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ADDRESS

OF

THE HONORABLE EDWIN MEESE III  
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

TO THE

THE INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY STUDIES

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 1986  
MARK HOPKINS HOTEL  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

NOTE: Because Mr. Meese often speaks from notes, the speech as delivered may vary from this text. However, he stands behind this text as printed.

Family. Work. Neighborhood. Peace. Freedom.

Those five words from the 1980 campaign state the five great themes of this administration. Since taking office, the President has worked hard to protect and maximize our freedoms, to secure the peace, to revive the economy so that more and more Americans do indeed have work, and to encourage the return of more and more decision-making to local communities, to neighborhoods.

In addition, the President has sought to protect and strengthen the family. He has, for example, supported tax-reform legislation that would greatly help the family.

But it is clear to the President there is more that this administration can do if the family is indeed to remain what he calls "the moral core of our society."

In his State of the Union address, the President said this:

"As we work to make the American Dream real for all, we must . . . look to the condition of America's families. Struggling parents today worry how they will provide their children the advantages their parents gave them. In the welfare culture, the breakdown of the family, the most basic support system, has reached crisis proportions -- in female and child poverty, child abandonment, horrible crimes and deteriorating schools. After hundreds of billions of dollars in poverty programs, the plight

of the poor grows more painful. But the waste in dollars and cents pales before the most tragic loss -- the sinful waste of human spirit and potential."

The President then went on:

"We can ignore this terrible truth no longer."

In his speech the President instructed the White House Domestic Policy Council, of which I am chairman, to study the plight of the family in America today and to present to him by December 1 a strategy for taking immediate action. Already I have asked the Undersecretary of Education, Gary Bauer, to head a Working Group on the Family within the Domestic Policy Council.

Tonight I would like to address this critical subject of the family. I would like to share my thoughts with you on why the family is important, what its problems are and what might be done to help it.

To begin with, one of the first things we need to be clear about is that by the term "family," I mean the nuclear family -- one husband and one wife, monogamous and heterosexual, together with their child or children.

That is what a family is. Other types of "families" do exist. But they are not the ideal for our society. In case someone doubts that, I would simply ask that person to reflect on the fact that, in the wake of the Bill Moyers' special the other night, no commentator came forward to praise as the ideal family those units which are husbandless or those in which children are

born to unwed teenagers -- or even to unwed older women. Neither did anyone come forward to praise what have been called "alternative living arrangements." As Margaret Mead once said, "No matter how many communes anybody invents, the family always creeps back."

Now, the family is not, obviously, a peculiarly American institution, although it has been the backbone of this country. The family is universal, occurring throughout man's history and around the world.

For all its antiquity, however, the two-parent family today has become, in America, a fragile institution. What is created in nature, it seems, man -- and woman -- more and more are setting asunder.

But does family breakdown matter? Is this fact even important?

Incredible as it may seem, as opposed to common sense as it is, some people think family breakdown unimportant. That is why, in our age, it is important to say why the family matters.

It matters for this reason: among the institutions through which human beings satisfy their most basic needs and fulfill their aspirations, the family is central. For most people, most of the time, family well-being is key to individual well-being. Indeed, strong families constitute the foundation of a healthy society. As Will and Ariel Durant have said, "The family is the nucleus of civilization."

Consider: A well-functioning family provides shelter, food and clothing for its members. It ministers to its sick or injured, and protects them from harm. And, perhaps equally important in our own somewhat harried time, the family is a haven from the psychic and emotional strains of the world. It provides intimacy and personal warmth.

The family also acts as an economic unit, although today it is less a producing than a consuming one. Nonetheless, within the family, labor is divided between husband, wife and children in a relatively efficient manner.

The family often serves, especially in smaller communities, as the basis for integration into the surrounding community. It is an element in the social order, contributing to unity and stability. When the family breaks down, other problems are not far behind -- problems like poverty, welfare, dependency, undereducation and illiteracy, and crime. These are not simply family but also community problems that can plague the nation.

How does the family contribute to the social order? It does so by imparting the kind of virtues upon which a free and stable society depends. Which virtues do I mean? Not necessarily the Christian and classical virtues -- those of faith, hope and love; of wisdom and temperance, although these virtues are important. No, I am referring to the less heroic, but still important virtues of self-respect and respect for others, honesty, industry, concern for neighbor, and care about community. The

list is obviously longer, because there are a great many intangible qualities that parents pass on to their children -- qualities that define both what kind of individuals those children turn out to be as adults, and what kind of society they create.

I should also add, as a parent, that children pass things on to their parents -- and I don't mean just a degree or two of fever, or a sore throat. Children also civilize us. As Peter DeVries once remarked, "The value of marriage is not that adults produce children, but that children produce adults."

The family, then, is not only our basic economic and social unit. It is where our character as individuals and as citizens is formed. Common sense tells us this, and social science more and more confirms it.

Public policy is therefore family policy. Notice that I say it is family policy. Public policy affects family life whether we intend it to do so, or not.

The crisis in the family today is a comparatively recent phenomenon -- taking place over the past 25 years. It is also largely an American one: other countries do not appear to be plagued in the same degree.

The decline of the family that the President discussed is perhaps best indicated by the facts on illegitimate births and single-parent families. Let me give you a brief sampling:

\* a recent Newsweek article projected that "by 1990 half of

all American families may be headed by only one adult."

- \* Presently, more than a quarter of all children are raised in single-parent homes -- double the number in 1970. In 90 percent of all cases, this parent is the mother.
- \* Among blacks, the situation is worst. More than 60 percent of black children live in single-parent homes, and 70 percent of these are officially classified as poor.
- \* Overall, fifty-four percent of single-parent households lie below the poverty line, compared to 18 percent of two-parent families.
- \* Today, every other black infant is born to a teen-aged mother who is, more often than not, unmarried and poor. In 1980, among black women, aged 15-19, 82 percent of all births were illegitimate.
- \* Between 1950 and 1980, the number of white illegitimate births increased from less than 2 percent to 11 percent.

I could go on. The divorce rate figures, as you know, are equally dismal. But even the gloomiest statistics never quite capture the full measure of the human tragedy. In that respect,

I think the recent Bill Moyers' television special, "The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America," was a great public service.

Although the program focused on blacks in the inner city, where the failure to form and maintain families is the most acute, it carried a message for all Americans. In their own words, we heard black Americans, young and old, describe a seemingly endless cycle of family decline: illegitimacy, teen-aged pregnancy, poverty, welfare dependency, unemployment, violence and crime. The cycle is complex, but spiraling ever downward.

Only twenty-five years ago, Moyers reported:

The strong family was still the backbone of Black America, and three out of four children had both parents at home. That is true no longer. Most black children are now growing up without their fathers. The result is a world turned upside-down, as children copy what they see and repeat what they learn.

Moyers told the story of a woman who was 34 years old and had never married. She was a teenager when her daughter was born, just as her own mother had been when she was born.

Today, notes Moyers:

Black teenagers have the highest pregnancy rate in the industrial world. And in the black inner city, practically no teen-aged mother gets married.

"That's no racist comment," Moyers said. "What's happening goes far beyond race." To be sure, most of the destructive trends visible in black families can be found in the families of other American ethnic groups, including white.

What is at the root of this crisis in the American family? What is happening?

To be sure, there have been significant changes in our society, in our attitudes, and in our laws. The liberalization of our divorce laws has had an impact on the family. So has the sexual revolution. So has a range of public policies, including those dealing with welfare and taxation, for example.

But in addition to these changes, we have also witnessed in our times an important change in our priorities. Let me explain. It was once taken for granted that nothing could be more important to our national well-being than the well-being of our families. Our social and political institutions supported family well-being or, at the very least, were careful not to threaten it. Our social norms, our cultural values, and a host of intermediating institutions nurtured and promoted -- and were in turn nurtured and promoted by -- strong families.

In recent years, however, we have lost sight of the central importance of the family. Changes in laws, policy, and values have, often inadvertently, tended to undermine the family. These

developments have had particularly adverse effects on poorer families -- those families whose members most need the support of strong families to advance and prosper.

Charles Murray, in his pioneering study of social policy from 1950 to 1980 titled Losing Ground, presents sobering evidence that our policies have done more to aggravate our social ills than to allay them. George Gilder's Wealth and Poverty, like Murray's book, examines the strong economic incentives working against the family in federal assistance programs. Gilder writes:

Welfare continuously mutes and misrepresents the necessities of life that prompted previous generations of poor people to escape poverty through the invariable routes of work, family, and faith. Above all, the welfare culture tells the man he is not a necessary part of the family; he feels dispensable, his wife knows he is dispensable, his children sense it.

While the idiom they use is different, the black men and women on Bill Moyers' program -- the so-called "beneficiaries" of the system -- gave remarkably similar assessments.

Very soon the new Working Group on the Family will start its work. The group will assess the present condition of the family. It will conduct a comprehensive inventory and evaluation of the effects of a wide range of public policies on the well-being of American families. It will identify those initiatives -- whether found in the public or private sector -- that have helped

strengthen families. And it will suggest changes in policies, programs and practices that would enable us to do all that we can to support the family.

Obviously, it is not my purpose here today to do the job of the Working Group in advance. But it is my purpose to insist on the importance of making the family central in our thinking about our public policies and the kind of society we wish to have. For we will not be able to design the right programs or policies affecting the family unless we have the right ideas about this most critical institution.

As we think about the family, perhaps those of us who are adults, in positions of family leadership, ought to engage in some critical self-reflection. It has been said that "the reason parents no longer lead their children in the right direction is that the parents aren't going that way themselves." We parents owe it to ourselves and our posterity to go "in the right direction" in our personal lives. Families will be stronger, and so will the nation, as a result of parents who live lives worth copying.

In his State of the Union message, President Reagan set an "agenda for the future." The restoration of the nuclear family, so essential to man's becoming man, is a central part of that future. Whether we work in government or the private sector, each of us must play our part in this great endeavor.