”

We would do well to remember the words of admonition the prophet Amos leveled at the ancient Israelites when they, too, were a mighty and prosperous nation. They had “built houses of well-hewn stone” and “planted pleasant vineyards.” But in so doing they had also turned away from being a virtuous people and inflicted injustice on the poor. Amos told the Israelites they would not enjoy their homes and their vineyards because they had turned “justice into bitterness and cast righteousness down to the earth.”

Justice and Virtue . . . Does the past illumine for us how “better to judge what to do?” As the Israelites faced the decay and possible destruction of their prosperity, Amos issued a challenge that rings out across the centuries separating us: “*Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream . . .*”

There is much to learn from this booklet of trends affecting women. The data within this compilation is just a beginning. But one lesson is inescapable: The well-being of women in America is inextricably linked to the strengthening of the American family.