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PUBLIC DISINVESTMENT IN CHILDREN: THE HIDDEN STORY OF PRIVATE ABANDONMENT

Public officials are taken to task in the fifth annual California Children's Budget 1997-98, released this week, for quietly cutting children's programs from 1989 to the present fiscal year. But the author here confesses: Public budgets do not tell the whole story. At least as important are the decisions of private individuals and their commitment to children. Do not believe for an instant that a "village" in California can raise a child. What village?

It takes a family, not an army of social workers. Social conservatives are right about that. Count me among those certain our parents' values were constricted and irrational, who has learned the hard way. As Mark Twain's cliché goes, "When I was 16, I knew my Dad was an idiot, but it is amazing how much he learned over the next 6 or 7 years."

Here is what one child advocate has learned: Nothing else matters unless people who have no business having children stop doing it. I am not suggesting abortion; if we are mature, that choice need not arise. But short of that, I am tired of arguing over the mechanics. It is time to begin with an apparently revolutionary principle to the "X" generation and their parents: The child comes first, not you.

At the risk of sounding like a fuddy-duddy: wait; get married; save; make a commitment. That's not asking too much. But most of our children are not even born intentionally. We live in a culture whose most popular television show (Seinfeld) portrays nebbish friend George, upon learning he may have impregnated a woman, reacting in delight: "Hey, my boys can swim!"

Now I am not Dan Quayle, and I understand that George is not a real person. But if I'm forced to choose between Mr. Quayle's message to Murphy Brown and Murphy's liberal retort about insulting single moms and all the rest of the claptrap, I'll swallow hard, check my spelling, and choose Dan's camp.

The facts are in. Clinton's first campaign was famous for its phrase, "It's the economy, stupid." Now, "it's unwed moms and abandoning dads, stupid." The median income of single mothers with children is in the \$7,000-\$11,000 range. The median income of married couples with children is more than four times this range -- above \$40,000; this extraordinary disparity holds true for all ethnic groups. Single parenthood is not economic, especially in a mobile, high-rent state like California. It generally means poverty. And it is not charming barefoot-boy-in-the-street-rolling-a-hoop poverty. It is watch-parent-buzz-around-on-cocaine-or-meth poverty. It is eat-dog-food poverty. It is child-prostitution-poverty -- for too many.

Where are the fathers? If one is lay blame, my gender gets three-fourths of it. Of the 2.4 million absent California biological dads not living with their families who are tracked by family support agencies, the total amount paid per month to their 4.5 million children averages \$16.80 per month per child. Read that number again.

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The California Children's Budget 1997-98 created a new measure of this dynamic, called the "Individual Commitment to Children Index." It counts married births and percentage of absent dads who pay any child support for their issue. The number should read 200, for 100% of each. It was at 90.7 in 1990; now it's at 79.4. Over 60% of all African-American births are unwed, but the only one willing to talk about it is Louis Farrakahn.

Although some liberals have long sought to exempt the poor from the obligations all of us should have to our children, the majority has temporarily swerved to the opposite extreme and now is so angry they are anxious for class warfare. Certainly the TV talk shows have fed this outrage, with a parade of social misfits announcing their right to professional motherhood at public expense, and males proud about their macho ability to "nail a thousand broads." I suspect some of these folk are playing the heavies just to get on television, but that doesn't matter; people believe they represent broad groups. Most liberals, bless their hearts, want to argue the facts -- that teen pregnancies are not that high; only 2% of welfare moms are unwed teens (granted); or that the poor work hard when given a chance (true); or that corporate welfare overwhelms public aid to families (even more true). But the fact is, unwed births and child support are a problem and the poor are not exempt from their obligations to their progeny.

If we truly targeted selfish adults, we wouldn't have the pogrom our impoverished children now face. And that is what they now confront. Almost 700,000 welfare parents must find jobs within the next two years. The optimistic estimate projects 380,000 new jobs in 1999, and 300,000 in 1999. And our welfare parents are not searching in a vacuum; they must compete with 1.6 million others, including high school and college graduates. The jobs are not there for more than 10-20% of them. In this game of musical chairs, over one million children will be left standing in the streets. A family of mom and two kids must survive with total monthly income (including food stamps) well below \$500 per month -- for many it will be below \$200 per month. Try paying rent, utilities and buying food on that.

Instead of taking on the adults who have created the problem, we have now decided on the disincentive: the deprivation of necessities for over a million children. This problem would not exist with an ethic that children come first. Even the most hard-hearted would have trouble denying help to people who tried, but suffered misfortune, layoff, disease, divorce, or accident. It is hard to know who to blame, the liberals who are in terminal denial, or the conservatives who lack the courage to face what they really object to -- irresponsible reproductive decisions by adults, preferring instead to pick on politically weak children.

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