

Why good marriages really matter

WILLIAM RASPBERRY



President Bush's proposal to spend \$1.5 billion for the promotion of "healthy marriages" is, at one level, a matter of babies and bath water.

There's precious little the government can do to strengthen existing marriages or to encourage new ones, as the president surely knows. The only pragmatic purpose I can see for his idea is that it might please his supporters on the religious right — particularly if he yields to their pressure to define healthy marriages as traditional marriages. No gays or lesbians, thank you.

That is tired and tepid political bath water, and, not surprisingly, people who

fancy themselves more socially aware than the president are demanding that it be tossed out the door.

But wait: There's a baby in there that deserves more attention than some of us have been willing to pay.

The president's proposal may not be entirely serious, but the state of marriage in America is. And when marriage is in trouble, the society is in trouble.

Take, for instance, the sacrifices that are necessary to raise the kind of healthy, happy and competent children we want. These sacrifices are almost always unequal between husband and wife. They are tolerable only if marriage is accepted as a permanent arrangement.

Marriage has always been a way of tying fathers to their offspring. But we've come to believe that this is

no longer necessary because women (in economic terms, at least) no longer require the commitment of their children's fathers. When dads become superfluous, it becomes more difficult for men and boys to see useful social roles for themselves. Too often, young men become threats to the families and communities that might once have considered them assets.

This is particularly true in America's inner cities. The decline in marriage may have begun with the decline in the number of eligible (meaning employed) men. But it accelerated when we abandoned the notion of "illegitimacy" and, in effect, declared marriage irrelevant to families.

If low-income women often opt out of marrying the men available to them ("I can do bad by myself"), middle-income women often opt out

for the opposite reason: I can do just fine by myself. Even if there are children.

Some of the things lost when marriage declines are obvious. Others are more subtle — for example, the value to young couples of having two sets of parents on tap for emergency financial help and two distinct groups of people who can hear and pass on information about jobs or other opportunities.

Educators know that children from two-parent households tend to perform better, both because there are likely to be more assets at home and because there is less stress on the parents.

And of course there is the undeniable fact that the absence of a second income can move a family toward poverty.

About 10 years ago, the Annie E. Casey Foundation reported a study that com-

pared two groups of Americans — those who graduated from high school, reached age 20 and got married before having their first child and those who didn't. Only 8 percent of the children of the first group were living in poverty a few years later. For the children of those in the second group, the rate was nearly 10 times as high: 79 percent.

Marriage does matter, and I wish the president's proposal didn't treat it so cynically.

But the rest of us had better get serious about doing what we can to restore marriage: by celebration, by exhortation, by making the workplace more accommodating to marriage and by creating the jobs that can make marriage a realistic option.

WILLIAM RASPBERRY is a Washington Post columnist.

AIDS and social hypocrisy

By Bill Fletcher Jr.
SPECIAL TO THE POST

I have been wondering why so many attempts to stop the spread of HIV have failed, including here in the U.S.A. Clearly the insufficient resources committed to it are a large part of the problem, but that is only one part.

HIV/AIDS, specifically because it is largely transmitted through sexual contact, raises a series of problems that this society does not wish to address. While some forces on the political Right, as well as many people of good intention, believe that human beings can simply turn off their sexual impulses and "just say no" indefinitely, such a course of action bears no relationship to reality.

Human beings have very long lives, particularly when compared with the humanity of just 200 years ago. Human beings are marrying much later than even 100 years ago. This situation is presenting significant challenges to anyone who wishes to face the reality of the various means and opportunities for the transmission of an illness through sexual relations. What has also changed is that the reality of homosexuality is becoming more openly acknowledged, rather than being subject to idiotic games of denial.

U.S. society, and probably most others on this planet, is not prepared for this situation. As a result, people are dying in numbers that defy our ability to mentally absorb. Over the last year I have had the interesting opportunity to speak with teen-agers and young adults about many things, including HIV/AIDS.

What fascinates me is that when we do speak about HIV/AIDS, they are more likely to engage if I am real with them. In other words, they are more likely to want to exchange views and consider my point of view if I speak with them about sex. They are not interested in being spoken down to. Nor are they interested in being hit over the head with why premarital sex should be a taboo. They have not the least interest in listening to a judgmental discourse. They want to speak about what is happening among them and to them.

Yet, I notice that too many older adults, and particularly those people that have titles associated with their names, don't want to be real. We would rather ignore the open sexual hypocrisy of this country where we know that extra-marital affairs proliferate (and are often accepted); alternative life-styles are very common; television soap operas go beyond suggesting sexual situations; and television commercials openly appeal to lust.

When will we also awaken, stop playing games, and face the fact that simply because we fail to discuss sex with our children, does not mean that they themselves will not discuss sex, let alone participate. If we are going to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic we have to change our entire mindsets. Obviously we must demand that the Bush administration step away from its grandiose, yet hollow, rhetoric about HIV/AIDS and instead commit the same level of resources to fighting this catastrophe that it was prepared to commit to fighting a war of aggression against Iraq.

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Corporations owe slave descendants a debt

By Richard Barber
SPECIAL TO THE POST

Testimony of Richard Barber, president of US Reparations to the Federal Reserve on the merger of FleetBoston and Charlotte-based Bank of America on Jan. 14:

Subsequent to the acquisition of Summit Bank in New Jersey by the FleetBoston Financial Corporation, when their financial health and future independence was being questioned by Wall Street stock analysts, it appeared that this merged Fleet Bank simply could not get its "economic traction". In short, it seemed that the management and board of directors had lost their way. I recall that Michael Mayo, an analyst at Prudential Securities and a critic of Fleet's corporate governance, said that, and I quote, "if you had to pick a song to go with Fleet, it would be Bob Seger's 'We felt the lightning, and we waited on the thunder.'" "We felt the lightning, and we waited on

the thunder."

In October 2000, I, along with the president of the New Jersey State NAACP, met with Jack Collins, Vice Chairman of Summit Bank and tried to convince him that FleetBoston was not an appropriate suitor. We corresponded directly with Terrence Murray, Chairman & CEO of FleetBoston, and Joseph Semrod, CEO of Summit Bank and conveyed that same message. They collectively chose to look away and passed on the other side of the road.

I contend Madam Smith and panel members, that part of the reason that Fleet Bank never seemed to get productive "economic traction", may just be due to the historical weight of slavery and the baggage of slave

trade of its predecessor financial institutions. Maybe, just maybe, the possible presence of ghosts in their corporate headquarters from the skeletal bones of captured Africans who died in the belly of slave ships in the middle passage across the Atlantic Ocean en route to a horrible existence in slavery in the Americas. Maybe those ghosts may very well be from the slave ships financed by Providence Bank for John Brown, who founded Brown University with part of his slave trading wealth. Maybe those ghosts are trying to convey a message to FleetBoston's management, directors and investors to 'pay up' and set a new example and moral standard for the other American and European corporations that benefited from slave trading and the institution of slavery.

My plea to you madam chairperson, and members of this panel, and to Kenneth Lewis, the CEO of Bank of

America and his directors and investors, is to reflect long and seriously on Fleet Bank's history before you transfer the "historical baggage of slavery and slave trading" from Boston, Massachusetts to Charlotte, North Carolina, my native state. For on my journey from that tobacco farm near Trenton, North Carolina to Boston today, I enrolled in North Carolina A&T, earned a degree in physics and an R.O.T.C. commission in the U.S. Army. I participated in the sit-in movement in the sixties...

So madam chairperson, and members of this panel, I respectfully request that if you must approve the Bank of America and FleetBoston merger, please do so on a contingency basis; contingent on the successful resolution of the slave reparations complaints against FleetBoston. Please don't give me a second reason to go to Charlotte in September. For to do so, the

thunder of which Michael Mayo spoke and was waiting on, just may be the thunderous marching feet of community leaders and concerned citizens across the Bank of America Plaza in Charlotte.

I hope that as you reflect on my journey over the last 50 years, you understand that the real message that I am conveying to you today, is that a financially viable merger of Bank of America and FleetBoston, coupled with a truly committed and productive community partnership, will enable future travelers to live their lives with greater economic stability and greater social well-being. We seek a partnership so that investors from Wall Street to the main streets of urban, suburban and rural communities will truly reap tremendous economic benefits and an improved quality of life.

North Carolina native RICHARD BARBER is president of US Reparations.

Statistics on teen sexuality don't tell the whole story

DONNA BRITT



Why is it that when good news surfaces, bad news often lurks close behind? Why is it that what we "know" — about people, events, our own kids — is so often wrong?

Take the ever-unsettling issue of teen sex. Teenagers live in a world in which casual, unprotected, "what's-love-got-to-do-with-it?" sex is omnipresent on TV and radio, in movies and literature. So teens are having more high-risk sex than ever, right?

In fact, teenagers in every ethnic and economic group are having less sex. And

they're using more contraception.

So teen births are dropping across the nation. The statistical drop is most pronounced among those at highest risk: urban teenagers who are poor and African American.

Reading that felt good? Get over it.

These recent findings by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provide a deceptively reassuring backdrop for the new report "This Is My Reality — The Price of Sex: An Inside Look at Black Urban Youth Sexuality." Sponsored by Motivational Educational Entertainment Productions (MEE) of Philadelphia, the report is based on discussions in 40 focus groups in 10 cities in which low-income black

youth shared their unvarnished views about sex, relationships, marriage, pregnancy and parenthood.

Much that these young people (ages 16 through 20) said was sobering. Many see sex as a transaction in which trust is minimal or nonexistent. The skewed way in which many urban teens view relationships contributes to their alarming HIV rates (half of victims ages 25 and younger are black). Most said adults — particularly parents — contribute to the problem of early sex and pregnancy.

Sad stuff. But perhaps you're a semi-sheltered suburbanite. Maybe you're a parent who feels unaffected by the sexual attitudes of this isolated, little-heard-from group of teens.

But in modern America,

where urban-based hip-hop culture dominates music, fashion, dance and, increasingly, movies and TV, these kids are trendsetters. What they feel, think and do could soon play out in a middle school — or a Pottery Barn-decorated bedroom — near you.

In 1995, MEE President Ivan Juzang reported to the federal government that "marijuana was again becoming a big phenomenon," Juzang recalls. "And everyone said, 'No, drug use is going down.' They were measuring [usage] in the suburbs. ...Now there's this big, \$2 billion anti-drug campaign."

In our spillover world, "risky behaviors of city kids often set the trend," explains Juzang. "You'll see the same behaviors copied in the larg-

er communities."

Sarah Brown of the District-based National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy says the "less sex, more contraception" trend results from increased awareness of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, programs that target teen pregnancy and increased attention to abstinence as a preventive.

"There's been a change in the conversation," Brown says. Yet the dramatic drop in teen births — the rate of black teens ages 15 to 17 having babies decreased 50 percent in the past decade — doesn't change her most lamentable statistic: "The U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world. By far."

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