

AlbertMohler.com

America's Second Civil War?

Our nation's political rhetoric is filled with references to unity and national cohesiveness. Nevertheless, this unity is often more superficial than substantial, and talk of national unity wears thin when the culture appears to be ripping apart at the seams.

Tuesday, November 15, 2005

Our nation's political rhetoric is filled with references to unity and national cohesiveness. Nevertheless, this unity is often more superficial than substantial, and talk of national unity wears thin when the culture appears to be ripping apart at the seams.

During last year's presidential race, commentators and editorialists commonly lamented their assessment that the unity that had marked the nation in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 had dissipated into a resumption of political debate and partisanship. Bryce Christensen sees the unity that marked the post-9/11 attacks as temporary and artificial—operating like something of a defense mechanism for the culture at large. He argues that the deeper reality is a cultural conflict that he describes as “America's second civil war.” Christensen is Professor of English at Southern Utah University and also serves as contributing editor to *The Family in America*, published by the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society. In an essay published in October 2003, “Divided We Fall: America's Second Civil War,” he argues that the rhetoric of unity that followed the terrorists attacks obscured, temporarily at least, a far deeper cultural conflict.

In his words, “the recent rhetoric of unity has obscured the sad reality of a nation more deeply divided than it has ever been, a nation whose citizens are increasingly pulled apart—personally, socially, morally, economically, ideologically and politically—by the unprecedented disintegration of the nation's marital and family life.” Christensen's essay is clear and prophetic, offering important insights into the reality of America's social health. He characterizes this social conflict as a battle fought over the most basic institutions of civilization and private life—marriage and the family. He describes recent trends as America's “astounding national retreat from wedlock and family life” and asserts that this retreat is not “merely an innocuous shift in personal lifestyles,” but “has seriously harmed our national public life, creating grievous tears in our national social fabric, profoundly dis-unifying the nation.” He presses his point: “Until Americans face that grim reality, even the most inspired talk about national unity will amount to no more than whistling-in-the-dark self-delusion.”

In order to back up his assessment, Christensen begins with a series of statistics. “In the more than two centuries of their country's existence, Americans have never before seen more fragmentation and disarray in marital and family life than we currently see. Though the divorce rate has declined slightly since the early 1980s, it still remains more than 30-percent higher than it was in 1970, when it was already high by historical standards. Meanwhile, the national marriage rate has plummeted to an all-time low, dropping almost 40 percent just since 1970, a drop that helps to account for an illegitimacy rate that has skyrocketed from just five percent in 1960 to 33 percent in 1998. Just as dramatic has been the multiplication of the number of couples repudiating wedlock in favor of non-marital cohabitation: the Census Bureau counted 4.5 million such couples in 1999, compared to just 1.6 million in 1980. Also on the rise, the number of female-headed households with children has risen from 3.0 million in 1970 to 7.8 million in 1999, and while the number of married-couple households with children has remained relatively stable, declining from 25.5 million in 1970 to 25.0 million in 1999, it must be remembered that the population as a whole grew by almost 30 percent (about 60 million) during this period.”

But that litany of statistics tells only part of the story. Christensen points out that many of the children living with married parents actually live with only one biological parent. Indeed, only slightly more than half live with both biological parents.

Did the national unity after September 11, 2001 mean a return to marriage and stable family patterns? Not hardly. In

retrospect, Christensen argues that any perceived shift in family attitudes constituted nothing more than a temporary aberration. "It appears that nothing Osama bin Laden and his followers have done has reversed the country's repudiation of family life."

Christensen does not use his civil war metaphor carelessly. To the contrary, he points to the period from 1861 to 1865 as "the most often-invoked example of national disunion." He acknowledges the full horror of this conflict, often described as pitting "brother against brother," but argues that even the terrible bloodletting of the Civil War was largely fought over regional alliances. In America's current civil war, Christensen argues that we face a conflict in which brother is truly pitted against brother, husbands against wives, parents against children, and children against parents. He cites literary critic Alvin Kernan to the effect that "in America, the family is probably the most desperate battlefield."

By any measure, over the last four decades America has set itself on a radical experiment in social innovation. Tragically, most of that innovation has taken form as assaults upon the integrity of marriage and the natural family. In the name of individual autonomy, personal liberation, feminism, and other liberationist causes, the family has been sacrificed on the altar of social revolution.

In a civil war fought with bullets and bayonets, the statistics come in terms of mortality and battle deaths. In America's current civil war, the statistics come in the form of research reports and sociological studies. Christensen cites reports from the University of New Hampshire indicating that women cohabitating with men without benefit of marriage are almost five times as likely as married peers to experience "extreme violence" within the household. Other research documents an "association between physical abuse of children and deviance from normative family structure." Christensen also cites Columbia University researchers who "have determined from available child-abuse data that children living in single-parent families are more than twice as likely to experience physical abuse." Similarly, Ohio State University studies "have established that domestic violence harmful to women and children is especially likely to erupt in 'disadvantaged neighborhoods' in which more than 42 percent or more of the households are headed by single females."

The battlefields of Shiloh, Gettysburg, Manassas, and other now-famous fields of battle marked America's first civil war, but many of the most significant disastrous battles of the current conflict are fought in courtrooms. With the family disintegrating through divorce, Christensen argues that this "fragmentation of the family sets the stage for socially divisive custody fights that traumatize children and embitter and impoverish adults."

Specifically, he points to the prevalence of "no-fault" divorce laws which "have made it easy to sever the ties to an unwanted spouse." In an important observation, Christensen documents the fact that no-fault divorce laws have not simplified child custody battles. "Indeed, legal scholar Lynn D. Wardle identifies an increasing number of acrimonious custody disputes as a prime reason that the nationwide adoption of no-fault divorce statutes has not led to the reduction in adversarial litigation promised by no-fault advocates."

Before the development of no-fault divorce laws, divorce proceedings were indeed often acrimonious. Christensen explains that the acrimony has not disappeared—it has merely been transferred to an even more dangerous context. Now, custody hearings and extended custody battles draw children into the vortex of divorce conflict. As Christensen notes, "the siblings split by America's domestic civil war of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are bewildered children with no control over what happens to them."

Poignantly, Christensen points to reports from psychologists who find that children split apart by divorce typically wish their parents to be reunited. "Even after the pronouncement of the divorce decree, children thus find themselves pinned down in the ugly house-to-house combat that continues between the former spouses," he laments.

One by-product of no-fault divorce laws is an alarming rise in accusations of child sexual abuse made by one spouse against the other.

Some may object to Christensen's use of the civil war metaphor. After all, they may argue, Americans are not currently involved in a killing war. Christensen would no doubt point to the vast swath of social devastation left in the wake of America's ongoing social revolution.

Christensen cites historian David T. Courtwright, who argues that the breakdown of urban family life in America is "the same kind of social disorder in the modern city as America once saw on its Wild West fringe in Dodge City or

Abilene—and for the same reason: the disappearance of the marital and family ties that restrain male aggression.” Courtwright argues that this is because “the total amount of violence and disorder in society is negatively related to the percentage of males in intact families of origin or procreation.” Christensen then argues that “the upsurge in illegitimacy and divorce in the inner-city” has created urban killing zones of lawlessness and moral anarchy.

Other signs of cultural breakdown abound. Sociologist Jennifer Glass documents a growing divergence in moral attitudes between full-time career women and women who are full-time homemakers or work only part-time. Christensen warns that “the retreat from family life is dis-unifying the nation along axes other than those defined by gender ideology.” He points to the family disintegration that is now “creating increasingly impassable chasms between America’s poor and America’s rich.”

This culture’s pattern of social dissolution is undeniably tied to the breakdown of the family unit. Why? Christensen answers the question clearly: “Compared to married peers, Americans with no intact family ties typically evince little of the civic virtue necessary to forge meaningful national union. For even if they have avoided criminal behavior, even if they have avoided bitter conflict with a former spouse, and even if they have opted out of the divisive ideological crusades polarizing political life, Americans without family ties typically lack the psychological and moral strength to make selfless sacrifices on behalf of national civic life. Millions of Americans who would sincerely like to contribute to a healthy nation simply lack the inner reserve to do so because family failure has plunged them into pathological self-absorption.”

The American landscape is now marked by a multitude of battlefields where husbands have fought wives, siblings have jockeyed for legal advantage, generations have been pitted against each other, and the family has been sacrificed to the idol of American individualism. Bryce Christensen has written an important essay that now, even more than a year after its publication, deserves our attention. The only way out of America’s second civil war is a national recovery that will start with the recovery of marriage and the integrity of family life.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

