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# THE CRISIS

Black  
History Month  
'94 Special Edition

THE MOST PROGRESSIVE VOICE OF BLACK AMERICA

## Black Stars' Images Shine



Your Romantic  
Market Value

Black Clinton Cabinet  
On A Great High



Black Hair: A  
Crown of Glory

Part I of this article was published in the January 1994 issue of *The Crisis*, the national membership magazine of the NAACP. It ended by telling readers, "End of Part I. To be continued in the next edition." The next edition, however, for reasons that have not been explained to the author, did not carry the continuation and offered no explanation to readers. It may or may not be relevant that the decision not to publish Part II was made by the first female editor of *The Crisis*, while the original decision to publish the full article was made by her predecessor, a divorced African-American father. One of the stories featured on the cover of the issue that had no space for Part II was "Black Hair: A Crown of Glory." At any rate, Part II is printed here in the hope that it might inform the national discussion of welfare reform.

## What Do We Really Know About Child Support? Part II

I believe that something terrible started to happen around 1960. Before we try to identify it, let's take a look at what's happened economically to the black family in the recent past.

- In 1960, twenty-two percent of all black babies were born to unwed mothers; in 1970, the figure was thirty-five percent; in 1980, fifty-five percent. In 1988, the figure was sixty-one percent. [The New Republic, Feb 6, 1989]
- In 1960, 243,000 children lived with a parent who was never married. By 1990, this number had increased twenty-fold to 4.9 million children. [Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources, May 12, 1992]
- In 1960 about 800,000 families received AFDC assistance. In 1987 more than 3.7 million families were in the program. [Grolier's Academic American Encyclopedia; electronic edition]
- In 1970 the average number of children receiving AFDC benefits monthly was 5.5 million. The number was 8.5 million in 1991. [Sixteenth Annual Report to Congress, FY 1991, DHHS Office of Child Support Enforcement]
- In 1970 total AFDC expenditures were \$4.1 billion. By 1991 they had increased nearly five-fold to \$20.3 billion. [Sixteenth Annual Report to Congress, FY 1991, DHHS Office of Child Support Enforcement]
- In 1978, the number of never-married women with children was 1.3 million. In 1991 the number was up to 3 million. [DHHS as reported by the Washington Post, October 11, 1991]
- In 1979 the number of women 18 and older living with children whose father was not in the home was about 7.2 million. By 1990 it had risen 39 percent to about 10 million. [Census Bureau: "Child Support and Alimony: 1989"]

What is going on? I'd like to suggest at least a partial explanation.

Around 1960, modern feminism arose. For all its value, it brought some excesses. By far the most dam-

aging of these was its promotion of such ideas as 1) women don't need men, 2) women can do whatever they want without men, 3) women are better than men, 4) women are better off without men, 5) men are responsible for all the ills of the world, 6) children only need a loving mother, 7) men only teach children how to be patriarchal and militaristic, 8) the only positive effect fathers have on children is through money, 9) etc. etc. ad nauseam.

As a product of feminism, the Principle of the Disposability of Men is an idea not confined to black America. Indeed, Newsweek, August 2, 1993 reported that "the sharpest increases [in elective single motherhood] are among white women... college-educated women... and professionals." But African-Americans, still living in the shadows of slavery, which utterly demolished the male protector/provider role and the pride, dignity and strength that came with it, may have been especially susceptible to believing that "men are good for nothing." I have heard it from more than one source that black boys grow up hearing, "Black men ain't s---, you're daddy wasn't s---, and you're going to be just like your daddy."

Much more easily than they can stimulate the economy to give men jobs to make them valuable again, President Clinton and NAACP Executive Director/CEO Dr. Benjamin Chavis could say to young women, "I'm not here to make value judgments for you, but it is my personal opinion that truly loving mothers will do everything they can to honor and respect the involvement—not just the economic involvement—of fathers with their kids."

Much more easily than she can design and administer an effective, efficient, fair child support enforcement bureaucracy, DHHS Secretary Donna Shalala and Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders could say to those same young women, "If you knew that getting pregnant today would mean your baby would be born without a fully developed left leg, you would wait for a better time to get pregnant, wouldn't you? Well, if you get pregnant today, your baby will be born without a fully developed father. Research shows that fathers are at least as important to your baby's happiness as left legs are. Maybe you should wait until you can give your baby everything it needs—including a dad."



Imagine if everyone in America would say to young men, especially young black men, "We have allowed and caused you to grow up in a society that tells you that because you are male you are disposable, inferior and obsolete. We apologize for the pain, sadness, anger and outrage those ideas must have created in you. We want you to know that we have grown to appreciate your importance in our community. We need you no matter how much money you have. We look forward to having you serve as powerful fathers to your children. Fatherhood can be a joy forever—for you and for your kids. We now understand that it's not something you can throw away without suffering a huge personal loss. Save it until you're ready for all it's worth. And when you're ready for it, we'll honor and protect your investment in it."

We need to recognize that slavery—like its modern AFDC descendant—had distinctly different effects on slave women and slave men. Even under slavery, females could at least continue to fulfill their most basic gender role: they could be mothers and nurse their young. Males, however, were completely stripped of their identity as men. Their basic role—to provide—was assumed by the rich man. Their other basic function—to protect—was something they were utterly powerless to do against the rich man's overwhelming force. We have never as a society focused on the gender-specific, for-men-only psychological devastation of these facts. We have never recognized how a system of government payments that makes men dispensable recalls and renews those old wounds.

To restore fatherhood to its rightful place, the government must protect and respect fatherhood no less than it supports motherhood. In her pilot survey of noncustodial parents, the Urban Institute's Sonenstein obtained a measure of the friendliness of breakups between mothers and fathers. The friendlier the breakup, she found, the more likely was the father to make payments. "These findings suggest that public policy oriented toward obtaining higher payment levels might try minimizing hostility and maximizing friendliness between separating parents," Sonenstein wrote.

It is also essential, of course, that the government protect the father's relationship with his children. Ask yourself whether, as a purely practical matter, the father uttering the following words in an MDRC focus group is likely to pay child support willingly: "If I wanted to take [my daughter] out for weekends, we are pretty cool. [The mother] will let me take [my daughter] out. I get to see my kid, but... if [the mother] is mad, she screws me up. If I make plans, she don't be home... I call the house and there won't be no answer."

Shamelessly, the government has paid mere lip service to the importance of the father-child bond. In 1984, when it passed an early round of child support measures, Congress passed the buck by saying that "domestic issues, such as visitation rights and child custody, are often intricately intertwined with the child support problem and have received inadequate consid-

eration; and... state and local governments must focus on the vital issues of child support, child custody, visitation rights, and other related domestic issues."

The states, shameless themselves, have paid scant attention to any part of the father-child relationship other than the father's money. Michigan provides a promising exception. In a speech to the Children's Rights Council in Washington, DC in March 1992, Michigan State Senator Debbie Stabenow said, "[Michigan's unique] visitation enforcement provisions... have provided an incentive for the noncustodial parent to maintain child support payments. This may be the significant factor which has made Michigan number one in collections for many years."

Protecting the father-child relationship from interference by the mother is neither difficult nor expensive. Stabenow went on to say, "In practice, only a small amount of resources are spent in actually enforcing visitation. It seems that the custodial parent's knowledge of the possible sanctions acts as a deterrent. Most complaints are resolved by simple written inquiries of the custodial parent." (Besides protecting the father-child relationship, the Michigan program of mediation ensures that custodial parents treat noncustodial parents with a modicum of respect, and thus helps maintain the parental friendliness Sonenstein found to be related to child support compliance.)

The Commission on Interstate Child Support (created by the Family Support Act of 1988) concluded that "Nonpayment of support should not be a valid defense to visitation denial. Similarly, visitation interference should not be a valid defense to non-payment of child support." That even-handed approach seems fair and balanced enough, until we remember that non-payment is aggressively attacked by the support enforcement machinery, while visitation interference, except in Michigan, precipitates no government response whatsoever.

The ramifications of these facts are huge and real. The Census Bureau report tells us that 90.2 percent of fathers with joint custody pay the child support due; 79.1 percent of fathers with visitation rights pay the child support due; only 44.5 percent of "absent" fathers with neither visitation nor joint custody pay the child support due. MDRC found that visitation interference was "perhaps a dominant source of resentment for the parents who are financially able to pay."

It only makes sense to make sure fathers have good relationships with their children. "Given limited emotional and material resources," MDRC observes, "[the fathers] must make a difficult choice between preserving ties with their biological children and forging relationships with a new family. Over time, then, the fathers' obligations often come to be discounted by both them and the mothers of their children." Contrary to popular myth, men want and need to love and be loved by their children. If men can't get what they need from their first set of kids, they'll naturally and inevitably look to have another set, thus dividing economic

resources that might already be limited and marginal.

Respecting the father-child relationship will have beneficial consequences beyond the merely economic. Former DHHS secretary Louis Sullivan wrote in "The Child Support Report," June 1992, that, "the adverse consequence of father absence cannot be reduced to a decline in income alone... A recent Department of Health and Human Services study found that even after controlling for... socioeconomic status, children from disrupted families were 20 to 40 percent more likely to suffer health problems than children living with both biological parents. These children were also much more likely to display antisocial behavior, peer conflict and/or dependency." [Emphasis added.]

In November 1989, *Essence* magazine said, "The drug economy is the main game in town in the ghetto, and until it is economically replaced, neither Nancy Reagan nor Jesse Jackson nor drug czar William Bennett nor all the social workers in the world are going to make it go away." But is there any possibility that the big money of the drug industry can really be economically replaced? Even the unlikely return of \$20 per hour heavy manufacturing jobs couldn't compete on a purely fiscal basis with drug-running. No, the drug business will never be economically replaced. But it could be psychologically replaced if our society, especially our women, said—and truly meant—"I know that my children need a father, and I know they need him for more than money. You with your humble little business, your low-wage job are infinitely more valuable and attractive to me than all the gold-flashing drug lords in this city. I know that with you I can build a solid, steady family, and raise children who will know first-hand the value of hard work, and who will raise their kids even higher than you and I can raise ours."

In my forthcoming book *Good Will Toward Men*, I interviewed two African-American women who understand what black men are going through. Audrey Chapman, a Washington, D.C., therapist who specializes in family and relationship issues, told me, "From the moment they arrived here, African-American men experienced a tremendous sense of powerlessness with no way to openly express what they were internalizing... I think that's been passed on among African-American men, like you pass on a banner, generation after generation after generation. That's where I believe the drugs and alcohol come in, because both are means of anesthetizing one's pain, one's rage, one's sadness, and one's shame."

Doris Caldwell is a nurse working with men in an Atlanta drug treatment program. She, too, sees a connection between male powerlessness and anti-social behavior. "A lot of [the men in drug treatment]... develop the substance-abuse problem after their lives have been torn apart, whether it's divorce, or the children going to the wife, loss of job, loss of self-respect, different things that cause them a lot of pain. They turn to the substance to medicate the pain they're feeling

over being no longer in control of their lives."

The father-child relationship is not just good for children. We must recognize that it's part of what makes men happy, healthy and productive citizens.

After reading the Census Bureau report on child support, congresswoman Patricia Schroeder, head of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, told the *Washington Post* that "Congress has no choice but to keep tightening the screws until the collection of child-support improves..."

That's one approach. But it's a tired, angry approach. On the other hand, Vice President Gore has launched a new campaign to re-invent government. Professor Paul Light of the Brookings Institution says this about the vice president's plan: "Command and control systems, and the distrust that goes with them, have a host of serious side effects, not the least of which is the enormous overhead of writing and enforcing the rules themselves.... Mr. Gore's reform effort points us another way. It embraces innovation, urges us to give up on our bureaucratic systems and cross-checking, and tells us to trust our employees to do what comes naturally: perform. It tells us that the path to better service is not through more rules and mid-level managers, but competition, listening and risk-taking. And it tells us that it's OK for labor and management to work together."

We can easily see the parallels between the vice president's exciting vision and a new view of child support policy by paraphrasing Light's description: "Child support enforcement and punishment systems, and the distrust that goes with them, have a host of serious side effects, not the least of which is the enormous overhead of writing and enforcing the rules themselves.... The new approach to child support points us another way. It embraces innovation, urges us to give up on our bureaucratic systems and cross-checking, and tells us to trust our fathers to do what comes naturally: love their children. It tells us that the path to better fathering is not through more rules and computers, but compassion, encouragement and respect. And it tells us that it's essential for fathers and government to work together."

As Doris Caldwell says in *Good Will Toward Men*, "We need to start looking at the male as someone who belongs in a family, that the male is just as important as the female in nurturing a child, that the male should make decisions for his child, and that he should be given joint custody of his child. Once we start doing that, society will begin to look at our males in a different light. His family values are basically the same as everybody else's."

#### Recommendations

- Instead of providing financial incentives to states based on how much child support they collect, provide incentives to states based on how much time fathers spend time with their kids.
- Encourage events specifically designed for low-

income noncustodial fathers during “visitation” with their children. If having the events for “fathers” is illegal or discriminatory, they could be made for “noncustodial parents” with much the same effect. Not only would the events support the father-child relationship, but we could expect fathers at these events to find peer support as well.

- Fund the full-scale Survey of Absent Parents so that we can better understand the problems of noncustodial parents and the reasons so many do not pay support.
- Release the DHHS study on custodial fathers so we can gauge the differences, if any, between the problems of custodial mothers and custodial fathers.
- Allow paternity proceedings to be initiated by either the father or the mother, instead of only by the mother as is now the case.
- Since we want fathers to be confident that the children we want them to support actually are their own, any doubt the father might have is counter-productive. Requesting a blood test, however, conveys an absence of trust and makes cooperation thereafter difficult. In all AFDC cases, then, the government, rather than the putative father, should be the entity which insists on the resolution of doubt.
- For several years, there has been an effort to identify and eliminate Gender Bias in the Courts, but the project has shown little interest in bias against men. Require that anti-male gender bias in the courts be addressed.
- Since social workers have great influence over the course of a father’s relationship with his children, and since there is considerable evidence of “hostility” toward men in the child support and children’s services systems, undertake a campaign to identify and eliminate Gender Bias in the Social Services.
- Grant joint custody in all cases unless there is a documentable reason to do otherwise; if joint custody is deemed objectionable by some jurisdictions, those jurisdictions should institute an affirmative action plan of sole custody for fathers.
- States and localities with commissions on women should be required to equally fund commissions on fatherhood to advocate and defend the paternal point of view so that policy decisions are based on full consideration of relevant facts.
- Require every child support enforcement office to provide mediators to help noncustodial parents resolve problems with visitation.
- Establish legal clinics for unmarried fathers in securing full parental rights to their children.
- Require the states to obey the dictates of congress in 1984: “State and local governments must focus on the vital issues of child support, child custody, visitation rights, and other related domestic issues.”
- Fund job training programs for noncustodial parents at least as well as for custodial parents.

Jack Kammer is the author of *Good Will Toward Men*, published in February 1994 by St. Martin’s Press.