HALFWAY THROUGH HIS thousand-day presidency, John F. Kennedy was exasperated. With the Cold War suddenly turning hot, the Soviet threat had never seemed more ominous. Expecting the worst at any moment (including a thermonuclear World War III), Kennedy desperately wanted unity at home. But that was not to be. Negroes (as they were called then) were demanding racial justice, with school desegregation a top priority. As southern streets filled with civil rights protesters and the National Guard was summoned to keep order, Kennedy complained bitterly behind closed doors to a black adviser, Louis Martin, “Negroes are getting ideas they didn’t have before. Where are they getting them?” Martin shouted, “From you! You’re lifting the horizons of Negroes.”

Martin reminded Kennedy of his Inaugural Address, with such stirring phrases as, “My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what Americans can do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.” Though Kennedy had uttered these words in the context of the Cold War, blacks took their meaning to heart and decided that freedom began at home.

At the turn of a new century, the transposition of presidential words into a different context than originally intended has repeated itself. In his second term, George W. Bush echoed Kennedy’s call for a world filled with
freedom. For Bush, enhancing liberty at home meant creating a twenty-first-century “ownership society,” which meant more freedom to make more varied choices. In his Second Inaugural Address, Bush declared, “By making every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny, we will give our fellow Americans greater freedom from want and fear, and make our society more prosperous and just and equal.”3 And in his final State of the Union Address, Bush returned to his familiar theme: “As Americans, we believe in the power of individuals to determine their destiny and shape the course of history. We believe that the most reliable guide for our country is the collective wisdom of ordinary citizens. And so in all we do, we must trust in the ability of free peoples to make wise decisions, and empower them to improve their lives for their futures.”4 From a governing perspective, these speeches signaled Bush’s desire to privatize a portion of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Social Security program, thereby giving citizens the option of investing some of their government savings in privately held accounts, an idea that received little congressional support and was eventually shelved.

As with Kennedy, Americans are reading something more into Bush’s profreedom rhetoric. To them, his ringing second-term Inaugural Address meant not just having more economic choices but more moral choices. The desire for greater moral freedom began in the mid–twentieth century with the civil rights and women’s rights revolutions. To poor blacks and disenfranchised women, more freedom meant exercising more options in life’s economic and political marketplaces. At the same time, citizens of all races and both sexes began experimenting with a sexual revolution that provided increased moral selection in private life. In 2001, political scientist Alan Wolfe wrote, “Never have so many people been so free of moral constraint as contemporary Americans.” He concluded, “The twenty-first century will be a century of moral freedom.”5

At the onset of a new century, Americans are taking the Declaration of Independence’s promises of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and endowing them with heretofore unthinkable meanings. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama believes that this hyperindividualism in the private realm has produced a profound shift in public values: “Traditional societies have few options and many ligatures (i.e., social bonds to others): people have little individual choice concerning a marriage partner, job, where to live, or what to believe, and are tied down by the often oppressive bonds of family, tribe, caste, religion, feudal obligation, and the like. In modern so-
cieties, options for individuals vastly increase, while the ligatures binding them in webs of social obligation are greatly loosened."

One byproduct of this newfound moral freedom is a narrowing of what constitutes the common good. Many Americans previously believed that defending the common good necessarily meant sacrificing some of their personal liberties. As John Adams put it, “We have no government armed in power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a religious and moral people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.” Andrew Jackson was even more succinct: “Individuals must give up a share of liberty to preserve the rest.” Traveling across the continental United States in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville found most citizens willing to marry their ideas about liberty to other values—including morality, law, and civic responsibility—that they deemed essential to preserving the common good. But in the twenty-first century, few people are willing to sacrifice their personal liberties to uphold commonly held public values.

This redefinition of morality has produced a powerful political backlash, particularly among conservatives. According to social commentator Irving Kristol, “The consequence of such moral disarray is confusion about the single most important question that adults face: ‘How shall we raise our children? What kind of moral example shall we set? What moral instruction should we convey?’ A society that is impotent before such questions will breed restless, turbulent generations.” Former U.S. senator Rick Santorum, a conservative Pennsylvania Republican, blamed 1960s-era “secular liberals” for the dwindling of the nation’s moral capital: “We now have a generation that has grown up with a belief, inspired by the Sixties’ free-love assault on sexual mores, that true love is a feeling, and that it should not be resisted or constrained—rather, its ultimate validation is through sexual relations, without regard to the outdated social convention of marriage.”

For decades, a conservative consensus existed that constrained the most personal of private behaviors to preserve a semblance of “common decency.” A 1939 poll found 8 in 10 respondents vehemently opposed to having sexual relations before marriage. Of the 5,000 men and women separately surveyed, 47 percent of females described premarital sex as “wicked,” while 52 percent of males said it was “unfortunate” (see table 1). Three decades later, societal condemnation of premarital sex continued unabated. For example, in a 1963 survey, 67 percent of respondents
strongly disagreed with the idea of men having premarital sex even if they were in love with the women involved. Likewise, 71 percent found it completely unacceptable for women to engage in such behavior (see table 1). A similar taboo existed concerning abortion. According to a 1969 survey, 78 percent of those polled believed abortion should be illegal if the parents “simply have all the children they want, although there are no major health or financial problems involved in having another child” (see table 1).

In the twenty-first century, some commonly understood limits to private moral behavior remain. For example, one study found that 93 percent of people believe polygamy is morally wrong. Such condemnation is hardly surprising. For decades, an overwhelming majority of people have viewed fidelity in marriage as an important social value. Polls conducted by the National Opinion Research Center since 1972 show a consistently large majority that says that marital infidelity is “always wrong.” And the number of people universally condemning this behavior increased 10 percentage points between 1972 and 2004 (see table 2).

Another area of public consensus is disdain of pornography, especially when it involves children. From the 1970s to the 1990s, a decisive majority of those surveyed said that pornography of all stripes contributed to a breakdown of public morals. While the percentage of those wanting all forms of pornography banned has declined slightly, there has been a nine-point increase in those who believe persons under eighteen years of age should not receive any pornographic materials (see table 2). Moreover, an overwhelming 97 percent of respondents reject equating child pornography to free speech.

But when Americans are asked about nearly every other aspect of private behavior, many are unwilling to pass judgment. According to surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center from 1972 to 1982, the public was divided on the question of premarital sex: 31 percent believed it was “always wrong”; 34 percent said it was “not wrong at all.” By 2006, only 25 percent thought premarital sex was “always wrong,” while 45 percent replied that it was “not wrong at all.” A similar pattern emerges on the subject of cohabitating heterosexual couples. In 1994, the public was split: 41 percent thought it was “all right” if a couple lived together without intending to get married; 41 percent disagreed. By 2005, those favoring cohabitation outnumbered dissenters, 49 percent to 46 percent (see table 3). When marriage is introduced into the equation, there is a greater likelihood of public approval: in 1994, only 33 percent approved of a pre-
<table>
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<th>Question: “Do you consider it all right, unfortunate, or wicked when young men have sexual relations before marriage?” (1939, males only)</th>
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<th>Question (Agree/Disagree): “I believe that full sexual relations are acceptable for the male before marriage when he is in love.” (1963)</th>
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<td>Strongly agree</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
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<td>Slightly agree</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Slightly disagree</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly agree</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>71</td>
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<th>Question: “Do you think abortion operations should or should not be legal in the following case: where the parents simply have all the children they want although there are no major health or financial problems involved in having another child?” (1969)</th>
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<td>Should not</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know (volunteered)</td>
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marital cohabitation that resulted in an eventual marriage; 11 years later, 40 percent favored premarital cohabitation under such conditions (see table 3). Familial backgrounds appear to be a contributing factor for the change of heart. One study of college-aged women whose parents had divorced found that 65 percent concurred with the statement, “It is a good idea to live with someone before deciding to marry him.” Just 49 percent of women from intact families agreed.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{A Persistent Moral Consensus: Marriage and Pornography, 1972–2006 (in percentages)}
\begin{tabular}{lcccccccccccc}
\hline
\hline
\textbf{Marital Infidelity} & & & & & & & & & & & \\
Always wrong & 71 & 72 & 77 & 76 & 78 & 77 & 78 & 79 & 81 & 81 & \hfill \\
Almost always wrong & 14 & 16 & 13 & 14 & 12 & 15 & 12 & 11 & 13 & 12 & 11 \\
Wrong only sometimes & 11 & 8 & 6 & 6 & 6 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 4 & 5 & 5 \\
Not wrong at all & 3 & 2 & 2 & 2 & 2 & 2 & 2 & 3 & 2 & 2 & 2 \\
Don’t know (volunteered) & 1 & 1 & 2 & 2 & 1 & 2 & 2 & 2 & 1 & 1 & \hfill \\
\hline
\textbf{Pornography Laws} & & & & & & & & & & & \\
There should be laws against the distribution of pornography whatever the age. & 41 & 41 & 42 & 42 & 37 & 37 & 38 & 36 & 38 & 38 & 38 \\
There should be laws against the distribution of pornography to persons under 18. & 49 & 54 & 54 & 54 & 59 & 58 & 57 & 60 & 56 & 57 & 58 \\
There should be no laws forbidding the distribution of pornography. & 8 & 4 & 5 & 3 & 3 & 4 & 4 & 3 & 5 & 4 & 3 \\
Don’t know (volunteered) & 2 & 1 & 2 & 1 & 0 & 1 & 1 & 1 & 1 & 0 & 1 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\footnote{Source: National Opinion Research Center polls, 1972–2006.}
\footnote{Text of first question: “What is your opinion about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner—is it always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?”}
\footnote{Text of second question: “Which of these statements comes closest to your feelings about pornography laws? There should be laws against the distribution of pornography whatever the age. There should be laws against the distribution of pornography to persons under eighteen. There should be no laws forbidding the distribution of pornography.”}
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<td></td>
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<td>Almost always wrong</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td><strong>Good Idea to Live together before Marriage</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>2</td>
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Source: The responses for 1972–2004, and 2006 are from National Opinion Research Center, General Social Surveys, 1972–2006. Text of first question: “There’s been a lot of discussion about the way morals and attitudes about sex are changing in this country. If a man and woman have sex relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?” Text of second question: Agree/Disagree: “It is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married.” Text of third question: “It’s a good idea for a couple who intend to get married to live together first.”

The responses for 2005 are from Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, July 25–August 7, 2005. Text of first question: “Now I am going to read to you a list of statements. For each of the following, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement. If you agree nor disagree with the statement, please say so . . . . It is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married.” Text of second question: “Now I am going to read to you a list of statements. For each of the following, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement. If you neither agree nor disagree with the statement, please say so . . . . It is a good idea for a couple who intend to get married to live together first.”

Note: N/A = not asked.
Other surveys suggest a greater public tolerance of various sexual behaviors. For example, a 2001 poll of 1,000 unmarried women attending four-year colleges found that 87 percent agreed with the statement, “I should not judge anyone’s sexual conduct except my own.” This newfound moral freedom was evident in a 2005 online survey that found 25 percent of men and 13 percent of women have had more than 25 sexual partners during their lifetimes. These findings echo those of the National Center for Health Statistics, which also reported in 2005 that men aged 30 to 44 had a median of 6 to 8 sexual partners, while women in the same age bracket had 4. Nonwhite males were especially apt to engage in a variety of short-term relationships: among men aged 15 to 44, 18 percent of Hispanics, 22 percent of whites, and 34 percent of blacks revealed that they had had 15 or more female partners. (For women of the same age, 4 percent of Hispanics, 10 percent of whites, and 9 percent of blacks had an equal number of male partners.)

The sexual revolution is no longer a revolution. Twenty-first-century teenagers provide abundant evidence of this point. According to a 2004 study, half of high-school-age adolescents have had intercourse, with a comparable proportion of senior girls and boys (62 percent and 61 percent, respectively) being sexually experienced. A similar survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control found the proportion of young people having sex rises nearly 10 percent with each passing grade:

- 32.8 percent of ninth-graders have had sex;
- 44.1 percent of tenth-graders have had sex;
- 53.2 percent of eleventh-graders have had sex;
- 61.6 percent of twelfth-graders have had sex.

As young people become more sexually adventurous, some parents have reacted by strongly endorsing abstinence education. In Anaheim, California, students receive ATM cards. But these are hardly the conventional banking cards—rather, the abbreviation stands for “Abstinence Til Marriage.” But Anaheim is the exception, as only 35 percent of school districts nationwide provide abstinence-only sex education. An additional 51 percent teach abstinence-plus—that is, courses that teach that chastity is preferred but that also provide information about contraception. Only 14 percent of districts have comprehensive programs that include discussions...
about abortion, homosexuality, premarital sex, oral and anal sex, and masturbation.20

But whatever the curriculum taught in the schools, teenage sexual activity is rampant. One poll of 600 abstinence-pledging teenagers found that 61 percent had broken their vows within a year.21 Another study found that 88 percent of middle and high school students who promised to remain virgins until marriage had engaged in premarital sex.22 And 40 percent of twelfth-graders reported having sex outside of any romantic relationship.23 With numbers like these, it is no wonder that 82 percent of adult parents with teenagers agreed with the statement, “Waiting to have sex is a nice idea, but not many teens really do wait.”24 Reflecting on her teenage years, one adult woman recalled abstinence as a whim of her childhood:

If someone had asked me when I was twelve if I wanted to remain a virgin until marriage, I would have said, “Of course I do.”
At thirteen, I would have said, “I think so.”
By fourteen, I would have replied, “Maybe.”
At age fifteen, my response would have been, “I don’t see how that is possible.”25

Parents are hardly oblivious to what their children are doing. One study found that two-thirds of parents believed their teenage children had engaged in sexual intercourse.26 This does not mean that parents subscribe to an “anything goes” philosophy. When asked about teaching sex in schools, 47 percent of parents agreed with the statement, “Teenagers need to have limits set, they must be told what is acceptable and what is not.” At the same time, 51 percent believed that “teenagers need to make their own decisions, so their education needs to be more in the form of providing information and guidance.”27 Parents Ed Gold and Amy Robinson neatly captured the majority sentiments: “What if [teenagers] just can’t say no? What if they are overwhelmed, or think they are in love, or their bodies overrule their heads? The reality is that children are having sexual experiences younger and younger. I don’t understand the concept of not wanting the child to have all the available information. I don’t think that’s any way to make a child whole.”28

But with so many once-forbidden sexual taboos falling by the wayside, it is not surprising that today’s intimate relationships are incredibly diverse.
The varieties include married couples, cohabitating couples (straight or gay), singles, blended families, “friendships with privileges” (meaning sex with no enduring commitment), civil unions, and gay marriages. Today, only 24 percent of households have a traditional family structure of a mother, father, and children living with them, and only one-third of all U.S. households have children under 18 years of age. Other statistics echo these figures. In 2004, nearly 1 in 5 women over 40 years of age was childless, compared to 1 in 10 in 1976. A 2005 Census report revealed that 36.8 percent of all U.S. births were to unmarried women. And a 2007 Pew Research poll found that 47 percent of adults in their 30s and 40s have spent a portion of their lives in cohabitating relationships. Thus, when pollster Stanley Greenberg asked respondents to define the term family, only 34 percent replied that it was “mother, father, and children,” “husband, wife, and children,” or “parents and children,” a sure sign as any that what once passed for the nuclear family is no more.

Simply put, we are as far away from the 1950s (with that era’s conventional stay-at-home mom and working dad) as the 1900s (with their Model-T Fords and urban tenements teeming with European immigrants) were from the mid–twentieth century, as statistics show:

- In 1950, 78 percent of U.S. households were headed by married couples; today, 54 percent.
- In 1950, 93 percent of families with minor children had married couples as parents; today, 73 percent.
- In 1950, 9.3 percent of households consisted of people living alone; today, 26 percent.
- In 1950, 1 in 20 children were born to unmarried mothers; today, more than 1 in 3.

Reflecting on these transformations, Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed, “The biggest change, in my judgment, is that the family structure has come apart all over the North Atlantic world.” And, he added, this phenomenon had happened in a “historical instant.” Indeed, it seems so. Back in 1965, Moynihan, then the assistant secretary of labor in the Johnson administration, warned that black families were trapped in a “tangle of pathology” as fathers abandoned households, leaving bereft mothers to cope with raising children. Years later, sociologist Stephanie Coontz ob-
served that this troubling phenomenon was only “a rehearsal for something that was going to happen in the white community.” Today, white women under 25 years of age are just as likely to have children out of wedlock as are black women of the same age. Among Hispanics, the percentage of unwed births has increased from 19 percent in 1980 to 48 percent in 2005.

The destruction of the nuclear family has provoked outrage among many conservatives. In 1992, Vice President Dan Quayle won plaudits from the Religious Right when he criticized television’s Murphy Brown for having an out-of-wedlock baby, saying that the character mocked “the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another ‘lifestyle choice.’” Quayle believed the program’s subtext reflected a “poverty of values” among the nation’s cultural elites, who, he declared, “sneer[ed] at the simple but hard virtues—modesty, fidelity, integrity.”

Sixteen years later, the Republican Party nominated Sarah Palin for vice president despite the fact that her teenage daughter, Bristol, was pregnant and not married to the father of her child. The situation hardly caused a ripple. In fact, it endeared Palin to the party’s conservative wing, since her daughter had not had an abortion. And on the Democratic side of the aisle, 38-year-old Representative Linda Sanchez made history in 2008 when she became the first House member to become pregnant without being married. Sanchez defended her pregnancy, saying, “I’m not a high school kid, it wasn’t an accident. I’m financially stable, in a committed relationship.” Sanchez told the Washington Post that she had always wanted children and that the public reaction to Bristol Palin’s pregnancy led her to conclude that her constituents would not object: “We’ve evolved as a society so much. The reality of single working moms is such a powerful reality.” Her boyfriend, who, like Sanchez, is divorced (and who is the father of five other children), welcomed the news. Marriage, said Sanchez, would have to wait.

The fact that so many Americans from both political parties are having children out of wedlock has led Coontz to conclude that marriage itself has come to an inevitable end: “It took more than one-hundred-fifty years to establish the love-based, male breadwinner marriage as the dominant model in North America and Western Europe. It took less than twenty-five years to dismantle it. No sooner had family experts concluded that the perfect balance had been reached between the personal freedoms promised by the love match and the constraints required for social stability, than
people began to behave in ways that fulfilled conservatives’ direst predic-
tions.”

A decade after Quayle excoriated Murphy Brown, another vice presi-
dent, Democrat Al Gore, described how varied interpersonal moral
choices made for intricate family arrangements. In *Joined at the Heart,*
Gore and his wife, Tipper, introduced readers to a prototypical twenty-
first-century family headed by Dick and Susan Fadley, who were raising six
children from four different partnerships.

Dick married Dee.
Dee previously had a child, Jacob, whom Dick adopted.
Dick and Dee had two children of their own.
Dick and Dee divorced, and Dick fell in love with Caitlin. They had
one daughter, although they never married.
Dick married Susan, and they had two children.45

Explaining how each child is related to the other is to describe a tangle
of relationships. As Susan Fadley said, “This family is definitely a crazy
mixed-up family. . . . It would have been nice to have a family with two par-
ents and children from those parents, but life’s choices did not happen that
way, unfortunately—or fortunately, because then we wouldn’t have [be-
come] who we are now.” Susan described the Fadleys’ choices as “okay.”46
That’s just the point. In the twenty-first century, personal relationships—
straight, gay, married, cohabitating, single—are all about making choices,
and those choices are just as diverse as the country itself. The 1950s version
of the family has been ripped apart and redefined in a myriad of ways.

The Postmarriage Century

In its 1966 mission statement, the National Organization for Women
(NOW) declared, “We believe that a true partnership between the sexes
demands a different concept of marriage, an equitable sharing of the responsi-
bilities of home and children and of the economic burdens of their sup-
port.”47 NOW’s marital critique was not the first. Four years earlier, *Cos-
mopolitan* magazine founder Helen Gurley Brown advised women that
marriage was “insurance for the worst years of your life.”48 By the late
1960s, protests against the conventional roles associated with marriage be-
gan to spread. In 1968, supporters of women’s liberation gathered outside the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City and tossed bras and pictures into garbage cans, saying that they “degraded” women as “sex objects.”

Yet despite such occasional uproars, husbands remained the dominant partners and often had the law on their side. Until the 1970s, men could force their wives to have sex. As Coontz reminds us in *Marriage: A History*, men had complete authority over the family finances and did not legally have to consult with their wives about where the couple would live.

When the members of NOW penned their founding document, marriage was—as it had been for centuries—an arrangement formed as much by economics as by love. Molly Yard, a former president of NOW, joined the organization because she was determined to overturn the economic and social constraints that defined her marriage. In 1938, Yard married Sylvester Garrett, a fellow classmate from Swarthmore College. She immediately defied social convention by choosing to keep her maiden name, but when she and her husband attempted to open a joint checking account with their different last names, bank officials said no. When Yard protested, they told her that if she had been Garrett’s mistress, there would have been no problem with their opening a joint account.

Yard was far ahead of her time. When respondents to a 1955 study were asked what they had sacrificed by marrying and raising a family, an overwhelming majority replied, “Nothing.” The promarriage sentiment was so strong that four out of five respondents believed that anyone who remained single was “sick,” “neurotic,” or “immoral.” A 1962 survey of more than 2,000 women conducted for the *Saturday Evening Post* painted an idyllic Norman Rockwell–esque portrait of marriage cast in the bounty of economic materialism: 47 percent of respondents said that they dreamed of marrying hardworking, ambitious men who could give them material benefits they otherwise could never afford; only 15 percent said there should be only “affection or love between” husbands and wives. In return for economic security, most women believed that their duty was to provide emotional stability: 60 percent said their chief purpose in life was being a good mother, 32 percent chose being a good wife, and 20 percent selected making a good home for the family. Only 1 percent believed having personal financial success was life’s most important goal.

Prominent public figures and the national media echoed these sentiments. Two-time Democratic Party presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson told graduates of Smith College that “most of you” are going to assume
“the humble role of housewife,” and “whether you like the idea or not just now, later on you’ll like it.”55 In 1956, Life magazine commented that women “have minds and should use them . . . so long as their primary interest is in the home.”56 Ladies’ Home Journal ran a regular feature under the title, “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” Inevitably, the answer was an emphatic yes, especially if women became faithful domestic partners and let their husbands be the breadwinners. In one case, “Marilyn” saved her marriage by giving up her “glamour girl” fantasies about becoming a movie star to do volunteer work in a local church. In another, “Ava” learned to control her bossiness, telling a therapist that her husband “now feels that he is the head of the family.”57

Today, those old magazines have been relegated to dusty bookshelves. No aspiring politician would ever give Stevenson’s commencement address. And even the Miss America Pageant, replete with its celebration of 1950s-era family values, has been demoted to Country Music Television after drawing just 9.8 million viewers in its final outing on a major network.58 The demise of the Miss America Pageant is an especially notable cultural touchstone. During the 1950s, the extravaganza captured nearly 40 percent of television viewers on the second Saturday in September. Contestants competed in the bathing suit competition, for such titles as Miss Congeniality, and of course for the overall crown.59 Washington Post staff writer Libby Copeland explains the reasoning lurking behind the judges’ final selection: “Miss America is not expected to be beautiful. Rather, she is aggressively cute. Her values are also cute, which is why Miss America and Country Music Television are so perfect for each other. The pageant is heartland entertainment for a heartland channel, and by ‘heartland’ we never mean a place but a state of mind. An irony-free state of mind. A cute state of mind.”60

The shunting of the Miss America Pageant to Country Music Television symbolizes a values revolution that encompasses the institution of marriage, which is no longer an economic contract with its guarantees of financial primacy for the male and emotional stability for both partners. As New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd observes, the feminist revolution had the “unexpected consequence of intensifying the confusion between the sexes, leaving women in a tangle of dependence and independence as they entered the twenty-first century.”61 Gone are the predetermined male-female married roles of the past. In 2001, for example, one in four wives earned more than their husbands.62
Moreover, many married couples are experimenting with reversals of 1950s-era gender roles: in 2003, 5.6 million couples had stay-at-home dads and working moms. Since the mid-1990s, the number of men suing their employer for family leave has grown from 5 percent to 11 percent. A survey found that the most important reasons men gave for staying home were “showing love and affection to kids,” followed by providing “safety and protection,” “moral guidance,” “taking time to play,” and “teaching and encouraging.”

Divorce, American Style

Emotional stability is no longer part of the marriage contract. In polls taken by the National Opinion Research Center from 1973 to 1976, 70 percent of respondents described their marriages as “very happy.” But when respondents were asked the same question between 1998 and 2004, the number of happily marrieds fell to 64 percent. Moreover, only 39 percent of first-time married couples in a 1999 Rutgers University study characterized their unions as “happy.”

These extraordinarily low figures correspond to a significant increase in the divorce rate. Although divorce has increased in every decade since the Civil War, the yearly rate held steady throughout the 1950s and early 1960s at fewer than 10 partings per 1,000 couples. Correspondingly, only 11 percent of children born in the 1950s saw their parents either divorce or separate by the time they turned 18. But in 1965, the divorce rate sharply increased, peaking at 23 divorces per 1,000 marriages in 1979. Today, a 25-year-old marrying for the first time has a 52.5 percent chance that the marriage will end in divorce.

All marriages end. During the colonial era, most conjugal unions ceased because one spouse died. But today, most marriages end as a matter of choice. According to a study conducted by sociologists Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, men aged 25 to 33 attribute prevalent divorce rates to narcissism, consumerism, and having “too many choices.” Observed one, “You used to fall in love with the girl in your high school English class. Now you have more choices and you get married and then three years later, a better one comes along.” Sociologists Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt see an emerging “divorce culture” based on the freedom to make varied moral choices: “The divorce culture arose when shifts in attitudes about the importance of lasting marriage began to
have an impact on everyone’s marriage. In a divorce-oriented culture, then, not only are troubled marriages more likely to end in divorce, but more marriages are likely to become troubled.”

Still, the choice to end a marriage is not without cost. Children are often the unwitting victims, with more than 1 million watching their parents part each year. One by-product is an enhanced teenage angst. Mary Eberstadt, a fellow at the Hoover Institution, believes that today’s popular music contains more than the usual dose of anomie. In an influential article, “Eminem Is Right,” Eberstadt cited several examples of popular music that reflect teenagers’ pain following a family divorce:

- Papa Roach, “Broken Home”: “I know my mother loves me / But does my father even care?”
- Blink 182, “Stay Together for the Kids Sake”: “What stupid poem could fix this home / I’d read it everyday.”
- Good Charlotte, “Little Things”: “We checked [Dad’s] room / His things were gone / We didn’t see him no more.”
- Everclear, “Sick and Tired”: “I blame my family / Their damage is living in me.”

The success of these million-selling songs has even caught the artists who composed them off-guard. According to Blink 182’s Tom DeLonge, “We get e-mails about ‘Stay Together,’ kid after kid saying, ‘I know exactly what you’re talking about! That song is about my life!’ And you know what? That sucks. You look at statistics that 50 percent of parents get divorced, and you’re going to get a pretty large group of kids who are pissed off and who don’t agree with what their parents have done.”

The founding members of Good Charlotte concur. When Benji and Joel Madden were teenagers, their father abandoned them, leaving behind a financially precarious and emotionally devastated family. Benji recalls, “It was pretty traumatic. We went from working class to poverty, and it was probably at the worst time possible. It’s happening when I’m in the ninth grade, which is a really tough year, and my mom is having health problems, and my older brother Josh, he was like: ‘I’m outta here.’ We didn’t know what the [expletive] we were going to do. I was angry.” Joel had similar thoughts: “I didn’t know where my dad was. I was living in this [bad] little town, where nobody knows what’s cool. I wanted to play sports, but I
wasn’t good. I wanted chicks, and chicks didn’t like me. I wanted to have friends, but I didn’t get to go to the parties. I had to work forty hours a week to help my mom pay the bills. It was like a tornado.”

Joel and Benji Madden translated their emotional losses into popular music. On the song “Emotionless,” they sing of their father,

It’s been a long hard road without you by my side  
Why weren’t you there all the nights that we cried?  
You broke my mother’s heart, you broke your children for life  
It’s not okay, but we’re all right  
I remember the days you were a hero in my eyes  
But those are a long-lost memory of mine  
I spent so many years learning how to survive  
Now I’m writing to let you know we’re still alive.

Music journalist William Shaw writes that these lyrics reflect the feelings of a generation that sees itself as “uniquely fractured.” Eberstadt agrees, citing an important qualitative difference between today’s teens and their baby boomer parents: “Baby boomers and their music rebelled against their parents because they were parents—nurturing, attentive, and overly present (as those teenagers often saw it) authority figures. Today’s teenagers and their music rebel against parents because they are not parents—not nurturing, not attentive, and often not even there.”

The death of so many marriages clearly causes substantial emotional pain for the children involved. Marquardt reports that children growing up in divorced families often feel like different people with each parent, while kids whose parents stay married remain at the center of family life and feel emotionally secure. As one acquaintance told Marquardt, “When I was a kid it would really stress me out when my divorced parents were in the same room together . . . because I didn’t know who to be.”

To relieve some of the emotional upheavals caused by divorce, the mushrooming “collaborative law” movement has sought to bring parents and lawyers to terms without resorting to family court. Even after divorces, many ex-partners turn to “parent coordinators” who can mediate decisions involving children.

In this morally free environment, the social stigma previously associated with divorce has all but disappeared. In a 2006 poll, two-thirds of respondents considered divorce morally acceptable, while 58 percent of
those who participated in a 2007 study said that divorce is “painful but preferable to an unhappy marriage.” These opinions represent quite a change of heart. In 1936, only 23 percent of those surveyed thought divorces should be easier to obtain; 77 percent disagreed. Two books neatly capture this shift toward no-fault divorce. One mid-1940s text tersely asserted, “Children are entitled to the affection and association of two parents, not one.” Thirty years later, another popular book proclaimed the opposite: “A two-parent home is not the only emotional structure within which a child can be happy and healthy. . . . The parents who take care of themselves will be best able to take care of their children.”

The latter attitude now prevails. According to Nation magazine writer Katha Pollitt, divorce has become “an American value.” A 2008 Time magazine report found that businesses aimed at the newly divorced are booming. New Orleans resident Renee Savant, for example, bought a hearse, thinking that she would rent it out for over-the-hill parties. Instead, customers often hire it to celebrate the end of their marriages. According to Savant, “I would never in a million years have thought thefad would be divorce parties.” Other companies have found success with ex-wife toilet paper, ex-husband voodoo dolls, wedding ring coffins, and the like. Even Hallmark cards has gotten into the “let’s celebrate the divorce” spirit with greetings such as, “Think of your former marriage as a record album. It was full of music—both happy and sad. But what’s important now is . . . YOU! The recently released HOT, NEW, SINGLE! You’re going to be at the TOP OF THE CHARTS!” Divorce parties, replete with upside-down wedding cakes with the legs of the bride and groom sticking out at the bottom/top, are also popular. At one, Lesley Rogers, a Seattle communications director whose five-year marriage ended in 2006, met her current boyfriend.

The failure of so many marriages has created a crisis of confidence in the institution itself. In a 2005 survey of women aged 18 to 24, 45 percent said, “You see so many unhappy marriages that you begin to question it as a way of life.” One New York University student typified the prevalent thinking: “You see so [many] people getting divorces. . . . I just don’t see the necessity [of marriage]. I think that I don’t have to be married to [the] person that I’m with. . . . You know like [movie stars] Goldie Hawn [and Kurt Russell]? They’re not married.” In a 2006 interview on Larry King Live, Hawn said that she and her long-standing live-in boyfriend had considered and rejected marriage:
We had both been married. I’ve been married twice. It didn’t work. He was married once. That didn’t work either. And we were at a time where we had kids and thought well, you know, what actually would it do to get married? I like being independent. I like being his girlfriend. I like that notion. I think it's sexy and I do think that it's a way of saying I don’t own you and there’s no paper that says that. My union with you is in my heart and it’s in my promises and that’s the best you can do. . . . And the kids didn’t want us to get married either by the way. After about five years [together] we said, “You know, guys, do you want us to get married?” And they went, “No, it's working great just the way it is.”

The dissolution of marriage is hardly a phenomenon pitting Republicans versus Democrats, conservatives versus liberals, red states versus blue states, or Hollywood versus the rest of America. While the country has chosen sides in a values war that defines how citizens should live, the plethora of interpersonal choices people make in real life knows no party or ideology. For example, a 1999 poll found that divorce is relatively commonplace—5.1 per 1,000 people—in eleven conservative, southern, Republican-dominated states. But in nine liberal, pro-Democratic, northeastern states, divorce was less frequent: 3.5 per 1,000 persons. Texas and Massachusetts—home states to the 2004 presidential nominees, George W. Bush and John Kerry, respectively—showed the same pattern. In Texas, the 2000 Census pegged the divorce rate at 4.1 per 1,000; in Massachusetts, the figure was 2.4 per 1,000.

A similar phenomenon occurs when marriage trends are analyzed. The areas with the greatest decline in marriage from 2000 to 2005 were not limited to either red or blue states. In Boone County, Kentucky, for example, the marriage rate fell an astounding 11.6 percent, yet the county gave Bush 72 percent of its votes in 2004. Similarly, in Nash County, North Carolina, marriages dropped by 9.7 percent, yet Bush won 58 percent of the ballots. And in Webb County, Texas, Kerry received 57 percent of the vote although the number of married households fell by 9.6 percent.

A comparison of divorce rates among conservative Christians and members of other religious groups shows a similar pattern. According to one study, Baptists are most prone to divorce, with 29 percent having dissolved their marriages; among born-again Christians, that figure was 27 percent; and Catholics, Lutherans, atheists, and agnostics all had divorce rates of 21 percent. Similarly, 23 percent of evangelicals have been mar-
ried more than once, while only 15 percent of people with no religious preference have entered into more than one union. According to pollster George Barna, the old saying that the family that prays together, stays together finds little validity in the social science data:

While it may be alarming to discover that born-again Christians are more likely than others to experience a divorce, that pattern has been in place for quite some time. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is that when those individuals experience a divorce many of them feel their community of faith provides rejection rather than support and healing. But the research also raises questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families. The ultimate responsibility for a marriage belongs to the husband and wife, but the high incidence of divorce within the Christian community challenges the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriages.

In Arkansas, the divorce rate became so high that former Governor Mike Huckabee declared a “marriage emergency.” Thirty-six other states joined Arkansas to fund programs to reduce the divorce rate and encourage couples to stay together. Even so, the divorce rate nationwide remains at nearly 50 percent. Many observers blame the transient nature of contemporary commitments and the range of family choices. As Harry Pearson, a former history teacher, told Wolfe, “When it is convenient for us to be committed, we are to another person. When it becomes inconvenient . . . the other person gets dumped along the way. I’m gonna get in trouble for this, but families work when there’s a way to make sure that children, particularly until they’re ten or eleven or twelve years old, are well cared for, are well directed, and are the prime focus of the family as a social unit. That doesn’t happen when both parents work sixty-five hours a week.”

**Redefining Marriage**

Rather than a contractual arrangement that provides economic security and emotional stability, today’s marriages represent declarations of love by both parties at a given moment. As the French often say, “Le coeur a sa raison [The heart has its reason].” Thus, when 18- to 24-year-olds are asked, “Regardless of how you may currently feel about marriage, which one or
two of the following represent the best reasons to get married?” the answers represent affairs of the heart:

- to have a partner for life—74 percent;
- to start a family—58 percent;
- to make a visible commitment to another person—51 percent;
- to obtain financial security—10 percent;
- to avoid being alone—10 percent.\(^{103}\)

In the twenty-first century, these heart songs involve all types of voluntary choices. By renegotiating the marriage contract to have its primary clauses premised on love (transitory or permanent), the concept of marriage itself has been transformed. Coontz writes that love-struck heterosexuals have involuntarily promoted the “disestablishment” of their once-stable conjugal unions: “Marriage is no longer the institution where people are initiated into sex. It no longer determines the work men and women do on the job or at home, regulates who has children and who doesn’t, or coordinates care-giving for the ill or aged. For better or worse, marriage has been displaced from its pivotal position in personal and social life, and will not regain it short of a Taliban-like counterrevolution."\(^{104}\)

For many Americans, disconnecting love from marriage has meant foregoing marriage altogether. A milestone was reached in 2006, when for the first time, only a minority of the nation’s households (49.7 percent) consisted of married couples. Demographer William H. Frey notes that the continued decline of married couples closes “the book on the Ozzie and Harriet era that characterized much of the last century.”\(^{105}\) A 2007 Pew Research poll shows that even having children is no longer viewed as a primary reason for entering into a marriage: 65 percent of those surveyed believed that mutual happiness and fulfillment should be the main purpose of entering into a marriage; only 23 percent thought bearing and raising children should be the reason to get married. Moreover, only 41 percent believe children are very important to a successful marriage, a 24-point decline from 1990.\(^{106}\)

Disconnecting love from marriage does not mean that marriage itself is dead. But it is a choice more Americans are making later in life. Today, the average age for men entering into first-time marriages is 27; for women, it is 25.\(^{107}\) And many of these “starter marriages” will end in divorce. Politi-
cal essayist and social critic Barbara Ehrenreich believes that marriage has become so transitory that couples should have “renewable marriages,” with reevaluations occurring every five to seven years to give couples opportunities to revise, recelebrate, or dissolve their unions.\textsuperscript{108}

The dissolutions and reformations of the marriage contract have affected both adults and children alike. Today, nearly half of all children live in households that do not include both biological parents. And some children reside with both biological parents, but those adults are not married. Jim and Michelle Fitzhenry thought that they were following the common path when they created their family situation but ultimately realized that this road is becoming less traveled: “By getting married and having a kid, we just assumed we were doing what everyone else in the country was doing. We thought we were normal.”\textsuperscript{109}

But what once passed for a “normal” family is no more. In one survey, 36 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds likened their families to television’s \textit{The Simpsons}—an intact but somewhat dysfunctional unit. Only 30 percent said their families reminded them of the Huxtables from \textit{The Cosby Show}—a close family with two working parents.\textsuperscript{110} Today a majority of Generation Y children report that by the time they graduate from high school, one of their biological parents has left home.\textsuperscript{111} Correspondingly, a majority of adults report spending most of their adulthood outside the bonds of marriage.\textsuperscript{112} Andrew Cherlin, a sociology professor at Johns Hopkins University, says, “Marriage used to be the first step into adulthood.” Now, however, “it’s the last.”\textsuperscript{113}

The dissolution of so many marriages makes many Americans uneasy, and their political leaders have taken notice. Assuming office in 2001, George W. Bush launched the Healthy Marriage Initiative to discourage divorce and encourage fathers to be more responsible.\textsuperscript{114} In 2003, Bush proclaimed Marriage Protection Week and proposed spending $200 million to help couples form and sustain more durable unions through marriage education and counseling programs offered by faith-based and other organizations. These programs would provide information on parenting, financial management, conflict resolution, and career skills. As Bush observed, “Marriage is a sacred institution, and its protection is essential to the continued strength of our society. . . . By supporting responsible child-rearing and strong families, my Administration is seeking to ensure that every child can grow up in a safe and loving home.”\textsuperscript{115} Two years later, Bush redoubled his efforts. In his 2005 State of the Union Address, the
president announced a three-year effort to help young people foster stronger family and community relationships. At the inaugural Helping America’s Youth Conference, First Lady Laura Bush, chair of the new initiative, declared, “We all know that mothers and fathers are the most important influences in a child’s life. Children whose parents show them love and support and stay active in their lives have an enormous advantage growing up. Yet too many children grow up in homes where one parent is absent, most often their father. Young people who grow up without their dads suffer a profound loss.”

And the Bush administration backed up the First Lady’s words with money. In 2006, Congress approved spending $500 million over the next five years to promote healthy marriages through programs including anger and stress management, premarital assessments, conflict resolution, and communication skills. Congress also authorized an additional $250 million to promote responsible fatherhood.

But despite these entreaties from their political leaders, more Americans are choosing not to marry even if they have children. One separated 30-something woman observed, “If Jesus Christ bought me an engagement ring, I wouldn’t take it. I’d tell Jesus we could date, but we couldn’t marry.” One reason for the unwillingness of so many women to marry is the abundance of birth control pills, which permit people to delay or avoid having children. Prior to the 1971 passage of the Twenty-sixth Amendment, which lowered the age of majority to 18, birth control pills were largely unavailable. In 1969, for example, an 18-year-old woman could legally obtain birth control pills in just nine states. One unintended consequence of the amendment was to make the Pill widely available.

Another reason many women delay taking their vows is the emergence of an Information Age economy that places a high premium on obtaining college and advanced degrees. Returning World War II GIs, most of them men, entered college classrooms en masse thanks to the 1944 GI Bill of Rights, which gave them full financial assistance. Staggering increases in college enrollments resulted. In 1941, the University of Michigan had fewer than 10,000 students; four years later, it had more than 30,000. Women soon followed men into the college classrooms. In 1958, only 35 percent of all females attended college. But during the 1960s and 1970s, more women began sitting in college classrooms in pursuit not of dream men but of dream jobs. In 1978, a cultural milestone was reached as college-bound women outnumbered men. The ratio of female/male college
graduates subsequently has sharply tilted toward women: by 2010, the Department of Education projects, 142 females will graduate for every 100 males.\textsuperscript{124} Jen Smyers, a junior at American University, where just 36 percent of the students are male, says, “The women here are on fire.” Smyers should know: she won a dean’s scholarship and held four internships and three jobs during her college years. Asked to explain her motivational drive, Smyers responded, “Most college women want a high-powered career that they are passionate about. But they also want a family, and that probably means taking time off, and making dinner. I’m rushing through here, taking the most credits you can take without paying extra, because I want to do some amazing things, and establish myself as a career woman, before I settle down.”\textsuperscript{125}

But for many college-bound women, marriage and children never happen. Many women graduate expecting to launch their careers, which often means postponing marriage. As one female Howard University student explained, “By the time I’m actually established and making the kind of money that I want to be making before I start a family, I’ll be in my early thirties. So I’m kind of confused about how marriage is going to fit into all of this.”\textsuperscript{126} M. Belinda Tucker, a psychologist and coeditor of \textit{The Decline in Marriage among African Americans}, says that the experiences reported by female college graduates typified her conversations with her peers while in college: “You were essentially consigning yourself to being unmarried. . . . That’s what we said to each other and that’s what we were told.”\textsuperscript{127} Joy Jones, a single sixth-grade teacher, describes her epiphany about marriage:

The turning point in my own thinking about marriage came when a longtime friend proposed about five years ago. He and I had attended college together, dated briefly, then kept in touch through the years. We built a solid friendship, which I believe is a good foundation for a successful marriage.

But—if we had married, I would have had to relocate to the Midwest. Been there, done that, didn’t like it. I would have had to become a step-mother and, although I felt an easy camaraderie with his son, stepmotherhood is usually a bumpy ride. I wanted a house and couldn’t afford one alone. But I knew that if I was willing to make some changes, I eventually could.

As I reviewed the situation, I realized that all the things I expected marriage to confer—male companionship, close family ties, a house—I
already had, or were within reach, and with exponentially less drama. I can do bad by myself, I used to say as I exited a relationship. But the truth is, I can do pretty good by myself, too.\textsuperscript{128}

Census Bureau statistics reflect what Jones says. In 2000, 27.2 million Americans were living alone, the highest number in U.S. history. Eight years later, presidential election exit polls showed that more than one-third of voters were not married, and members of that group voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama.\textsuperscript{129}

Many of these single heads of households are women. In Manhattan, which has the nation’s largest percentage of single households, 56 percent of families are headed by single women.\textsuperscript{130} But women are not alone in making conscious decisions to eschew marriage. James Conaboy, a 35-year-old musician, chooses to live alone because, he says, “If you want to make a mess, you can make a mess. If you want to paint the walls a certain color, you can do it.” Thomas F. Coleman, executive director of Unmarried America, notes that singles no longer experience discrimination and low self-esteem: “Self-esteem isn’t based on having children and being married anymore.”\textsuperscript{131} Indeed. As of 2004, nearly one in four college-educated women between ages 40 and 44 were childless.\textsuperscript{132}

\textit{Single Motherhood: The Murphy Browns Take Center Stage}

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, more Americans than ever before are voting no on marriage. Transient relationships are surely one reason, as fewer first-time lovers take their vows. Today, both sexes can find sexual fulfillment without having a 1950s-style marriage and the children that once accompanied it. According to one study, 50 percent of those aged 18 to 24 believe that they “can lead a perfectly fulfilled life without having children.”\textsuperscript{133} But some people are adding a twist to this view: young women giving birth without the security of marriage. In 2005, a record 4 in 10 babies were born outside of marriage, many to women between ages 25 and 29, a group for whom unwed births have risen 30 percent since 1991.\textsuperscript{134} While many of these unwed mothers were poor women, a substantial number were highly educated, well-to-do females—like the mythical Murphy Brown—who could easily support one or more children. When asked to explain why she chose to have an out-of-wedlock baby, one chiropractor from Avon, Connecticut, admitted, “It is selfish, but this was something I
needed to do for me.” A female student at the University of California at Berkeley concurred: “I like the idea of kids more than I like the idea of a husband.”

Yet for every well-paid, self-fulfilled, college-degree-holding single mother, there are many more women who lack a college education, are not married, and have children. Today, one in three women becomes pregnant by age 20, and half of these pregnancies are out-of-wedlock births to teenagers. Startlingly, one of every five out-of-wedlock births to teenagers is a repeat birth. While more than 80 percent of unmarried mothers say they hope to marry the fathers of their children, fewer than one in seven do so before the child turns three years old. Shenia Rudolph, a 42-year-old divorced mother living in the Bronx, is one. Shortly after graduating from high school, Rudolph and the father of her two-week-old baby married. When that marriage foundered, Rudolph had three children by another man before ending that relationship after learning he was married to someone else. Now, she says, “I don’t trust men [enough] to marry them.”

Some men readily admit that Rudolph is right. Joe Callender, a retired 47-year-old New York City corrections officer, has had two long-term relationships and fathered four children but has never married. He says, “Marriage, that’s sacred to me; I’m committed to you for the rest of my life, my last breath. I’m not cheating, looking. Work, home, that’s it. It’s you and me against the world.” Not surprisingly, the children of unmarried relationships often eschew marriage based on their unhappy experiences. As one 12-year-old black boy told his teacher, “Marriage is for white people.” His classmate agreed: “We’re not interested in the part about marriage. Only about how to be good fathers.” Not surprisingly, as marriage becomes the choice of fewer citizens, more single women are opting to adopt. Of the 50,000 children adopted in 2001, one-third found homes with single women.

But the increasing elusiveness of marriage has been caused by more than a mutual lack of female-male trust and single-mother adoptions. More women are deciding to have children knowing that marriage is not part of the bargain. And more Americans than ever before find out-of-wedlock births morally acceptable. A 2007 Pew Research survey discovered that 67 percent of those aged 18 to 29 thought the idea of unmarried women having children was either only “sometimes wrong” or “not wrong at all.” Brookings Institution scholar Isabel V. Sawhill notes that these changing attitudes have eclipsed the model family of married parents with
kids living at home: “Before [1970], if you looked at families across the income spectrum, they all looked the same: a mother, father, kids, and a dog named Spot.”

As the approbation against out-of-wedlock births abates, other attitudes have also changed. For example, when one pollster asked whether “one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents together,” respondents were about evenly split: 42 percent agreed, while 45 percent disagreed. As one unwed 20-year-old mother told the New York Times, “I wanted to have a baby. It wasn’t, like, because everybody else had a baby. . . . I wanted somebody to take care of.” A 21-year-old single mother agreed: “I’m gonna make sure I have my own stability. I mean, because they’re my kids. I don’t care who the fathers are, they’re mine. For the rest of my life, they’re gonna be my kids and I’m gonna have to take care of them, with or without their fathers.” According to sociologists Andrew Cherlin and Frank Furstenburg, “Through divorce and remarriage, individuals are related to more and more people, to each of whom they owe less and less.”

**Cohabitation without Marriage**

Many Americans prefer to live together without legal entanglement. Between 1960 and 2005, the number of unmarried couples cohabitating in the United States grew from 439,000 to more than 5,368,000. Today, nearly 4 in 10 adults under age 50 have entered into cohabiting relationships. As Whitehead and Popenoe write, “When blushing brides walk down the aisle at the beginning of the new millennium, well over half have already lived together with a boyfriend.” Amanda Hawn, a 28-year-old writer living in San Francisco, explained why she set up housekeeping with her boyfriend: “Owning three toothbrushes and finding that they are always at the wrong house when you are getting ready to go to bed wears on you. Moving in together has simplified life.”

In his pathbreaking 1987 book, The Closing of the American Mind, Allan Bloom wrote, “The kind of cohabitations that were dangerous in the twenties, and risqué or bohemian in the thirties and forties, have become as normal [today] as membership in the Girl Scouts.” In a bow to the redefinition of family, nearly half of the 500 largest U.S. corporations extend health care and other benefits to unmarried partners. Jennifer Lynch and her live-in, divorced boyfriend typify the trend. Lynch told the New York Times that she and her partner will not marry because unmarried co-
habitation makes their union stronger: “Cohabitating is our choice, and we have no intention to be married. There is little difference between what we do and what married people do. We love each other, exist together, all of our decisions are based upon each other. Everyone we care about knows this. [If anything,] not having the false security of wedding rings makes us work even a little harder.”154

Cohabitation is one more example of the moral freedom many Americans prefer to exercise.155 But these new liberties sometimes provoke controversy. In Black Jack, Missouri, for example, the city council rejected a motion allowing unmarried couples to cohabitate. Under the law, couples who are not married face eviction. Olivia Shelltrack and Fondrey Loving, the parents of three children, were denied an occupancy permit after moving into their new home.156

But even as the Black Jack city councillors try to turn back the clock, the number of Americans who find cohabitation morally acceptable rises. A 2007 Gallup poll found that 55 percent of respondents approved of unmarried men and women living together.157 Among the younger age cohort, the onus once associated with the term living in sin has evaporated. According to a 2001–4 survey of high school seniors, 64 percent of boys and 57 percent of girls said, “It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they can really get along.”158

Cohabitation has become so commonplace that pollsters routinely ask whether respondents are “married, single, divorced, in a civil union, or together.” One 2002 survey found that 37 percent of all married couples reported living together prior to their marriages.159 Chris and Gabrielle Wagners typify the trend. Long before their wedding, they decided to live together so that, according to Gabrielle, they could “test things out beforehand.” As Chris put it, “We wanted to spend as much time as we could together, but we weren’t ready to get married. The next thing I knew there was a hair dryer and all this stuff.” After two and a half years together, Chris and Gabrielle married in May 2001.160

As cohabitation increases, more couples have children without rushing to the altar. Today, 43 percent of unmarried couples are raising children, just a trace behind the 46 percent of married couples who have children living with them at home.161 In Mississippi, New Mexico, and West Virginia—all red states that supported George W. Bush in 2004—a greater proportion of unmarried couples are raising children than are married cou-
ples. In fact, the former Confederate states have the highest share of unmarried couples and the lowest share of married households with children.\textsuperscript{162} In such places, marriage, with all of its entanglements and commitments, has become passé. And in the cohabitating relationships involving children, three-quarters will see their parents split up before they reach age 16.\textsuperscript{163} It is no surprise, therefore, that 57 percent of young people believe “the institution of marriage is dying in this country.”\textsuperscript{164}

“Friendships with Privileges”

Perhaps the fastest-growing type of relationship goes by the names \textit{friendships with privileges}, \textit{friends with benefits}, or \textit{hookups}. These affairs involve virtually no mutual long-term commitment and are especially commonplace on college campuses. One New York University student describes the typical encounter: “Some people are just friends with benefits. Like I know this girl, oh God, this disgusted me. There’s this guy on my floor and she lives upstairs and they’ll just call each other at random times and they’ll, you know, just have sex and then leave. Knock on each other’s doors, satisfy themselves, and go home.”\textsuperscript{165} One female senior at George Washington University defended the practice: “I don’t have time or energy to worry about a ‘we’” in relationships.\textsuperscript{166} A Colby College sophomore tacitly agreed, telling an investigative team of sociologists, “I would like to meet my husband here... But... I don’t really think that it will happen... A lot of [the guys] don’t want relation[ships]. They... want little freshman girls... to hook up with [and it’s] almost [about] the numbers.”\textsuperscript{167}

One study found that just 50 percent of college senior women had been asked on six or more dates, while one-third had had just one or two dates. A University of Virginia undergraduate explained, “Hookups happen way more than just dates. Dates, you’re actually interested in the person. A hookup it’s like you just want to get something.” Not surprisingly, 49 percent of college women agreed with the statement, “At this time in my life, I am not ready to be serious about romantic relationships.” As one University of Washington student said, “I think the goal at this point for most women my age is just to have a good time [and] maybe have a boyfriend.”\textsuperscript{168} Amy Kass, a University of Chicago scholar, bemoans the loss of a “courtship culture”: “The very terms—‘wooing,’ ‘courting,’ ‘suitors’—are archaic; and if the words barely exist, it is because the phenomena have all but disappeared. Today there are no socially prescribed forms of con-
duct that help guide young men and women in the direction of matrimony. This is true not just for the lower or under classes even—indeed especially—the elite, those who in previous generations would have defined the conventions in these matters, lack a cultural script whose denouement is marriage.”

Rather than committing to a courtship following prescribed rules of behavior, men and women simply “hook up.” According to one poll of college undergraduates, 78 percent have hooked up at least once. In another survey, 50 percent of college females said that hookups happened “very often” or “fairly often” at their schools. The same survey also found that a surprising 12 percent of women agreed with the statement, “Sometimes it is easier to have sex with a guy than to talk to him.” According to one male Duke University student, “The girls made all the effort. The guys didn’t have to do anything.” Says a Yale University student, “Women know within the first five minutes of meeting a man whether they are going to hook up with him or not. But . . . women don’t want the guy to know he’ll be hooking with [her] until he’s actually doing it. . . . Post hookup is when guys tend to get ambiguous [they ignore you]. It’s their payback. Do they want to hook up again? Dunno. Do they want to date? Dunno. Are they straight? Dunno. Name? Dunno.”

Despite the impersonal nature of these relationships, many people welcome them. As one Rutgers University student explained, “I think hooking up with different people and seeing what you like and don’t like is a good idea. Because eventually you’re going to have to . . . marry someone and I’d just like to know that I experienced everything.” The college practice of hooking up is increasingly spreading to high schools. Josey, a 17-year-old student from New Jersey, told a reporter that hooking up has few, if any, social ramifications: “As a senior I’ve noticed a lot of people hooking up. Not just hooking up, but getting out of control with hooking up. They don’t feel one should have romance together to have sex with somebody. And the guys enjoy it. Nobody gets a bad reputation from it either.”

Living in Two Parallel Universes

The weakening of marriage and the plethora of personal relationships that has replaced it have created another values division. To cite but one example, nearly half of married men aged 25 to 34 attend religious services several times a month, while less than one-quarter of their unmarried peers do
so. Similarly, 75 percent of married men believe that children should be raised in a religion, compared to just 59 percent of unmarried men.176 These findings accord with other polls. Stanley Greenberg finds that when respondents from traditional families (i.e., married men and women with children under age 18) are compared to those from nontraditional ones (i.e., unmarried parents with children under 18), the values gaps are enormous (see table 4). Those in traditional families are more likely to frown on cohabitation (with or without the intention of getting married), divorce, different family formulations (including homosexual parents or a single parent raising a child), and having women find fulfillment outside the home in the workplace. Nontraditional families are far less likely to make moral judgments on these matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Traditional Families</th>
<th>Nontraditional Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married people are generally happier than unmarried people.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married.</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s a good idea for a couple who intend to get married to live together first.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can’t seem to work out their marriage problems.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is better for children if their parents are married.</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love is what makes a family, and it doesn’t matter if parents are gay or straight, married or single.</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The law should define marriage as a union between one man and one woman.</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both the man and the woman should contribute to the household income.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research poll, July 25–August 7, 2005. Text of question: “Now I am going to read you a list of statements. For each of the following, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement. If you neither agree nor disagree with the statement, please say so.”
As interpersonal relationships become even more varied and nonjudgmental, the connections between traditional families and nontraditional ones become even more frayed. Fukuyama writes that the “moral miniaturization” of adult relationships has resulted in fewer sources of authority, fewer common values, and more competition among individuals and groups.177

Despite the unwillingness of those in nontraditional families to render moral judgments about themselves or anyone else, that reluctance does not mean that they do not worry about their family’s or the nation’s values. In fact, the worries expressed by nontraditional family members exceed those who belong to traditional households on a variety of issues—including the negative influences of other kids on their own children, paying bills and making ends meet, and obtaining health insurance and good medical care for their offspring. Moreover, a substantial minority fret about juggling the demands of work and family, making sure their children learn the right values in school, and having their child watch too much sex or violence in the popular media (see table 5). In all cases, the concerns expressed by these nontraditional family members strikingly outdistance the worries of those in traditional families.

### TABLE 5. Family Concerns Compared, Traditional vs. Nontraditional Families (percentage answering “a lot”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Traditional Families</th>
<th>Nontraditional Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The negative influence of other kids on your child</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying bills and making ends meet</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juggling the demands of work and family</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting health insurance and good medical care</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for your child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your child learning the right values from his/her teachers at school</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your child seeing too much sex or violence from video games, television, and movies</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research poll, July 25–August 7, 2005. Text of question: “Now I am going to read you a list of things some parents worry about. Please tell me how much you worry about each of the following: a lot, some, only a little, not at all.”
As the variety of interpersonal relationships expands, so, too, does the feeling that the nation has divided into two parallel universes. On the one side are those who like their “morality writ small.” As Wolfe has written, “There is a moral majority in America; it just happens to be unwilling to follow anyone’s party line about what morality ought to be.” On the other side are those who like their “morality writ large”—having absolute certainty about what is right and what is wrong. Many people in traditional families are more apt to take the morality writ large view; those in nontraditional families like their morality writ small.

This divide has become so great that each side accuses the other of not getting it. On occasion, the split even tears apart those who otherwise share a common faith and background. Jimmy Carter and his fellow Southern Baptists provide just one of many examples. For 70 years, Carter was a member of the Southern Baptist Convention. But in 2000, the organization adopted a new “Baptist Faith and Message” that mandated that men “provide for, protect, and lead [the] family” and ordered wives to “submit graciously” to their husbands based on what Carter called the “ridiculous assertion” that “man was first in creation and woman was first in the Edenic fall.” Carter’s resultant decision to leave his Baptist faith was not without pain and loss: “For me, being a Southern Baptist has always been like being an American. I just never thought of making a change. My father and his father were deacons and Sunday school teachers. It’s something that’s just like breathing for us.” But the president of the Southern Baptist Convention had no qualms about bidding Carter good riddance: “With all due respect to the president, he is a theological moderate. We are not a theologically moderate convention.”

The split between Carter and the Southern Baptists is but one small spat in the ongoing culture wars. On one side are those who recoil at the plethora of new families and relationships. In *It Takes a Family* (a rejoinder to Hillary Rodham Clinton’s *It Takes a Village*), Santorum argues that family decay is the result of misguided social policies propagated by a “liberal elite” that have resulted in “an epidemic of promiscuity and sexually transmitted diseases among the young; . . . extreme violence and offensive sexual content on everything from video games to the Internet; 3,500 healthy expectant mothers carrying healthy children exercising a ‘choice’ to end the lives of their children every day; [and] the foundational institution of every civilization known to man—marriage—under siege.” But Popenoe writes that the “postnuclear” family trend is “closely linked to such well-
known and seemingly entrenched phenomena of the modern era as affluence, secularism, and a strong emphasis on individualism. In other words, to reverse the family trend would require a massive shift in cultural values.”182

During the 1960s and 1970s, the aphorism “The personal is political” assumed enhanced resonance. Blacks, heretofore denied basic rights, demanded that the federal government issue additional guarantees to fulfill the long-deferred promises contained in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which were grafted onto the document following the Civil War. Women, too, sought a greater measure of freedom outside the traditional realms of marriage and family life. Thus, in 1961, President Kennedy signed an executive order creating the President’s Commission on the Status of Women.183 Days before his death, Kennedy attached his name to another order, establishing an Interdepartmental Committee on the Status of Women that would “further the effort to achieve the full participation of women in American life.”184 After Kennedy’s assassination, Lyndon B. Johnson moved aggressively to enact his Great Society programs, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which forbade racial and gender bias and allowed blacks access to the polls.

“The personal is political” no longer carries quite the same meaning it held 40 years ago. In private, Americans remain loving individuals who are reluctant to condemn their personal moral choices. But in public, Americans have become more suspicious of the moral choices made by their compatriots. The chief justice of the Connecticut State Supreme Court describes a legal tussle that illustrates the tension between private morality and public values:

We had a case of a couple who employed a surrogate mother. After fourteen years of marriage the couple decided to divorce. The father claimed it was his child, and not his wife’s because a surrogate mother gave birth to the child. What do you do in an instance like this? Nobody ever thought of these issues and their legal aspects, but there will be more of them in the future.185

As the courts and other government institutions try to adjudicate these delicate disputes, the culture wars have added a poisonous passion to our politics, even as citizens remain passionate lovers at home.
The cultural battles that accompany present-day family relationships resemble the social polarization described by Benjamin Disraeli in his 1845 novel, *Sybil; or, The Two Nations*. An encounter between the novel’s hero, Charles Egremont, and an unnamed stranger produces a dialogue that could easily be replicated in twenty-first-century America:

“Well, society may be in its fancy,” said Egremont slightly smiling; “but say what you like, our Queen reigns over the greatest nation that ever existed.”

“Which nation?” asked the younger stranger, “for she reigns over two. . . . Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.”186

As chapter 4 demonstrates, the division of the nation into two parallel universes—one private, one public—has been enhanced by the struggle over gay rights.