



THE MARRIAGE BONUS

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Somewhere Dan Quayle must be smiling. In 1992 the vice president provoked headlines when he mentioned a famous sitcom by name. "It doesn't help matters," he said, "when prime time TV has Murphy Brown -- a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman -- mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another 'lifestyle choice.'" In wake of that comment Mr. Quayle was alternately ridiculed and savaged. As Joe Lieberman is learning today, defending Mom and apple pie isn't as easy as it sounds.

Just ask Matt Daniels, founder of the Alliance for Marriage. Clearly the numbers are on his side. The Alliance's own Wirthlin survey, released on Wednesday, showed that Americans list strengthening families as more important than creating jobs or cleaning up the environment. Nearly six out of 10 Americans also say that the family is not strong today. And the figures cut across all political lines, with Republicans, Democrats and independents showing roughly the same percentages. And yet someone who makes a point of sticking up for traditional marriage will soon be labeled as "controversial." Why?

Partly it's because a real defense of marriage starts from the premise that, to borrow Mr. Quayle's phrase, it ought not to be regarded simply as a "lifestyle choice." In fact, marriage is a contract, between society and a couple no less than between a man and a woman.

That's where the hard part comes in. Because respect for the institution of marriage means not elevating other relationships to the same level. In other words, it means not extending to cohabiting couples the same rights and benefits as married couples. It means a welfare policy that doesn't make dads expendable. It means rethinking no-fault divorce. And it means recognizing, above all, that when marriages break up, children suffer and society pays.

That doesn't mean demonizing people who don't fit in. Matt Daniels himself grew up in Spanish Harlem to a single mom on welfare. And he has gathered around him an impressive and diverse board, from Walter Fauntroy, who organized the March on Washington for Martin Luther King, Jr., to the leadership of two of the largest African-American denominations in the United States. While they may disagree on specific policies, all recognize a hard truth: that the real road to happiness lies not in the direct pursuit of personal fulfillment but in love of, compromise with and commitment to another.

As Maggie Gallagher and Linda Waite argue in their forthcoming book, "The Case for Marriage," marriage works better than the alternatives because people are willing to invest more in the relationship -- morally, emotionally, financially -- when they are sure of the lifetime commitment. Indeed, their book is not so much a moral defense of marriage as a social defense, with impressive evidence showing that married people are healthier, make more money and have better sex than those in other relationships.

Maybe that's why Ward and June Cleaver always looked so much happier than Murphy Brown.