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Beliefs

Peter Steinfels

Amid growing calls for a moral revolution, questions about who will make the sacrifices.

"Finally," President Clinton said at a convention of black ministers two weeks ago, "we may be ready to do something about it."

Mr. Clinton was speaking from the pulpit in Memphis where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his last sermon. The "it" that the President hoped the nation might finally confront was the blight of crime, drugs, joblessness and family disintegration that has cast such a shadow on Dr. King's dream. A political column in *The Washington Post* by E. J. Dionne termed President Clinton's speech "the most important of his 10-month-old Presidency."

Why? Because in dealing with the problems haunting black America, Mr. Clinton was linking the typically liberal emphasis on government actions to foster employment and economic security with the typically conservative emphasis on buttressing family stability, moral values and personal responsibility.

This theme of a moral and cultural revolution has cropped up more and more in White House pronouncements ever since Hillary Rodham Clinton's speech last April about the "politics of meaning."

There are models for this kind of moral and cultural revolution. Two centuries ago, England was hit with a wave of evangelical piety — the Methodism of Mrs. Clinton's forebears — combined with Romantic sentimentality, no-nonsense doctrines of self-help and new economic opportunities. A land of libertine aristocrats and displaced country folk marinating themselves in various gin lanes was transformed into a land of middle-class and working-class Victorian respectability.

Whatever the losses, the result was almost certainly a kinder, gentler environment for women and children.

Those who believe that a cultural stiffening of personal standards is still possible point to recent small-scale examples. The culture now stigmatizes, and sometimes even heavily penalizes, behavior that once was taken for granted: anti-Semitism, overt racism, cigarette smoking, public celebration of drug use and the routine designation of stereotypical

roles or traits to women. Success is less than total, but the changes are real.

Have things reached the point when society will mobilize, as President Clinton hopes, for a similar cultural revolution in regard to the interlocking triangle of family breakdown, crime-ridden neighborhoods and joblessness?

Are passage of the Brady gun-control bill, the Rev. Jesse Jackson's campaign against inner-city violence and Janet Reno's jabs at televised mayhem straws in the wind? Or are they well-meant but feeble gestures, substitutes for the decisive and possibly costly measures that society is unwilling to take?

Adding urgency to these questions are the data first presented by the author and researcher Charles Murray in *The Wall Street Journal*.

The nation, he noted, is approaching the point where one of every three children will be born to an unmarried mother. In 1991, 22 percent of the white births were to single women, most of them with low incomes and less than a high school education. The illegitimacy birthrate among white women is nearing the 25 percent that Mr. Murray believes is a kind of tipping point.

Twenty-five percent was the black illegitimacy rate that moved Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965 to write his much-debated Government memorandum warning about the state of the black family. Since then, that rate has gone to 68 percent — and more than 80 percent in many urban neighborhoods — with parallel increases in crime and dropping out of the work force, developments that Mr. Murray views as linked to fatherless children.

"The single most important social problem of our time," Mr. Murray said, is the emergence of a "critical mass" of fatherless children. It is the crucial factor, he argued, in poverty, crime, drugs, illiteracy — the whole snarl of social pathologies.

A lot of people agree with Mr. Murray about that, but don't agree with his proposed solution: abolish all economic support for single mothers, all welfare, all food stamps and all housing subsidies (he somewhat begrudgingly exempts medical care).

By throwing poor young mothers and their babies on the benevolence of parents, relatives, boyfriends, neighbors, churches and charities, Mr. Murray expects to detonate one of those cultural and moral revolutions.

The threat of this economic burden would jolt families and communities to reinstate all the forces — like promoting chastity, chaperoning, contraception, abortion, ready adoption, shotgun marriages and social stigma, generally — that operate against conceiving, bearing or keeping fatherless children.

Leave aside the reasons that this proposal might not work. Even if it did, in the meantime fatherless children and their unmarried mothers would bear the brunt of the change. In effect, they are hostages who would be threatened with disaster in order to restore social discipline.

This is a draconian solution. If strong measures are required, why not ones that might impinge on the more comfortable segments of soci-

ety, rather than on the most vulnerable?

For example, should the marketing edge obtained by blatant sexual appeals, verbal shock tactics or displays of violence be held as socially despicable as racist demagoguery? Should newspapers and television voluntarily forgo advertising such products and personalities?

Down that route, of course, lies financial disadvantage and what might be even more frightening for the culturally influential, the specter of Victorian respectability.

To what extent are pacesetters in the entertainment industry ready to give up the excitement of breaking taboos or to take seriously the possibility that an environment saturated with images of sex and violence might be linked to the self-destructive behavior of 15-year-olds?

"Finally, we may be ready to do something about it," President Clinton told the black ministers. The President and the ministers may be ready. It is not clear that many of the nation's other cultural leaders are equally determined.

Acquittal Is Reason Enough to Give Thanks

SAN DIEGO, Nov. 26 (AP) — To Dale Akiki, who was recently cleared of molesting nine preschoolers at a Sunday school in 1988 and 1989, the turkey and trimmings on Thanksgiving were sweet. But freedom was even sweeter.

"I'm just glad to be home," Mr. Akiki said as about 20 friends and relatives gathered on Thursday at the home of his in-laws to celebrate his first real Thanksgiving in two and a half years. The last two holidays he had spent in jail.

After a seven-month trial, the longest in San Diego history, Mr. Akiki was acquitted on Nov. 19 of all 35 charges.

Mr. Akiki, 38, said he had been sustained by faith. "You have to believe that God knows the truth," he said. "My prayers were answered that I would be home for Thanksgiving."

He began the day by attending church with his wife, Sharon. The Rev.

Richard Allsing, recounting his visit with Mr. Akiki shortly before the verdict, said he had reminded Mr. Akiki of the biblical story of David and Goliath, and had added, "You're not the only one who's walked this path." The congregation cheered.

During the trial, defense lawyers argued that parents and therapists had brainwashed the children through months of suggestive questioning, making them believe they had been abused. Jurors said they did not believe the children's testimony, which included stories that Mr. Akiki had slaughtered rabbits and killed a baby.

Residents here seemed to believe Mr. Akiki. Sheriff's deputies contributed money to rent a limousine for him on the night he was released, and letters supporting him have poured in to the local newspaper. But prosecutors stand by the children's testimony, and the children's parents are outraged.

The New York Times

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