

“A Call for a  
New Conversation  
on Marriage”

—AN APPEAL FROM SEVENTY-FIVE  
AMERICAN LEADERS

10

Propositions

WINTER 2013

## **It's time for a new conversation on marriage.**

Why *marriage*?

Because families are the seedbeds of civil society, and marriage is the basis of the family. Marriage creates kin. Marriage is a wealth-producing institution. And because marriage is the main institution governing the link between the spousal association and the parent-child association, marriage is society's most pro-child institution.

Marriage is fracturing in America. While the nation's attention is riveted by a debate about whether a small proportion of our fellow citizens (gays and lesbians) should be allowed to marry, marriage is rapidly dividing along class lines, splitting the country that it used to unite. While marriage is stable or strengthening among our college-educated elites, much larger numbers of Americans, particularly in middle and working-class America, are abandoning the institution entirely, with harmful social and personal consequences.

This hollowing out of marriage in mainstream America is among the most consequential social facts of our era. It's contributing to the growth of inequality, harming countless children, and weakening, perhaps fatally, our formerly strong middle class. And amazingly, if you listen to political leaders of both parties and opinion leaders from both the left and right, you'll discover that very few of them appear even to have noticed what's happening.

Why a *new conversation*?

Because the current conversation is at a dead end. And because we won't renew marriage without fundamentally reforming the way we discuss marriage.

Let us tell you the differences between the dead-end conversation of today and the new conversation we propose.

### **1. The current conversation is almost entirely a culture war over gay marriage, pitting traditionalists opposed to gay rights against gay rights leaders and their allies.**

We propose a new conversation that brings together gays and lesbians who want to strengthen marriage with straight people who want to do the same. The new conversation does not presuppose or require agreement on gay marriage, but it does ask a new question. The current question is: "Should gays marry?" The new question is: "Who among us, gay or straight, wants to strengthen marriage?"

### **2. The current conversation treats marriage decline as primarily a problem of the poor and minorities.**

We propose a new conversation on marriage decline, focusing on the startling fact that marriage trends in middle America, particularly among the nearly 60

percent of Americans who've graduated from high school but do not have a four-year college degree, are more and more resembling the historic marriage trends in poor and low-income America.

In short, in the current conversation, marriage policy is mostly seen as a welfare topic. In the new conversation, marriage policy is an inequality topic.

**3. The current conversation on heterosexual marriage focuses largely on the young, especially on teenagers at risk of getting pregnant and on parents of young children.**

We propose a new conversation involving all Americans on marriage across the life cycle. If unwed child bearing is not good for teens, is it good for twenty-somethings? Thirty-somethings with good jobs? As the huge Baby Boom generation (the generation that led the divorce revolution) heads toward retirement and old age, does marriage matter for older and empty-nest Americans, and if so, why?

**4. The current conversation on middle-class marriage is largely therapeutic and psychological, focusing on gender roles and on “soul mate” issues.**

In the wake of the Great Recession and in the midst of severe and possibly long-lasting economic challenges to our society, we propose a new conversation that re-establishes the link between marriage and money, the nest and the nest-egg. What economic policies strengthen marriage? What marriage policies create wealth? In the new conversation, marriage and thrift, the two great engines of the American middle class since the nation's founding, stand best when they stand together.

In short, the current conversation on middle-class marriage presupposes affluence. In the new conversation, marriage helps to rebuild affluence.

**5. Finally, and possibly most importantly, the current conversation on marriage decline is rooted in the belief that nothing can be done.**

The conventional wisdom seems to be that marriage – except possibly for gay marriage – is something that can't be fixed. It's about personal choices. People are voting with their feet. Nothing can be done to stop or reverse the trend. The only thing we can do is ignore the problem, change the subject, or passively wring our hands in sadness.

The new conversation rejects this premise entirely. This is an American conversation. Like our forebears, we assume that what happens in the future will be the result of our ideas and choices today. No trend in our society, including the marriage trend, is preordained, or immune from human decision-making, and no problem we face – this is America, after all – is so large that we must become passive and servile in its face.

The current conversation is at a dead end.

But the new conversation is just getting started.

To this new conversation, we pledge our time, money, and best ideas. We are eager to face the challenge. We invite you to join us.

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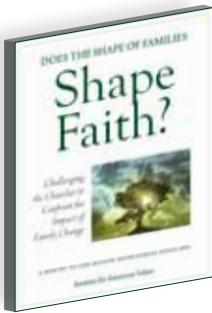




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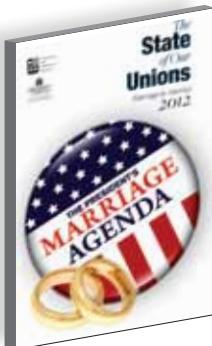
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