TOWARD ECONOMIC MORALITY IN PUBLIC POLICY DECISION MAKING ABOUT MEN IN FAMILY LIFE

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I am currently writing a chapter for a book sponsored by the National Fatherhood Forum. This short presentation is a condensation of that chapter. In the chapter version presentation, I spend several pages at this point discussing topics that are probably fairly common and old-hat to this group. These include the large scale change from AFDC to TANF and the problems with means testing for welfare assistance and other public decisions such that have created some economic disincentives with regard to fathers and family life.

I also touch on child support enforcement. These policies provide state and federal incentives for paternity establishment, court mandated child support, and collecting owed child support from the infamous ‘dead-beat dads.’ Of course, the argument is always raised that this policy has the unintended effect of driving men underground and creating yet another barrier for them to become involved in family life… the word is out amongst young men that they will be pursued.

Finally, federal policy initiatives have included some fatherhood programs (Carlson & McLanahan 2003). These programs are typified by demonstration efforts to bring men back into family life and strengthen fathers’ connections with his family members. Most of the research about these programs is difficult to interpret and the
programs are complicated in application. The *Fragile Families Project* has demonstrated that one of the most important elements in dealing with young fathers is timing. Starting early at the time of birth of the first child may be a key to successful fatherhood programming.

While these are all important issues, in my remaining time, I would like us to step back and take a more wide-screen view of public policy and men in families. When I teach classes about inner family life or about public policies that effect families generally, I suggest that what happens in inner family life derives directly from a family’s collective sense of ideology. In other words, the ideological core of family life directs much of what happens during the daily prosaic and quotidian of living. The way to tell what people really believe in, value, and subscribe to is follow the resources. In addition, the same principle applies to public policy. By examining how and what we spend money on at the state and federal level, we can deduce the nature of our core ideology position.

Since the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, we have seen the continued rise of federal and state policies and federal spending that respond to personal and familial issues, and in particular, to the needs and problems surrounding men in and out of family life. An emerging political theme for much of the 20th Century has been a clear recognition that investing in men benefits not only the male and the economy directly—but also their families indirectly. Additionally, we have come to realize that the investment in both men and women as parents is an investment in a common good. That is particularly true of those disadvantaged parents who live in economically difficult situations.
Therefore, a primary theme of this presentation is that effective federal family policy that focuses on men, and particularly fathers, is more powerful when those policies reflect a political ideology that acknowledges the need for both economic opportunity and a strong sense of communal moral investment.

Glen Palm argued that wars take men away from families and weaken family life. I would like to expand on that point and argue that a century of wars and the public policies that have attended those wars have had a dramatic effect on men in family life, public policy initiatives, and on the general well-being of our culture.

Since the 1930s there have been continuous efforts by the federal government to intervene in the lives of men and women. We frequently hear that most social programming is designed with women in mind. However, I would argue that most of the larger public policy decisions by the federal government have not focused on women, but have been responses to men’s problems and indirectly to the problems of men in family life. By tracing expenditures and resource allocation, we can see that a predominate ideological theme for nearly 100 years has been to invest in the well-being of our society by responding to the problems and choices of men.

First, in the 1930s, the programs delivered by FDR were designed to address directly the joblessness created by the Great Depression, and primarily targeted men at work. These policies and programs were primarily centered on the working male, the father attempting to feed his family, and male transitioning from an antiquated agricultural economic to an industrial system. These programs such as the WPA and the Civilian Conservation Corps, hired men like my grandfather. Ralph Day was hired as a WPA supervisor in 1937 to build a school and gymnasium in the small town of
Bluejacket Oklahoma. With the allocated money, our family survived those desperate years. The money not only built a school that is still in use 70 years later, but employed numerous other men who were able to feed their families and regain a sense of dignity and community investment.

World War II followed, during which the government drafted, trained, and employed vast numbers of men and women in the military and in war related industry. Of course the war itself was not a program initiated by the government for the benefit of men in family life, but the war and its subsequent public policy initiatives were very instrumental in shaping this nation for the last 60 years. In 1945, Truman devised perhaps one of the most significant men/father/family social programs ever implemented: the G.I. bill. This initiative enabled my father and millions like him to participate in a smoother transition from participating in war to engaging in peace.

Again, this program contained the two key elements of an excellent public policy. First, it was economically essential. Millions of soldiers and sailors required assistance as they re-entered family life. And just as importantly, the G.I. Bill was based on a sense of communal moral value. That is, the initiative provided opportunities that built and enhanced communities in the form of affordable housing, access to education, and loans for small business initiatives.

Another important feature of this era was the mandatory draft that lasted through the Korean Conflict and, with a short hiatus, into and past the Vietnam Era. For decades the military provided a viable option for young men and indeed a mandatory life course track for many. This option focused on national defense but also was framed as a practical and useful trajectory into responsible and productive manhood (or in some cases
womanhood). Again, this policy was both economically and communal values based. For example, the military option was frequently used by courts as an alternative to prison for much of the 20th Century. Those who could not or were not able to attend university could obtain training in a basic occupation. This program worked because it was based on the principle of economic benefit and were also directed in part by a larger sense of communal contribution. The military created and generated a sense of community protection, well-being, personal responsibility, and taught democratic/patriotic values while building job skills and educational opportunities.

In like manner, during and following Vietnam, within the timeframe of the Kennedy and Johnson Era, many of the great society programs were directed at jobs and work programs for inner city youth –especially disadvantaged males. These programs contained a message of hope and conveyed a sense of future. In like manner, during the Nixon-Ford years there were several initiatives that provided vast sums of money that subsidized education, created a continuance of the G.I. Bill, of housing and food assistance for poorer families, and jobs programs that were supported by the Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA).

However, during the Reagan, Clinton, and George H. Bush years, our attention shifted; a number of societal factors dismantled the time tested approaches that once had led to productive adulthood. Many of the young men and women transitioning from adolescence began to adopt a counter-culture centering on drug and criminal behavior. In addition, our culture decided that we would decrease our expenditures on military service, decrease our subsidy for accessible education, and create masses of temporary, low paying jobs that really had no future. In the beginning, the numbers of young people
that these events impacted was relatively small. However, that has changed. Today’s young men (in particular) have fewer and fewer avenues to economic success and are turning to entrepreneurial crime. A primary feature of the nation’s response to this high risk, hard edged, but potentially lucrative counter-culture is the dramatic increase in arrest, imprisonment, and long term incarceration. This policy, once again, targets primarily younger men many of whom are or will be fathers. Incarceration in many segments of our community is so prevalent that it has replaced the traditional role of the apprenticeship model of just two decades ago. We have responded to this problem by declaring another war—the War on Crime. Our response includes longer prison sentences, fixed penalties in which the discretion of judges is limited, decreased programming for rehabilitation, and decreased patience with second or third offenders.

Bottom line: As a nation we have become deeply invested in crimes committed by young men. There is, however, a serious problem with our response—and that response reflects, I am afraid, our core ideological values. Our response to this new war is economically based and has no sense of communal moral value attached to it. We are attempting to buy our way through this crisis by building more and larger prisons, incarcerating as many offenders as possible, and dramatically decreasing rehabilitative programming that would enhance the community.

To perhaps over-dramatize the point, during the last 70 years we have passed from the War on the Great Depression to the War on Japan/Germany, to the War on Poverty, and then to the War on Drugs and Crime, and now to the War on Terrorism. We are approaching nearly a century of War. The primary difference in our response to all of our wars prior to the mid-1980s was that our response—our ideological orientation was
not based solely on the pragmatics of flaming economic individualism. Each of the Wars prior to the War on Crime contained elements of both economic advantage (with the promotion of individual pragmatism), plus a clear sense of moralistic communal power. Let’s examine what that means.

Daniel Elazar (1984) has suggested that three political cultures have dominated U.S. politics for the last 75 years. First, Elazar refers to an individualistic political culture. This concept embraces a fairly utilitarian, yet a libertarian stance toward the government. An individualistic state or federal government culture promotes the idea that the role of government is to respond to public economic demands while facilitating common functions such as military strength, the building of roads, and the fostering of economic advantage through international trade.

Typically an individualistic point of view emphasizes private and public economic concerns over or even at the expense of public concerns of the welfare of individuals. The individualistic approach would promote the notion that personal problems (such as unemployment, health issues, and personal economic well-being) should be handled by individuals, community based organizations, and that government should have limited involvement in individual or community interventions.

This approach primarily focuses on economic development as its centerpiece. The expansion of governmental social programming is generally viewed as unsavory but occasionally necessary. Therefore, according to this view issues such as family and individual well-being should be left to individuals and private non-governmental entities.

The second type of political orientation described by Elazar is a traditionalistic political culture. In this view, government is seen as a rather paternalistic and elitist
organization and those subscribing to this view attempt to maintain a hierarchical order managed by those at the top of the political food-chain. Those without a specific calling in this elite hierarchy are expected to remain relatively silent and compliant. Leaders are expected to play a custodial role not a role based on initiating or creating social intervention or on a general concern for the welfare of hoi polloi. The aim of this culture is not focused on a response to the common good but rather to serve the interests of the entitled elite.

Last, Elazar proposes that there exists a kind of *communal moral values culture*. By moralistic, he is not describing religious fundamentalism, but instead, is describing those who espouse the idea that government has a direct and central responsibility to promote the general welfare. Additionally, he would argue that those subscribing to this orientation would want the government to assert an active agenda that is committed to the use of *communal power*. Communal power, according this viewpoint, constrains individualism, enhances public welfare, and views public problems as a matter of general concern and assumes that the community, in general, has a moral responsibility to respond.

During the last 30 years we have struggled as a nation between embracing a philosophy of rampant flaming pragmatic economic individualism mixed with elitist traditionalism with an occasional foray into moralistic community building. This struggle is clearly present in how collectively we think of families, men in families, and men and women who will be parents. From Carter to G.W. Bush, recent presidential administrations have increasingly had to deal with the issues of family life, gender, marriage, and fertility (i.e. abortion). Clinton with the assistance of Vice President Gore
even went so far as to initiate a National Fatherhood Initiative. We also frequently see public policy rhetoric that sounds, on the surface like a communal moralistic stance when in fact, it is merely flabby rhetoric that is meant to disguise elitist and/or flaming pragmatist intentions and actions.

Still, there are a growing number of stakeholders, public policy makers, and social scientists who have discovered that community investments in family life go hand-in-hand with strong economic well-being and do not have to be at odds with one another. Public policy doesn’t have to bifurcate. Instead, the most powerful public policy efforts of the past have demonstrated that investment in the fathers has greater results when it is both economically sound and morally responsible.

Another principle we have learned in the last 30 years is that weak families, especially those in which fathers are less involved, promote larger government. Let me give you two statements by presidents at the opposite ends of the political spectrum but who offered similar rhetoric with regard to families. The first is from Jimmy Carter: “There can be no more urgent priority for the next administration than to see that every decision our government makes is designed to honor, support, and strengthen the American family”. He went on to proclaim that “…government ought to do everything it can to strengthen the American family because weak families mean more government” (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978, p. 1012).

In the same tone hear the words of G.W. Bush:

The President is determined to make committed, responsible fatherhood a national priority...the presence of two committed, involved parents contributes directly to better school performance, reduced substance abuse, less crime and delinquency, fewer
emotional and other behavioral problems, less risk of abuse or neglect, and lower risk of teen suicide. The research is clear: fathers factor significantly in the lives of children. There is simply no substitute for the love, involvement, and commitment of a responsible father” (Executive Office of the President, 2001).

These statements may just be vacuous pronouncements, but they are typical examples of statements used in countless stump speeches by a host of politicians during the last 30 years. They illuminate the idea that intervening in family life is critical to a strong nation. We have learned the difficult lesson that when families (and the men who are an integral part of family life) have structural, economic, and interpersonal struggles—it is and always will be government who will be called upon to pick up the pieces.

I wish to provide an example of how we are currently failing to grasp the notion of economic moral responsibility. The context for this conference is that there is or should be a strong connection between father involvement and early child well-being. However, frequently we overlook one of the most significant reasons why men in the lower socio-economic ranks do not or cannot actively participate in the lives of their families. In many recent data collection efforts, including my own, it has become remarkably clear that a primary reason for decreased father involvement for poorer families is participation in crime and the prison terms that result. This year more than one-quarter of the children in the U.S. live without a father in the home. When we think of a ‘fatherless home’ we usually think of divorce, death, or military separation.

However, consider the startling fact that in the U.S. it is estimated that 1.5 million children have at least one parent in prison: in 94 percent of these cases the prisoner is the
father (Petersilia 2003). Additionally, each year about 600,000-700,000 men are released from prison and many will reconnect (or attempt to reconnect) with spouses, former spouses, and children (Travis & Wahl 2005).

Never before U.S. history have so many individuals (fathers in particular) been convicted and imprisoned. One of the unanticipated results of the ‘war-on-crime’ and recent mandatory (or determinate) sentencing practices is the sheer numbers of men (and women) who have been arrested and detained in prison (Arditti & McClintock, 2001). In turn, these high arrest rates have fueled the dramatic jump in the numbers of men who are then released from prisons and return to family life. The Department of Justice (DOJ) estimates that 95 percent of the 2 million prisoners currently incarcerated will eventually be released and return to their families and former communities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002). According to the DOJ about 1,700 are released each day and most seek out what remains of their shattered family life.

This phenomenon of ‘mass imprisonment’ is one of the most startling changes in U.S. culture over the last 25 years (Tonry & Petersilia 1999; Pattillio, Weiman, & Western, 2004). Between 1920 and 1975, the general prison population (both state and federal) represented around .10 of 1 percent of the general population. However, since 1975 that percentage has risen substantially every year. That percentage now is estimated to be near .70 of 1 percent of the population—a 700 percent rise in the last 50 years and a 400 percent rise over the last twenty-five years alone (Beck, Karberg, & Harrison 2002). Of course, most (90 percent) prison inmates are male, and a very high percentage of those are African-American. It is estimated that the current prison population of African Americans is seven times that of whites in prison. Shockingly, it is projected that 30
percent of black non-college men will eventually find their way into prison at some point in their lives (Western & Pettit 2002). In Utah, the cost of housing one prisoner in a minimum security prison is about $27,000 per year. As one prison guard quipped to me a few months ago, “With the amount we spend on these bums, we could send them all to Stanford.”

So, what should our ‘public policy’ stance be for these ‘bums’? During the 1930s, we decided to put the bums to work and help contribute to the infrastructure of every small Bluejacket like community in the nation. On the one hand, the research shows that when men connect with families they are less likely to be re-arrested and therefore, less likely to cost taxpayer money, more likely to get a productive job, and become a contributor rather than a detractor in the community. On the other hand, as he returns from prison he brings diseases, an attitude of prisionalization, bad friends, bad habits, and a severely decreased capacity for productive living. How is this good public policy? How does this foster, for example, either economic opportunity or communal morality?

Perhaps we are entering an era in which society as a whole must rediscover that investment in young men and women is not just economically advantageous, but a moral responsibility. We have a moral duty to intervene in the lives of young people so they continue to build and strengthen what has gone before them. Simply buying our way out of this social mess we are in by arresting and imprisoning vast numbers of these young offenders is probably not in our collective best interest. The economic pragmatic individualistic model nor the approach political elitism will work with this problem. In fact, the approach we are using today does not represent good pragmatic economic
thinking. Our investment of billions of dollars to imprison young offenders results in a 70 percent re-arrest rate within three years.

I suggest three points summation. First, public policy models in the past that have resulted in dramatic success have been economically responsible and, at the same time, have built communal moral responsibility. Second, the War on Crime and Drugs is a social mess. The resource consumption rate of this war is approaching a crisis situation. Third, our response to this crisis is neither economically sound and certainly has practically no communal moral value attached to it. As we think about the future and what types of public policy initiatives we should/could/or will implement to turn this situation around, may I suggest some guidelines:

First, as we develop public policy it is becoming increasing clear that those policies will be more likely to succeed if they are both economically sound and contain a strong element of communal moral value. If the policy seeks only to promote the pragmatic, economically based, individualistic culture we will fail. That means that good policy must invite individuals to participate in the building of community.

Second, we must continue to believe that young men and women on the margin are or can become valued members of the larger society. One of the unintended messages I sometimes hear from current research about families on the margin is that many of our young men live lives of hopelessness and express feelings of being entrapped in a system from which there is no escape. Any effective public policy for our young people needs to take a page from the past. The Wars on the Great Depression, Japan, and Poverty were messages of hope, renewal, and survival. The War on Crime, on the other hand, spawns a sense of hopelessness—fear—elitism—and fatalism.
Third, rather than continuing to carry out mass incarceration, I would encourage us to seriously rethink the proposals of a decade ago that recommended some form of mandatory youth programming for both men and women that strengthen the sense of community commitment, prepare young people for productive economic life, and perhaps nurture them toward the task of becoming a responsible parent.

Fourth, as an additional alternative to a policy of mass imprisonment for young offenders, we may want to consider creating something akin to the French Foreign Legion. This week the Army announced that its recruitment numbers were as much as 40% off of projection. I would suggest we think again about the option of military service for young offenders. Perhaps these could be really nasty “Dirty Dozen Units” who build bridges, dig wells in drought stricken areas of the world, and provide relief during tragic events like the recent tsunami in Asia. What if we had an army of young men and women—who were not in prison consuming $25,000-$30,000 per year but instead were a part of something useful and productive? Let them turn their anger and rage into service and work.

Finally, to enhance the practicality of the previous suggestions, we need to continue pushing for strong economic policies that have a communal morality to them. We need to find ways for young people—most of them soon to be fathers and mothers—to find decent jobs that transcend the McJobs currently available. The research is pretty clear that when there are economic possibilities, people will work, spend money, become more connected to family life, and generate positive community life.

In sum, as we cope with social problems that involve fathers or men who will soon be fathers, it is to our collective advantage to take a moral and economic approach.
If we continue to primarily focus on the flaming individualistic approach where a moral communal emphasis is absent, we will have ever decreasing success in convincing a young man that becoming a responsible father is worth his effort.