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## Beyond the 'M' Word: The Tangled Web of Politics and Marriage

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### Abstract

Marriage entered presidential politics for the first time as farce: Dan Quayle's June 1992 attack on the television character "Murphy Brown" for having a child while unmarried. In the wake of the Los Angeles riots, the then-vice president addressed the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco. "The lawless social anarchy which we saw," he argued, "is directly related to the breakdown of family structure." The poverty at the root of the disorders was a "poverty of morals." At the very end of speech, he denounced "Murphy Brown" and her Hollywood creators for "mocking fatherhood," glamorizing single motherhood, and thereby encouraging family disintegration among the poor. The attack on a popular television show launched a media frenzy and a torrent of late night talk-show jokes.

# Beyond the 'M' Word

*The Tangled Web of Politics and Marriage*

**Arlene Skolnick**

**M**ARRIAGE ENTERED presidential politics for the first time in 1992, when Dan Quayle as vice president attacked on the television character "Murphy Brown" for having a child while unmarried. In the weeks of the Los Angeles riots, the vice president addressed the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco. "The lawless moral anarchy which we now see is directly related to the breakdown of family structure. The poverty at the root of the disorders was a poverty of morals." At the very end of speech, he denounced "Murphy Brown" and her Hollywood creators for "mocking fatherhood," glorifying single motherhood, and thereby encouraging family disintegration among the poor. The attack on a popular television show launched a media frenzy and a torrent of late night talk-show jokes.

It's hard to believe now, but the Quayle attack and Pat Buchanan's declaration of cultural war at the Republican National Convention later that summer served to bury the hard-line version of "family values" as a political strategy. A chastened Quayle denied that he had ever criticized single mothers. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton captured the national mood with a pluralistic vision of "an America that includes every family. Every multi-racial family and every extended family. Every two-parent family, every single-parent family, every foster family."

Yet the Murphy Brown episode turned out to be merely the mislaid opening shot in a real political/cultural war. Clinton had barely settled into the White House when a barrage of op eds, articles, books, and talk show appearances argued that, as Barbara D'Amico Wickelmaier put it in the *Atheistic Monthly*, "Dan Quayle Was Right," after all, the rise of "illegitimacy" and divorce would have dire consequences for the nation's children and for all the rest of us. Ever since then, marital status and family structure have remained major themes in political rhetoric and government policy.

Though conservatives led and funded the new conservative, centrist Democrats and even some liberals inside and outside the Clinton administration joined up. No more was heard about "all our families" no matter what their form. Instead, Clinton advisers hailed the two-parent family as the "best anti-poverty program." In the media, pundits of all political hues warned that single parenthood had become the predominant threat to the country because it was the root cause of all the rest: poverty, crime, drugs, juvenile violence, and failing schools—what Joe Klein called "a causating buffet of social ills."

Since the early 1990s, then, marriage has been a major combat zone in the culture wars, at the center of debates over poverty, welfare, sexuality, divorce, race, gender, and gay rights. At first, the focus was on welfare as the breeder of crime and inner-city pathology. But the end of welfare as we know it in 1996 did not end the marriage crusade. Government at all levels became involved in a range of marriage-promotion efforts—high school courses on the benefits of marriage, premarital counseling, bonuses for post couples who agree to marry, cohabitation, marriage, among many others. Just this past February, with little fanfare, Congress finally reauthorized welfare reform. Along with numerous cuts to social net programs such as food stamps, the bill provides \$750 million over five years to promote "healthy marriage" and "responsible fatherhood."

In addition, a self-designated "marriage movement" began in the 1990s, a broad crusade to "arrest America's moral decay" by resanctifying marriage, restoring traditional fa-





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