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Defining and Defending Conservatism—Senator Rick Santorum’s “It Takes a Family”

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Santorum was raised in Butler, Pennsylvania, a small town he describes as “a place where family togetherness, being a good neighbor, and civic participation were on display every day, without complaint or apology.” He later attended college at Penn State University and earned a law degree from the Dickinson School of Law in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. At the age of 32, Santorum was elected to the United States House of Representatives. After two terms, he was elected in 1994 to the United States Senate. He quickly emerged as a national figure and became the youngest person elected to the Republican Senate leadership. He continues to serve as Republican Conference Chairman, the party’s third-ranking leadership position in the Senate.

Nevertheless, Santorum is defined as much by his family life as by his political career. He and his wife Karen have six children, and the couple has been very generous in sharing their family life with the larger public.

This is no accident, nor a matter of mere personal eccentricity. In *It Takes a Family*, Santorum points to the natural family as the basic building block of civilization, as the proper focus of government concern, and as the true starting point for a conservative political philosophy.

Santorum argues that civilization is based upon five essential pillars—social capital, economic capital, moral capital, cultural capital, and intellectual capital. In his book, he deals with each of these in turn, but at the center of his argument lies the assertion “that the key to building capital in all of these areas is fostering the formation, stability, and success of the traditional family.”

This is a controversial book, and we are living in controversial times. Writing and publishing a book of this substance represents something of a political risk, but Santorum’s book should serve to help conservatives, as well as others, come to a deeper understanding of why civilization itself depends upon the stable functioning of families, and why the family is now at risk.

Throughout the book, Santorum displays a rather remarkable engagement with significant conservative thinkers of the past and present. Furthermore, he gives evidence of a deep understanding of social realities and the ideological principles that produce concrete social results. This senator also understands that conservative principles have enemies.

Referring to what others have called the “cultural elite,” Santorum speaks of the “village elders” who now attempt to forge a social revolution in terms of their own ideological commitments—commitments that are directly subversive of families.

According to Santorum, the liberal elites hold to what he identifies as an ideology of “No-Fault Freedom.” The ideology of No-Fault Freedom insists that personal choice, grounded in an assertion of personal autonomy, is the highest good. In the name of liberation, the prophets of No-Fault Freedom insist that limitations upon personal liberty are repressive and unhealthy and that freedom should thus be unconstrained by a larger moral context, set of rules, or other limitations.

Any responsible political philosophy must identify the central unit of civilization. As Santorum sees it, the critical distinction between contemporary forms of liberalism and conservatism is that the liberals see the individual as the basic unit of society, whereas the conservatives see the family as the focal unit.

“Liberal social policy has never put an emphasis on the family because the village elders, frankly, don’t believe in the importance of strong, traditional families,” Santorum asserts. “For a raft of reasons, the village elders view the strong, traditional, married-mother-and-father family as contrary to their social agenda. They think of society as fundamentally made up of *individuals* guided by elite and ‘expert’ organizations like government, not the antiquated, perhaps uneducated, independent family. The village elders *want* society to be individualistic, because a society composed only of individuals responds better to ‘expert’ command and control.”

Those who protest or recoil in light of Santorum’s pointed rhetoric should understand that his argument is solidly based in the writings and public arguments of those he opposes. The foundation of the modern revolutions in sex, law, education, and the larger society are based in an assertion of either individual or class rights—not in a focus on the protection of the family as the definitional unit of civilization.

In essence, Santorum sees marriage as the essential glue that defines families and holds civilization together. “Marriage matters because children matter,” he asserts. “Without marriage, children suffer. There is simply no better investment parents can make in their children’s future than a healthy marriage.” Santorum’s insistence upon the primacy of marriage will be sufficient to give opponents grounds for labeling him a finger-wagging moralist. But, as Santorum understands, the morality of marriage defines the morality of the larger culture.

Ideas do have consequences (another key conservative idea), and Santorum believes that the idea of big government, wedded to the principle of No-Fault Freedom, has led to family dissolution and an entire host of social ills. “We’ve wasted decades and countless lives under the direction of the village elders trying to build bureaucracies to aid the poor and marginal in our society, while ignoring the central importance of the traditional family,” Santorum insists. In his view, the prevailing elites have been “pretending that the health of the mom-and-dad family isn’t really important.”

Without apology, Santorum grounds his concept of family in what he properly identifies as a “natural” form. Even though he speaks of the “traditional” family, he recognizes that the natural or nuclear family is something prior to tradition. As a Roman Catholic, Santorum grounds this in the natural law. In so doing, he raises an issue that should attract broad Christian consensus. He correctly asserts that liberals see nature as far too confining and thus the enemy of freedom. “Liberals believe that the traditional family is neither natural nor vital, and that it’s an antiquated social convention which has not only outlived its usefulness, but is now inherently discriminatory and repressive towards legitimate alternative ‘families,’” Santorum reflects.

Why would the senator tie his social vision to such an arbitrary definition of family? He answers that question clearly: “Every known society has some form of marriage. And it’s always about bringing together a male and a female into the kind of sexual union where the interests of children under the care of their own mother and father are protected. Marriage is the word for the way in which we connect a man, a woman, and their children into one loving family. It represents our best attempt to see that every child receives his or her birthright: the right to know and be known by, to love and to be loved by, his or her own father and mother.”

Santorum recognizes that many families fail to live up to this vision. Nevertheless, he rightly insists that nothing can replace the family. When advocates for same-sex marriage attempt to redefine marriage as an institution, they are merely articulating a vision of what Santorum calls “liberal marriage.” As he sees it, “the ‘right’ of homosexuals to ‘marry’ one

another is a logical result of what *must* happen to the definition of marriage if we view society as composed of nothing but abstract, autonomous *individuals*, rather than of men and women with their given natures. Abstract individuals, after all, are completely interchangeable and completely 'free' to define who and what they are. To the liberal mind, therefore, there is no 'rational basis' for limiting marriage only to people of opposite sexes Our village elders now declare that those holding to the traditional understanding of marriage are simply irrational."

Of course, Santorum is a legislator, and he understands the role of law as an instrument for teaching the young. "Just imagine two or three generations from now, if we legalize same-sex marriage today, what young adults will understand about marriage," he suggests. "Keep in mind that they will have been raised in a society that considers marriage nothing more than a romantic and sexual coupling between men and men, women and women, and men and women. The law will have declared it so, the centers will have been pressured into silence, and public schools will embrace and teach same-sex marriage as the law of the land. Laws have meaning, and therefore, laws *teach*. When something is legal it has the presumption that it is moral and right. If the sexual unions of men with men and women with women have equal dignity with the union of men and women, then marriage cannot be understood as having anything intrinsically to do with children. Society will teach the next generation that marriage is a self-centered endeavor primarily about adult satisfaction, not children's well-being."

Throughout the book, Senator Santorum reveals a thoughtful and intelligent engagement with the most basic issues of political theory, conservative political philosophy, and the social impact of culture. He writes personally and sensitively of his own observations and about how threatening social realities have affected his own family and the way he and his wife raise their children.

When addressing issues as sensitive as abortion, Santorum is able to write about the danger abortion poses to our "moral ecology," even as he provides an insider's view of how he became involved in the partial-birth abortion issue. Movingly, he writes of abortion as "a toxin methodically polluting our fragile moral ecosystem." As he laments, "It poisons everyone it touches, from the mother and her ill-fated child, to the mother's and father's families, to the abortion provider, to each of us who stands as a silent witness to this destruction and debasement of human life."

Even more movingly, he wrote of the experience he and his wife shared as they were told by a doctor that their unborn child was afflicted with a fatal birth defect and would surely die. He writes, "That wasn't the news we wanted or expected, but I must tell you that our reaction, after the shock and grief, was not to avoid the pain, the cost, or the struggle; it was not to get rid of the 'problem,' and it was not to take a baby out of his misery like something that was less than human. Karen and I couldn't rationalize how we could treat this little human life at twenty weeks' gestation in the womb any different than one twenty weeks old after birth. At either age, he is helpless, unaware, and thoroughly dependent on us, his parents, to protect him, care for him, and love him unconditionally." Gabriel Michael Santorum, who died just two hours after his birth, was treated as a human being rather than something less than human, and his life and death testify of the irreducible but vulnerable reality of human dignity.

It Takes a Family is an important book for our troubled times. Its emergence can bring only good things for the conservative movement in America. If every public servant was this clear-headed and intellectually courageous, we would see a very different culture.

