Marriage Is the Key to Spending Cuts

by Phyllis Schlafly October 15, 2010

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The attack on the institution of marriage is not only the biggest cultural but also the biggest fiscal issue of our times, and political and judicial attacks by gays are only part of the problem. Marriage is being assaulted by unilateral divorce, feminist hostility toward marriage, the bias of family courts against fathers, and the taxpayer-paid financial incentives that subsidize illegitimate births.

Forty-five years ago, a liberal in Lyndon Johnson's Labor Department, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, shocked the nation with a report called "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." The Great Society's welfare handouts to women were breaking up black families by making husbands irrelevant.

Since the Moynihan Report, out-of-wedlock births in the United States have grown to 72.3 percent for blacks, 52.5 percent for Hispanics, and 28.6 percent for whites (non-Hispanic). For the population as a whole, out-of-wedlock births have risen from 6 percent in the 1960s to 40.6 percent today.

Sounding a Moynihan-style alarm today is Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation. He has assembled figures from U.S. Census Bureau and Centers for Disease Control data, and they are downright scary.

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This is not, as Moynihan indicated, merely a black problem, and it's not just a cultural problem as the RINOs (Republicans In Name Only, the fiscal conservatives who disdain social issues) like to portray it. It's a very big money problem because the government is transferring nearly $1 trillion in taxpayer-

funded handouts to the 40 percent of Americans who rely on government for all or part of their living expenses.

The crux of this problem and its costs is that a lack of marriage causes poverty. The poverty rate for single parents with children is 36.5 percent, while it is only 6.4 percent for married couples with children.

We just suffered the largest increase in government-designated poverty: 3.7 million more Americans moved into the "poor" column in 2009. The number of Americans receiving food stamps just rose to a record 41.8 million.

Obama's solution for the poverty problem is more redistribution of money from taxpayers to the poor. But there's no evidence that more money is the remedy because we've been increasing handouts every year and the problem keeps getting worse.

Contrary to a lot of chatter, this isn't a teenage problem (only 7.7 percent of new single moms are minors), and it isn't a failure of birth control, and it isn't the accidents of unplanned pregnancies. These single moms want their babies and confidently expect Big Brother to provide for them.

Rector's solution to the poverty problem is marriage. He urges government policies to promote and strengthen the institution of marriage instead of providing incentives to discourage it.

Marriage drops the probability of child poverty by 82 percent. Marriage has just as dramatic an effect as adding 5 to 6 years to the parents' level of education.

If single moms were to marry the fathers of their children, the children would immediately be lifted out of poverty. Eight out of ten of these fathers were employed at the time of the births of their out-of-wedlock children.

Government should reduce or eliminate the marriage penalties in welfare programs, in tax law, and even in ObamaCare. Rector explains that marriage penalties occur in many means-tested welfare programs such as food stamps, public housing, Medicaid, daycare, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

Ronald Reagan's advice is still pertinent. If we subsidize something, we'll get more of it; if we tax it, we'll get less of it.

Interviews with low-income single moms show that they are not hostile to marriage as an institution or as a life goal. In fact, they dream of having a husband, children, a minivan, and a house in the suburbs "with a white picket fence," but nobody tells them they will probably always be poor if they have babies without getting married.

What about the guidance we give kids in school? We tell them they will be poor if they become school dropouts and that it's self-destructive to use illegal drugs, but it's just as important to warn them about the life of poverty ahead of them if they produce babies before they marry.

What about the moral guidance we expect from the churches? Do they tell young people not to pretend they can form a "family" without marriage and a father for the children?

What about the conservatives who limit their concerns to fiscal priorities? Do they identify what the taxpayers' money is being spent on, and then urge cutting the taxpayer-paid incentives that encourage illegitimate births?

As far back as 1993 Charles Murray identified "illegitimacy as the single most important social problem of our time . . . because it drives everything else." It's time we put it at the top of our agenda.