

HOMeward BOUND

AMERICAN FAMILIES IN
THE COLD WAR ERA

*Fully Revised and Updated
20th Anniversary Edition,
With a New Post 9/11 Epilogue*

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New York

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CHAPTER ONE

CONTAINMENT AT HOME: COLD WAR, WARM HEARTH

I think that this attitude toward women is universal. What we want is to make easier the life of our housewives.

—VICE PRESIDENT RICHARD M. NIXON, 1959

IN 1959, the year the atomic-age newlyweds spent their honeymoon in a fallout shelter, when the baby boom and the cold war were both at their peak, Vice President Richard M. Nixon traveled to the Soviet Union to engage in what would become one of the most noted verbal sparring matches of the century. In a lengthy and often heated debate with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, Nixon extolled the virtues of the American way of life, while his opponent promoted the communist system. What was remarkable about this exchange was its focus. The two leaders did not discuss missiles, bombs, or even modes of government. Rather, they argued over the relative merits of American and Soviet washing machines, televisions, and electric ranges—in what came to be known as the “kitchen debate” (see Figure 3).

The “kitchen debate” was one of the major skirmishes in the cold war, which was at its core an ideological struggle fought on a cultural battleground. For Nixon, American superiority rested on the ideal of the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members. He



FIGURE 3 Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev spar verbally at the American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959. Here they engage in the "kitchen debate" as they fight the cold war over the commodity gap rather than the missile gap. (*Wide World Photo.*)

proclaimed that the "model" home, with a male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker, adorned with a wide array of consumer goods, represented the essence of American freedom:

To us, diversity, the right to choose, . . . is the most important thing. We don't have one decision made at the top by one government official. . . . We have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the housewives have a choice. . . . Would it not be better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets?¹

Nixon's focus on household appliances was not accidental. After all, arguments over the strength of rockets would only point out the vulnerability of the United States in the event of a nuclear war between the superpowers; debates over consumer goods would provide a reassuring vision of the good life available

in the atomic age. So Nixon insisted that American superiority in the cold war rested not on weapons, but on the secure, abundant family life of modern suburban homes. In these structures, adorned and worshipped by their inhabitants, women would achieve their glory and men would display their success. Consumerism was not an end in itself; it was the means for achieving individuality, leisure, and upward mobility.

The American National Exhibition was a showcase of American consumer goods and leisure-time equipment. But the main attraction, which the two leaders toured, was the full-scale "model" six-room ranch-style house. This model home, filled with labor-saving devices and presumably available to Americans of all classes, was tangible proof, Nixon believed, of the superiority of free enterprise over communism.

In the model kitchen in the model home, Nixon and Khrushchev revealed some basic assumptions of their two systems. Nixon called attention to a built-in panel-controlled washing machine. "In America," he said, "these [washing machines] are designed to make things easier for our women." Khrushchev countered Nixon's boast of comfortable American housewives with pride in productive Soviet female workers: In his country they did not have that "capitalist attitude toward women." Nixon clearly did not understand that the communist system had no use for full-time housewives, for he replied, "I think that this attitude toward women is universal. What we want is to make easier the life of our housewives." Nixon's knockout punch in his verbal bout with the Soviet premier was his articulation of the American postwar domestic dream: successful breadwinners supporting attractive homemakers in affluent suburban homes.

Although the two leaders did not agree on the proper social roles for women, they clearly shared a common view that female sexuality was a central part of the good life that both systems claimed to espouse. Noting that Nixon admired the young women modeling American bathing suits and sports clothes, the Soviet leader said with a wink, "You are for the girls, too." Later in the day, when the two leaders faltered over a toast in which Khrushchev proposed to drink to the removal of foreign bases and Nixon would drink only to the more general hope of "peace," Khrushchev smoothed over the impending confrontation by gesturing to a nearby waitress and suggesting, "Let's drink to the ladies." Relieved, Nixon chimed in, "We can all drink to the ladies."

American journalists who were present, however, viewed the appearance and situation of Soviet women as anything but feminine. An article in *U.S. News and World Report*, noted for its anticommunism and cold war militance, suggested that Soviet women, as workers and political activists, desexualized themselves. It



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described Moscow as "a city of women—hard-working women who show few of the physical charms of women in the West. Most Moscow women seem unconcerned about their looks. . . . Young couples stroll together in the parks after dark, but you see many more young women [stride] along the streets purposefully, as though marching to a Communist Party meeting."² The implied contrast was clear. American women, unlike their "purposeful" and unfeminine Russian counterparts, did not have to be "hard working," thanks to the wonders of American household appliances. Nor did they busy themselves with the affairs of men, such as politics. Rather, they cultivated their looks and their physical charms, to become sexually attractive housewives and consumers under the American capitalist system.

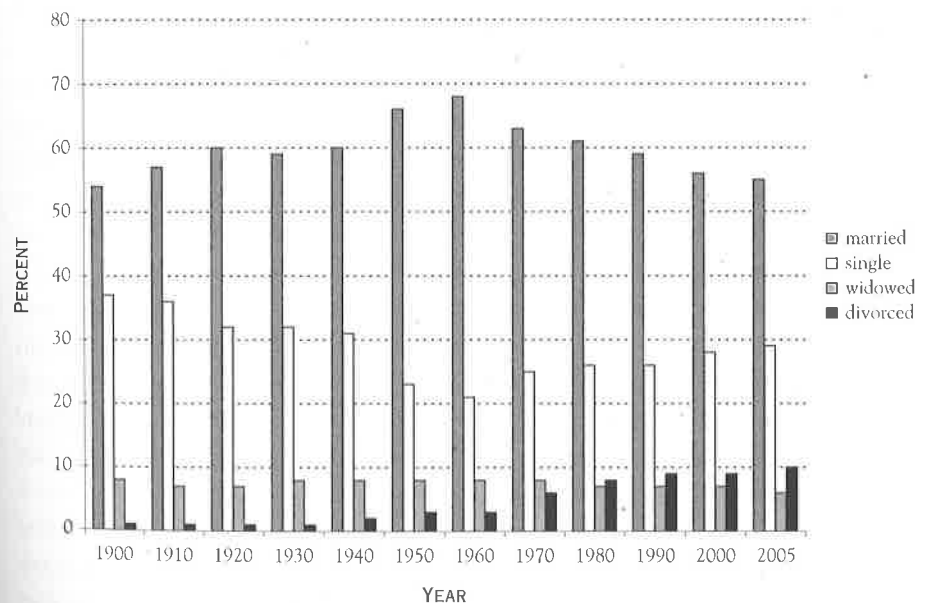
Of course, in reality, both American and Soviet women worked outside as well as inside the home; and in both countries women had primary responsibilities for housekeeping chores. But these realities did nothing to mitigate the power of gender ideologies in both countries. Assumptions about Soviet women workers versus sexually attractive American housewives were widespread. More than a decade before Nixon's trip to Moscow, for example, Eric Johnston, president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, wrote contemptuously of the claim that Soviet women were emancipated because they held jobs. He argued, "Russian women, like women in all undeveloped countries, have always done the . . . hardest work." He labeled as "simply Communist propaganda" the claim that Soviet women were "emancipated from housework" and noted sarcastically that they were "permitted the glory of drudgery in industry" in the Soviet Union. Like Nixon, he pointed to the home, where breadwinners supported their housewives, as the place where American freedom was most apparent.³ The implication, of course, was that self-supporting women were in some way un-American. Accordingly, anticommunist crusaders viewed women who did not conform to the domestic ideal with suspicion.

With such sentiments about gender and politics widely shared, Nixon's visit was hailed as a major political triumph. Popular journals extolled his diplomatic skills in the face-to-face confrontation with Khrushchev. Many observers credit this trip with establishing Nixon's political future. Clearly, Americans did not find the kitchen debate trivial. The appliance-laden ranch-style home epitomized the expansive, secure lifestyle that postwar Americans wanted. Within the protective walls of the modern home, worrisome developments like sexual liberalism, women's emancipation, and affluence would lead not to decadence but to a wholesome family life. Sex would enhance marriage, emancipated women would professionalize homemaking, and affluence would put an end to material deprivation. Suburbia would serve as a bulwark against communism.

and class conflict, for according to the widely shared belief articulated by Nixon, it offered a piece of the American dream for everyone. Although Nixon vastly exaggerated the availability of the suburban home, he described a type of domestic life that had become a reality for many white working-class and middle-class Americans—and a powerful aspiration for many others.

The momentum began to build toward this ideal long before it became widely available. Those who came of age during and after World War II were the most marrying generation on record: 96.4 percent of the women and 94.1 percent of the men (see Table 6). These aggregate statistics hide another significant fact: Americans behaved in striking conformity to each other during these years. In other words, not only did the average age at marriage drop, but almost everyone was married by his or her mid-twenties. And not only did the average family

**TABLE 6: MARITAL STATUS OF THE
U.S. POPULATION, 1900–2005**



SOURCES U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Part 1* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 20–21; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports, Series PLO-514*, March 1998 (Update), and earlier reports; U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2005 and Earlier* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, September 21, 2006), Table MS-1, www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html#history.

size increase, but most couples had two to four children, born sooner after marriage and spaced closer together than in previous years.⁴ At a time when the availability of contraceptive devices enabled couples to delay, space, and limit the arrival of offspring to suit their particular needs, this rising birthrate resulted from deliberate choices. Nixon could, therefore, speak with some conviction when he placed the home at the center of postwar ideals.

What gave rise to the widespread endorsement of this familial consensus in the cold war era? The depression of the 1930s and World War II laid the foundation for a commitment to a stable home life, but they also opened the way for a radical restructuring of the family. The yearning for family stability gained momentum after the war, but the potential for restructuring the family withered as the powerful ideology of domesticity was imprinted on everyday life. Ironically, traditional gender roles became a central feature of the "modern" middle-class home.

Since the 1960s, much attention has been paid to the plight of women in the 1950s. But at that time, critical observers of middle-class life considered homemakers to be emancipated and men to be oppressed. Much of the most insightful writing examined the dehumanizing situation that forced middle-class men, at least in their public roles, to be other-directed "organization men," caught in a mass, impersonal white-collar world. The loss of autonomy was real. As large corporations grew, swallowing smaller enterprises, the number of self-employed men in small businesses shrank dramatically. David Riesman recognized that the corporate structure forced middle-class men into deadening, highly structured peer interactions; he argued that only in the intimate aspects of life could a man truly be free. Industrial laborers were even less likely to derive intrinsic satisfactions from their jobs. Thus, blue-collar and white-collar employees shared a sense of alienation and subordination in the postwar corporate workforce. At work as well as at home, class lines blurred for white men in the postwar era. Both Riesman and William Whyte saw the suburbs as extensions of the corporate world, with their emphasis on conformity. Yet they perceived that suburban homes and consumer goods offered material compensations for organized work life.⁵

In spite of the power of the homemaker ideal, increasing numbers of married women worked outside the home in the postwar years. But their job opportunities were limited, and their wages were low. Employed women held jobs that were even more menial and subordinate than those of their male peers. Surveys of full-time homemakers indicated that they appreciated their independence from supervision and control over their work; they had no desire to give up

their autonomy in the home for wage labor. Educated middle-class women, whose career opportunities were severely limited, hoped that the home would become not a confining place of drudgery, but a liberating arena of fulfillment through professionalized homemaking, meaningful child rearing, and satisfying sexuality.⁶

While the home seemed to offer the best hope for freedom, it also appeared to be a fragile institution, subject to forces beyond its control. Economic hardship had torn families asunder, and war had scattered men far from home and drawn women into the public world of work. The postwar years did little to alleviate fears that similar disruptions might occur again. In spite of widespread affluence, many believed that the reconversion to a peacetime economy would lead to another depression. Even peace was problematic, since international tensions were palpable. The explosion of the first atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked not only the end of World War II but the beginning of the cold war. At any moment, the cold war could turn hot. The policy of containment abroad faced its first major challenge in 1949, with the Chinese revolution. In the same year, the USSR exploded its first atomic bomb. The nation was again jolted out of its sense of fragile security when the Korean War broke out in 1950. Many shared President Harry Truman's belief that World War III was at hand.⁷

Insightful analysts of the nuclear age have explored the psychic impact of the atomic bomb. Paul Boyer's study of the first five years after Hiroshima showed that American responses went through dramatic shifts. Initial reactions juxtaposed the thrill of atomic empowerment with the terror of annihilation. The atomic scientists were among the first to organize against the bomb, calling for international control of atomic energy, and others soon followed suit. By the end of the 1940s, however, opposition had given way to proclamations of faith in the bomb as the protector of American security.

Along with that faith came fear. In 1950, 61 percent of those polled thought that the United States should use the atom bomb if there was another world war, but 53 percent believed there was a good or fair chance that their community would be bombed in the next war, and nearly three-fourths assumed that American cities would be bombed. Most agreed that since Russia now had the bomb, the likelihood of another war increased. By 1956, nearly two-thirds of those polled believed that in the event of another war, the hydrogen bomb would be used against the United States.

As support grew for more and bigger bombs, arguments for international control waned, and the country prepared for the possibility of a nuclear war by instituting new civil defense strategies. Psychologists were strangely silent on

the issue of the fear of atomic weapons, and by the early fifties, the nation seemed to be apathetic. Boyer echoed Robert J. Lifton in suggesting that denial and silence may have reflected deep-seated horror rather than complacency. Indeed, in 1959, two out of three Americans listed the possibility of nuclear war as the nation's most urgent problem.⁸

Lifton argued that the atomic bomb forced people to question one of their most deeply held beliefs, that scientific discoveries would yield progress. Atomic energy presented a fundamental contradiction: Science had developed the potential for total technological mastery as well as for total technological devastation. Lifton attributed "nuclear numbing" to the powerful psychic hold that the fear of nuclear annihilation had on the nation's subconscious. He pointed to unrealistic but reassuring civil defense strategies as the efforts of governmental officials to tame or "domesticate" the fear.⁹

Americans were well poised to embrace domesticity in the midst of the terrors of the atomic age. A home filled with children would create a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation. Children would also be a connection to the future and a means of replenishing a world depleted by war deaths. Although baby-boom parents were not likely to express conscious desires to repopulate the country, the devastation of hundreds of thousands of deaths could not have been far below the surface of the postwar consciousness. The view of childbearing as a duty was painfully true for Jewish parents, after six million of their kin were snuffed out in Europe. But they were not alone. As one Jewish woman recalled of her decision to bear four children, "After the Holocaust, we felt obligated to have lots of babies. But it was easy because everyone was doing it—non-Jews, too."¹⁰

In secure postwar homes with plenty of children, American women and men might be able to ward off their nightmares and live out their dreams. The family seemed to be the one place where people could control their destinies and perhaps even shape the future. Of course, nobody actually argued that stable family life could prevent nuclear annihilation. But the home represented a source of meaning and security in a world run amok. Marrying young and having lots of babies were ways for Americans to thumb their noses at doomsday predictions. Commenting on the trend toward young marriages, one observer noted, "Youngsters want to grasp what little security they can in a world gone frighteningly insecure. The youngsters feel they will cultivate the one security that's possible—their own gardens, their own . . . home and families."¹¹

White working-class and middle-class women and men were not the only ones who hoped to embrace this vision of domesticity. Other groups of

Americans had their own particular reasons for aspiring to the nuclear family ideal. Postwar prosperity allowed African-Americans, for the first time, to imagine the possibility of a family life where the earnings of men would be ample enough to allow women to stay home with their own children, rather than tending to the houses and children of white families. Celebrating that possibility in 1947, *Ebony* magazine proclaimed, "Goodbye Mammy, Hello Mom." World War II "took Negro mothers out of white kitchens, put them in factories and shipyards. When it was all over, they went back to kitchens—but this time their own. . . . And so today in thousands of Negro homes, the Negro mother has come home, come home perhaps for the first time since 1619 when the first Negro families landed at Jamestown, Virginia." For the black woman, domesticity meant "freedom and independence in her own home."¹² People of color longed for the "good life," just like anyone else. But their exclusion from the opportunities most citizens took for granted intensified their desires. Black artists expressed this yearning for a new life. Lorraine Hansberry's powerful 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, articulated with great eloquence the importance of a home in the suburbs, not to assimilate into white America but to live as a black family with dignity, pride, and comfort.

Asian-Americans also had good reason to celebrate home and family life. With the end of the exclusion of Chinese immigrants during World War II, wives and war brides began to enter the country, transforming communities like New York's Chinatown from small societies of bachelors into thriving family-oriented communities. Japanese-Americans, after the humiliations, disruptions, and anguish of internment, were eager to put their families and lives back together. Children of European immigrants hoped to use the fruits of postwar abundance to escape the crowded ethnic neighborhoods of the cities and blend into white America, in spacious single-family homes in the suburbs.¹³

For all of these groups, thoughts of the family rooted in time-honored traditions may have allayed fears of vulnerability. Nevertheless, much of what had provided family security in the past became unhinged. For many Americans, the postwar years brought rootlessness. Those who moved from farms to cities lost a familiar way of life that was rooted in the land. Children of immigrants moved from ethnic neighborhoods with extended kin and community ties to homogeneous suburbs, where they formed nuclear families and invested them with high hopes. Suburban homes offered freedom from kinship obligations, along with material comforts that had not been available on the farm or in the ethnic urban ghetto. As Whyte noted about the promoters of the Illinois suburb he studied, "At first they had advertised Park Forest as housing. Now they began advertising

happiness." But consumer goods would not replace community, and young mobile nuclear families could easily find themselves adrift. Newcomers devoted themselves to creating communities out of neighborhoods composed largely of transients. As Whyte noted, "In suburbia, organization man is trying, quite consciously, to develop a new kind of roots to replace what he left behind."¹⁴

Young adults aged twenty-five to thirty-five were among the most mobile members of the society, constituting 12.4 percent of all migrants but only 7.5 percent of the population. Higher education also prompted mobility; fully 45.5 percent of those who had one year of college or more lived outside their home states, compared to 27.3 percent of high school graduates. Overwhelmingly, these young educated migrants worked for large organizations: Three-fourths of all clients of long-distance movers worked for corporations, the government, or the armed services, with corporate employees the most numerous. In their new communities, they immediately endeavored to forge ties with other young transients that would be as rewarding and secure as the ones they left behind, but free of the restraints of the old neighborhood.¹⁵

Postwar Americans struggled with this transition. The popular culture was filled with stories about young adults who shifted their allegiances from the old ethnic ties to the new nuclear family ideal. When situation comedies shifted from radio to television, working-class ethnic kin networks and multigenerational households faded as the stories increasingly revolved around the middle-class nuclear family.¹⁶ One of the most popular films of the 1950s was *Marty*, winner of the Academy Award for best motion picture in 1955 and first produced as a television play in 1953. In the film, Marty, a young man living with his mother, has a deep commitment to the ethnic family in which he was reared. The sympathy of the audience stays with him as he first demonstrates his family loyalty by allowing his mother to bring her cranky, aging sister to live with them and doing his duty as the good son. As the story unfolds, Marty falls in love and, to the horror of his mother and his aunt, decides to marry his sweetheart and move away from the old neighborhood. Far from his family and their obligations, the young couple can embark on a new life freed from the constraints of the older generation. By the film's end, the audience has made the transition, along with the main character, from loyalty to the community of ethnic kinship to the suburban ideal of the emancipated nuclear family.¹⁷

Whyte called the suburbs the "new melting pot," where migrants from ethnic working-class neighborhoods in the cities moved into the middle class. In the process, they lost much of their identity as ethnic outsiders and became simply "white."¹⁸ Kin and ethnic ties were often forsaken as suburban residents formed

new communities grounded in shared experiences of homeownership and child rearing, and conformity to the modern consumer-oriented way of life. Young suburbanites were great joiners, forging new ties and creating new institutions to replace the old. One such suburban community, Park Forest, Illinois, had sixty-six adult organizations, making it a "hotbed" of participation. Churches and synagogues, whose membership reached new heights in the postwar years, expanded their functions from prayer and charity to recreation, youth programs, and social events. Church membership rose from 64.5 million in 1940 to 114.5 million in 1960—from 50 percent to 63 percent of the population (100 years earlier only 20 percent of all Americans belonged to churches). Churches and synagogues provided social arenas for suburbanites, replacing, to some extent, the communal life previously supplied by kin or neighborhood.¹⁹ Religious affiliation became associated with the "American way of life." Americans highlighted their religiosity, in contrast to the "godless communists." "In God We Trust" became the national motto, appearing on all paper currency; and the words "under God" became part of the Pledge of Allegiance. Religion offered to bind citizens to each other and to provide a sense of belonging.

Still, these were tenuous alliances among uprooted people. With so much mobility and with success associated with moving on to something better, middle-class nuclear families could not depend on the stability of their communities. As much as they tried to form ties with their neighbors and conform to each other's beliefs and lifestyles, they were still largely on their own. The new vision of home life, therefore, depended heavily on the staunch commitment of individual family members. Neither the world nor the newly forged suburban community could be trusted to provide security. What mattered was that family members remained bound to each other—and to the modern, emancipated home they intended to create.

The wisdom of earlier generations would be of little help to postwar Americans who were looking toward a radically new vision of family life and trying self-consciously to avoid the paths of their parents. Thus, young people embraced the advice of experts in the rapidly expanding fields of social science, medicine, and psychology. After all, science was changing the world. Was it not reasonable to expect it to change the home as well?

Postwar America was the era of the expert. Armed with scientific techniques and presumably inhabiting a world that was beyond popular passions, the experts had brought us into the atomic age. Physicists developed the bomb, strategists created the cold war, and scientific managers built the military-industrial complex. It was now up to the experts to make the unmanageable manageable. As

the readers of *Look* magazine were assured, there was no reason to worry about radioactivity, for if ever the time arrived when you would need to understand its dangers, "the experts will be ready to tell you." Science and technology seemed to have invaded virtually every aspect of life, from the most public to the most private. Americans were looking to professionals to tell them how to manage their lives. The tremendous popularity of Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* reflects a reluctance to trust the shared wisdom of kin and community. Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* provided readers with religiously inspired scientific formulas for success. Both these best-selling books stressed the centrality of the family in their prescriptions for a better future.²⁰

The popularity of these kinds of books attests to the faith in expertise that prevailed at the time. One retrospective study of the attitudes and habits of over four thousand Americans in 1957 found that the reliance on expertise was one of the most striking developments of the postwar years. Long-term individual therapy, for example, reached unprecedented popularity in the mid-1950s. The authors concluded:

Experts took over the role of psychic healer, but they also assumed a much broader and more important role in directing the behavior, goals, and ideals of normal people. They became the teachers and norm setters who would tell people how to approach and live life. . . . They would provide advice and counsel about raising and responding to children, how to behave in marriage, and what to see in that relationship. . . . Science moved in because people needed and wanted guidance.²¹

The Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS) confirmed these findings. By the mid-fifties, one out of six respondents had consulted a professional for marital or emotional problems; yet fewer than one-third that number considered their personal problems to be severe.²² It seems evident, then, that people were quick to seek professional help. When the experts spoke, postwar Americans listened.

Despite the public's perceptions of scientific mastery and objectivity, professionals groped for appropriate ways to conceptualize and resolve the uncertainties of the times. Like other Americans, they feared the possibility of social disintegration during this period. As participants in the cold war consensus, they offered solutions to the difficulties of the age that would not disrupt the status quo. In the process, they helped focus and formulate the domestic ideology. For these experts, public dangers merged with private ones, and the family appeared besieged as never before. The noted anthropologist Margaret Mead articulated this problem in a 1949 article addressed to social workers. The methods of the

past, she wrote, offered "an inadequate model on which to build procedures in the atomic age." Children were now born into a world unfamiliar even to their parents, "a world suddenly shrunk into one unit, in which radio and television and comics and the threat of the atomic bomb are everyday realities." The task for helping professionals—psychologists, psychiatrists, family counselors, and social workers—would be especially complicated because conditions had changed so drastically. Each adult faced "the task of trying to keep a world he [sic] never knew and never dreamed steady until we can rear a generation at home in it."²³

According to the experts, political activism was not likely to keep the world steady. They advocated adaptation rather than resistance as a means of feeling "at home." The modern home would make the inherited values of the past relevant for the uncertain present and future, but it had to be fortified largely from within. Married couples were determined to strengthen the nuclear family through "togetherness." They would have "well-adjusted" children—adjusting to the world as it was, rather than trying to change or adjust that world. With the help of experts to guide them, successful breadwinners would provide economic support for professionalized homemakers, and together they would create the home of their dreams.

The women and men who embraced this vision were not simply victims of an ideology foisted upon them by the power elite. Although political repression and institutional barriers constrained their options, many were deeply committed to the promise of domestic security and happiness. Marriage promised not only happiness, but also a positive alternative to the lonely life of a single person. In the postwar years, many agreed with the experts that single women would be doomed to an unfulfilled and miserable existence, and that bachelors were psychologically damaged and immature, locked into "primitive and infantile modes of thinking," in the words of one psychiatrist.²⁴ The respondents to the 1955 KLS survey articulated that fervent commitment to marriage. These white middle-class Americans were among the first to establish families according to the new domestic ideology. Relatively affluent, more highly educated than the average, they were able to take advantage of the fruits of postwar prosperity (see Appendix 1). They looked toward the home, rather than the public world, for personal fulfillment. No wonder that when they were asked what they thought they had sacrificed by marrying and raising a family, an overwhelming majority of them replied, "Nothing."

One of the striking characteristics of the KLS respondents was their apparent willingness to give up autonomy and independence for the sake of marriage and

a family. Although the 1950s marked the beginning of the glamorization of bachelorhood, most of the men expressed a remarkable lack of nostalgia for the unencumbered freedom of a single life. Typical responses to the question "What did you have to sacrifice or give up because of your marriage?" were "nothing but bad habits" and "the empty, aimless, lonely life of a bachelor." One who gave up only "a few fishing and hunting trips" claimed that "the time was better . . . spent at home." Many of these men had been married for over a decade and had their share of troubles. The comment of one man was especially poignant. Although he described his wife as addicted to alcohol and "sexually frigid," he claimed that "aside from the natural adjustment, I have given up only some of my personal independence. But I have gained so much more: children, home, etc. that I ought to answer . . . 'nothing at all.'"²⁵

Women were equally quick to dismiss any sacrifices they may have made when they married. Few expressed regrets for devoting themselves to the homemaker role—a choice that effectively ruled out other lifelong occupational avenues. Although 13 percent mentioned a "career" as something sacrificed, most claimed that they gained rather than lost in the bargain. One wife indicated how her early marriage affected the development of her adult identity: "Marriage has opened up far more avenues of interest than I ever would have had without it. . . . I was at a very young and formative age when we were married and I think I have changed greatly over the years. . . . I cannot conceive of life without him."²⁶

Many wives who said they abandoned a career were quick to minimize its importance and to state that they "preferred marriage," a response suggesting that the pursuit of both was not viable. Many defined their domestic role as a career in itself. One woman defended her decision to give up her career: "I think I have probably contributed more to the world in the life I have lived." Another mentioned her sacrifices of "financial independence [and] freedom to choose a career. However, these have been replaced by the experience of being a mother and a help to other parents and children. Therefore the new career is equally as good or better than the old." Both men and women mentioned the responsibilities of married life as sources of personal fulfillment rather than sacrifice.²⁷

Further evidence of the enormous commitment to family life appears in responses to the question "What has marriage brought you that you could not have gained without your marriage?" Although the most common answers of men and women included family, children, love, and companionship, other typical answers were a sense of purpose, success, and security. It is interesting to note that respondents claimed that these elements of life would not have been

possible without marriage. Women indicated that marriage gave them "a sense of responsibility I wouldn't have had had I remained single" or a feeling of "usefulness . . . for others dear to me." One said marriage gave her a "happy, full, complete life; children; a feeling of serving some purpose in life other than making money." Another remarked, "I'm not the 'career girl' type. I like being home and having a family. . . . Working with my husband for our home and family brings a satisfaction that working alone could not."²⁸

Men were equally emphatic about the satisfactions brought about by family responsibility. Nearly one-fourth claimed that marriage gave them a sense of purpose in life and a reason for striving. Aside from love and children, no other single reward of marriage was mentioned by so many of the husbands. Included in the gains they listed were "the incentive to succeed and save for the future of my family," "a purpose in the scheme of life," and "a motivation for intensive effort that would otherwise have been lacking." One man confessed, "Being somewhat lazy to begin with, the family and my wife's ambition have made me more eager to succeed businesswise and financially." A contented husband wrote of the "million treasures" contained in his family; another said that marriage offered "freedom from the boredom and futility of bachelorhood."

Others linked family life to civic virtues by claiming that marriage strengthened their patriotism and morals, instilling them with "responsibility, community spirit, respect for children and family life, reverence for a Supreme Being, humility, love of country." Summing up the feelings of many in his generation, one husband said that marriage

increased my horizons, defined my goals and purposes in life, strengthened my convictions, raised my intellectual standards and stimulated my incentive to provide moral, spiritual, and material support; it has rewarded me with a realistic sense of family and security I never experienced during the first 24 years of my life.²⁹

The respondents expressed a strong commitment to a new and expanded vision of family life, focused inwardly on parents and children and bolstered by affluence and sex. They claimed to have found their personal identities and achieved their individual goals largely through their families. Yet the superlatives ring hollow, as if these women and men were trying to convince themselves that the families they had created fulfilled all their deepest wishes. For as their extensive responses to other questions in the survey will show, they experienced disappointments, dashed hopes, and lowered expectations. Many who gave their marriages high ratings had actually resigned themselves to a great deal of misery.

As postwar Americans endeavored to live in tune with the prevailing domestic ideology, they found that the dividends required a heavy investment of self. For some, the costs were well worth the benefits; for others, the costs were too high.

Ida and George Butler were among those who felt the costs of marriage were worth the benefits. After more than a decade together, they both claimed that they were satisfied with the life they had built. When they first embarked on married life, they brought high hopes to their union. Ida wrote that George "very nearly measures up to my ideal Prince Charming." George, in turn, noted Ida's attractiveness, common sense, and similar ideas on home life and sex. He was glad she was not the "high stepping" type but had "experience in cooking and housekeeping." For this down-to-earth couple, the home contained their sexuality, her career ambitions, his drive for success, and their desires for material and emotional comforts.

Yet, like all things worth a struggle, it did not come easy. Ida's choices reflect the constraints that faced postwar women. She sacrificed her plans for "a professional career—I would [have] liked to have been a doctor—but we both agreed that I should finish college, which I did." Following her marriage, there were "obstacles" to her continuing to pursue a career in medicine. It was difficult to combine a professional life with a family. For one thing, the children were primarily her responsibility. She explained:

My husband works very hard in his business and has many hobbies and friends. The care and problems of children seem to overwhelm him and he admits being an "only" child ill prepared him for the pull and tug of family life. We work closely together on discipline and policies, but he is serious minded and great joy and fun with the children [are] lacking.

If Prince Charming's shining armor tarnished a bit with the years, Ida was not one to complain. She had reasons for feeling contented with the family she helped build:

I think a *stability* which runs through my life is important. I cannot recall any divorce or separation in my immediate family. We are a rural close-to-the-soil group and I was brought up to take the "bitter with the sweet"—"you made your own bed, now lie in it" philosophy, so it would not occur to me to "run home to mother."

Although marriage was not Ida's first career choice, it eventually became her central occupation: "Marriage is my career. I chose it and now it is up to me to

see that I do the job successfully in spite of the stresses and strains of life." She felt that the sacrifices she made were outweighed by the gains: "children, a nice home, companionship, sex, many friends." George also claimed to be "completely satisfied" with the marriage. He wrote that it brought him an "understanding of other people's problems, 'give and take,' love and devotion." He felt that he sacrificed "nothing but so-called personal freedom." Her medical career and his so-called personal freedom seemed to be small prices to pay for the stable family life they created together.³⁰

For couples like the Butlers, the gains were worth the sacrifices. But their claims of satisfaction carried a note of resignation. Combining a profession with a family seemed an unrealistic goal for Ida; combining personal freedom with the role of provider seemed equally out of reach for George. They both thought they faced an either/or situation and they opted for their family roles. At first glance, this case appears unremarkable: two people who made a commitment to marriage and made the best of it. But the Butlers' choices and priorities take on a larger significance because they were typical of their generation, which was unique in its commitment to family life. The costs and benefits articulated by the Butlers—and their willingness to settle for less than they bargained for—were conditions they shared with their middle-class peers.

Unlike the Butlers, Joseph and Emily Burns emphasized the costs of family life. Haunted by the legacy of the Great Depression and World War II, Joseph expected marriage to yield the "model home" described by Nixon, where affluence, intimacy, and security would prevail. But the worrisome state of the world was inescapable for him, even in the family. Nevertheless, he articulated the way in which the world situation contributed to the intense familism of the postwar years.

At the time of his engagement, Joseph Burns had high expectations for his future marriage. He had chosen his fiancée because he could trust and respect her, her "past life has been admirable," she did not drink or smoke, and "she is pleasing to the eye." If anything made him uneasy about their prospects for future happiness, it was the fear of another depression: "If the stock market takes another drop . . . business will be all shot." The depression had already made him wary, but his disillusionment would be complete by the end of World War II.

Looking back over his life from the vantage point of the 1950s, Joseph Burns reflected:

As I review the thoughts that were mine at the time of my marriage and as they are now, I would like to give an explanation that should be considered. . . . A young couple, much in love, are looking forward to a happy life in a world that

has been held up to them by elders as a beautiful world. Children are brought up by their parents to love God and other children, honesty is a must, obedience to the Ten Commandments and to the golden rule is necessary.

With such training, I started out my life only to find out the whole thing is a farce. Blundering politicians lusting for power and self-glory have defiled what is clean and right, honesty is just a word in the dictionary, love of God—who really believes in God? Love of neighbor . . . get him before he gets you.

I agree it does sound cynical, but let us face the facts. Mankind has been slowly degenerating, especially since 1914, and today, what do we have to look forward to? Civil defense tests, compulsory military training, cold wars, fear of the atomic bomb, the diseases that plague man, the mental case outlook? . . . I submit these things to show how a marriage can be vitally affected as was ours and, therefore, many of my ideals, desires, and, most of all, my goal.

Joseph's cynicism toward the wider world made him place even higher hopes on the family to be a buffer. When world events intruded into that private world, he was devastated: "On December 7, 1941, the question burned in my mind, How can so-called Christian nations tear each other apart again?" Joseph resolved his personal anguish by becoming a Jehovah's Witness. But he continued to cling to the family as security in a chaotic world. Although he claimed that the world situation had dashed his ideals, he still rated his marriage happier than average and said it gave him "the opportunity to think and reason." As far as what he sacrificed for his marriage, he wrote, "Whatever [I gave] up, which probably would have been material possessions, has been offset by the things [I] gained." Joseph's rage at the world was tempered by the benefits of having a family. He believed that the family provided him with security and satisfaction, and fulfilled at least some of the hopes he originally brought to it.

Emily Burns had a different view of their marriage and found little comfort in her life with Joseph. Although his religious conversion was at the center of her dissatisfaction, her responses raise other issues as well. Emily complained about her husband's pessimism, coldness, aloofness, and lack of a love of beauty. She emphasized that her husband's change of religion had affected his whole life—"[his] attitude toward wife, children, home, friends, and world. Unless I become absorbed in [his religion], we [will come] to a parting of the ways, since I'm an outsider in my own home." In addition to the major rift over her husband's conversion, Emily enumerated her sacrifices as follows:

1. A way of life (an easy one).
2. All friends of long duration; close relationships.

3. Independence and personal freedom.
4. What seemed to contribute to my personality.
5. Financial independence.
6. Goals in this life.
7. Idea as to size of family.
8. Personal achievements—type changed.
9. Close relationship with brother and mother and grandmother.

Her complaints add up to much more than religious incompatibility. They suggest some of the costs of adhering to the domestic ideology of the postwar era: an emphasis on the nuclear family at the expense of other relatives and friends, as well as loss of personal freedom, financial independence, "goals," and "personal achievements." For Emily, like Ida Butler and others of their generation, marriage and family life led to a narrowing of options and activities. But it was a bargain she accepted because it appeared to be the best route toward achieving other goals in life. Although she claimed that she would not have married the same person if she had to do it over again, she never considered divorce. The benefits she gained in marriage offset her discontent with her spouse. Her list of benefits reveals why she chose the domestic path:

1. The desire to give up all for the love of one.
2. The placing of self last.
3. A harmonious relationship until religion . . . changed this.
4. Two ideal children even though the boy is cold and indifferent like his father. (They have strong religious ties in common.)
5. A comfortable home independent of others.
6. Personal satisfaction if all turns out well.
7. Personal satisfaction in establishing a home.

In this list, Emily mentioned practically all the major subjective compensations that made marriage such an important commitment for so many women at the time. Yet it was a qualified list. Her dissatisfaction was obvious even in her enumeration of her gains. So she struggled to improve her situation as best she could. While her husband used the last space in the questionnaire to brood over the world situation and explain his turn toward religion, Emily used it to reaffirm her faith in the potential for happiness in marriage. She wrote to Kelly and his research team, "Honestly wish this survey will help future generations to maintain happiness throughout marriage and that your book will become more than cold facts and figures. We have enough such now!"

Emily revealed a submerged feminist impulse that also surfaced in numerous testimonies of her peers. To help her formulate these ideas and influence her husband, she turned to experts:

Have tried to arouse interest in the woman's point of view by reading parts of Dr. Marie Carmichael Stopes' works pertaining to marriage, to my husband. He says, "Oh, she is just a woman, what does she know about it?" and "How can such things [marriage relationship] be learned from a book?" I have ideas on marriage and when I see the same ideas expressed in print by a person of authority, at least I can see that I am not the only woman or person who thinks "such and such."

Recognizing that her husband was not sympathetic to her rebellion against female subordination, she predicted, "Because of a developing hard, slightly independent attitude on my part, I believe my husband's report on me will be anything but favorable."

Joseph and Emily Burns, in spite of their numerous complaints, stayed together. Through all their disillusionment and anger, they never wavered in their commitment to their imperfect relationship and insisted that their marriage was worth the struggle. Emily chafed against the limits to her freedom and turned to experts to bolster her status within the family. Joseph turned to the home to provide solace from the miseries that surrounded him in the public world. Both had invested a great deal of their personal identities in their domestic roles and were not willing to abandon them. Even if the home did not fulfill their dreams of an emancipated, fulfilling life, it still provided more satisfaction and security than they were likely to find elsewhere. For all their struggles and strains, Joseph and Emily Burns had created something together that met their needs. In 1980, they were still married to each other.³¹

Like the Butlers, the Burnses demonstrate the powerful determination and the considerable sacrifice that went into the creation of the postwar family. Even if the result did not fully live up to their expectations, these husbands and wives never seriously considered bailing out. It is important to consider the limited options and alternatives that these men and women faced. It was not a perfect life, but it was secure and predictable. Forging an independent life outside marriage carried enormous risks of emotional and economic hardship, along with social ostracism. As these couples sealed the psychological boundaries around the family, they also sealed their fates within it.

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CHAPTER SIX

BABY BOOM AND BIRTH CONTROL: THE REPRODUCTIVE CONSENSUS

On that day in August 1945, when the first atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima, new concepts of civilized living, based on the obligations of world citizenship . . . were born. Out of the smoke and smoldering ruins arose a great cry for leadership equipped to guide the stricken people of the world along the hazardous course toward peace. On that day parenthood took on added responsibilities of deep and profound significance. . . . Surely, in all history, the parents of the world were never so challenged! However, there is a defense—an impregnable bulwark—which lies in meeting the world's desperate cry for leadership. Upon the shoulders of parents, everywhere, rests the tremendous responsibility of sending forth into the next generation men and women imbued with a high resolve to work together for everlasting peace. . . . The new philosophy of child guidance makes of parenthood not a dull, monotonous routine job, but an absorbing, creative profession—a career second to none.

—LOUISA RANDALL CHURCH, 1946¹

PROCREATION in the cold war era took on almost mythic proportions. The writer just quoted articulated the fundamental principle of postwar parenthood: Children were a "defense—an impregnable bulwark" against the terrors of the age. For the nation, the next generation symbolized hope for the future. But for individuals, parenthood was much more than a duty to posterity; the joys of raising children would compensate for the thwarted expectations in other areas of their lives. For men who were frustrated at work, for women who were bored at home, and for both who were dissatisfied with the unfulfilled promise of sexual excitement, children might fill the void. Through children, men and women could set aside the difficulties of their sexual relationships and celebrate the procreative results. In so doing, they also demonstrated their loyalty to national goals by having as many children as they could "raise right and educate and be a benefit to the world," in the words of one postwar father.² Rather than representing a retreat into private life, procreation was one way to express civic values.

Louisa Randall Church was one of the countless advocates of parenthood as the key not only to responsible citizenship and a secure future but to a personally fulfilling life. Sounding like those who blamed sexual degeneracy for the nation's problems, she railed against the parents of the past who "failed to produce the quality of leadership needed to harmonize world factions" because they were too preoccupied with "superficial culture, refinements and polish, luxury and ease . . . which nurtured flabby, apathetic, indifferent, irresponsible members of society." With such high stakes placed on the next generation, "Complacent, indifferent, ignorant, lazy or selfish parents have no place" in today's world.³ What better way for postwar adults to demonstrate their potency, in contrast to the sloth of the past, than in prolific procreation and vigorous child rearing?

The postwar consensus was nowhere more evident than in the matter of having children. While sexual ideals and behavior often diverged, reproductive ideals and behavior fused. The baby boom was not the result of the return to peace, or of births to older parents postponed because of the war. Rather, the baby boom began *during* the war and continued afterward because younger couples were having babies earlier. Part of the boom can be explained by the drop in the marriage age, which was encouraged by sexual pressures. But a lower marriage age would not necessarily result in a higher birthrate. In fact, during the first few decades of the twentieth century, the marriage age and the birthrate both declined steadily. In the 1940s, however, the birthrate skyrocketed, reversing a decline in fertility that had lasted for nearly two centuries. How did this reversal happen? Demographers have shown that the baby boom did not result from women suddenly having a huge number of children; the number of children per family went up modestly. Women coming of age in the 1930s had an

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FIGURE 13 Typical postwar baby-boom family, early 1950s. (Courtesy of Judy Tyler.)

average of 2.4 children; those who reached adulthood in the fifties gave birth to an average of 3.2 children. What made the baby boom happen was that *everyone* was doing it—and at the same time (see Figure 13).⁴

The birthrate rose among all social groups. One demographic study of the sources of the baby boom concluded, "The vast changes in fertility and fertility-related behavior since World War II . . . are pervasive; that is, those social and economic variables that we have been able to examine with census data, such as race, ethnic status, education and residence, do not indicate differences with respect to trends in fertility."⁵ In addition, Americans behaved with remarkable conformity during these years. They married young and had an average of at least three children in a few years. Most couples who married in the 1940s and 1950s completed their families by the time they were in their late twenties. Thus, the smallest birth cohort of twentieth-century women, those born in the 1930s, had the largest birth cohort of children: the baby boom.⁶

Along with the baby boom came an intense and widespread endorsement of pronatalism—the belief in the positive value of having several children. A major study conducted in 1957 found that most Americans believed that parenthood was the route to happiness. Childlessness was considered deviant, selfish, and pitiable. Twenty years later, these pronatal norms began to break up. But in the 1940s and 1950s, nearly everyone believed that family togetherness, focused on children, was the mark of a successful and wholesome personal life.⁷ One study of nine hundred wives in the 1950s found that the desire for children was second only to companionship in stated marriage goals.⁸

In spite of these widespread beliefs, and the fact that the baby boom was well under way, numerous postwar observers expressed fears that women might be inclined to shirk their maternal role—to the nation's detriment, as well as to their own. J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, spoke to "homemakers and mothers" about their unique role in fighting "the twin enemies of freedom—crime and communism." Hoover was careful to address these housewives as "career" women. . . . I say 'career' women because I feel there are no careers so important as those of homemaker and mother.⁹ Many agreed with Hoover that women should focus their talents and expertise on the home and argued that the new opportunities for education and employment would reduce a woman's reproductive potential. A 1946 study reported in the *American Journal of Sociology* concluded that the increase in women's employment "is related to the secular decline in the birth rate" and predicted (wrongly) that since the proportion of women in the paid labor force was likely to increase even more, the birthrate would continue to decline.¹⁰

That same year, *Newsweek* reported that education was equally detrimental to procreation: "For the American girl books and babies don't mix. Long ago scientists concluded that the American family's reproduction rate is in inverse ratio to the educational attainment of the parents. Now, analyzing facts collected for the first time in the 1940 United States Census, they have discovered that it is the higher-educated wife, rather than the husband, who brings down the birth rate."¹¹ *Newsweek* was careful to point out that the husband's educational attainment would not inhibit fertility—only the wife's. Therefore, there was no danger in men taking advantage of the GI Bill and going to college; women, however, ought to tend to their reproductive responsibilities instead.

As late as 1956—the peak of the baby boom—*U.S. News and World Report* echoed this concern: "America's college women are marrying earlier than they did, having more children." Nevertheless, the article continued with the misperception that college-educated women "are failing to keep up with the baby boom. It is the relatively uneducated women who keep the U.S. population on

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News and World Report saying earlier than they with the misperception up with the baby U.S. population on

the rise."¹² The report was inaccurate. Although women with less education continued to have a higher overall birthrate, as had been the case for decades, the increase in the birthrate among these women during the baby-boom years was relatively modest. Actually, the sharpest increase in the birthrate was among the most highly educated women.¹³ Nevertheless, distorted observations like these reports suggested that "inferior" groups were overpopulating the nation.

These sentiments echoed the elitist and nativist attitudes that fueled the eugenics movement popularized by Theodore Roosevelt in the early years of the twentieth century. At that time, proponents of eugenics urged the "better" classes, meaning white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, to reproduce at a rate equal to or higher than that of the "lower orders." They feared that white native-born Americans were committing "race suicide." After World War II, these concerns fed the controversy surrounding new educational and employment opportunities for women. The *Ladies Home Journal* entered the debate by asking, "Is College Education Wasted on Women?"¹⁴ Some observers answered in the affirmative: College was good for women only if they found husbands there. As one writer proclaimed, "Certainly the happiest women have never found the secret of their happiness in books or lectures. They do the right thing instinctively."¹⁵

The "maternal instinct" was the point at which sexual and reproductive ideology fused, giving rise to a revival of the cult of motherhood. Of course, idealized motherhood was nothing new in the United States. It had its heyday in the nineteenth century when Victorian values were at their zenith. During that era, the declining birthrate contributed to the idealization of motherhood, for women could then spend more time and energy nurturing each child. In the twentieth century, the Victorian notions of motherhood were recast in the form of powerful sentiments encouraging women to have more, rather than fewer, babies. This new glorification of motherhood reflected the twentieth-century idea of the sexualized home.

The notion that motherhood was the ultimate fulfillment of female sexuality surfaced suddenly and visibly in the media at the beginning of World War II. Female film celebrities began to offer a new maternal model for identification and emulation.¹⁶ In mass circulation magazines such as *Photoplay*, the shift in the portrayal of female stars was dramatic. Celebrities who were noted for their erotic appeal suddenly appeared in these magazines as contented mothers, nestled comfortably in their ranch-style suburban homes with their husbands and children. The most striking thing about the new image of women was the sudden introduction of babies. While children almost never appeared in stories or photographs of female stars in the 1930s, they became featured along with their famous moms in the war years.

One issue of *Photoplay* in 1940 ran a story headlined "Hollywood Birth Rate—Going Up! A Bumper Crop of Babies Brings a Message of Renewed Faith and Courage." By 1943, babies had taken center stage. Significantly, it was the sex symbols who were now featured as mothers. "Hollywood's Newest Pin-up Girl" was none other than the infant of Lana Turner, noted World War II "pin-up" herself. The article accompanying the picture stated approvingly that Lana Turner was giving up her film career to raise her daughter, suggesting that her sexual energy and her ambition now found fulfillment through motherhood. Joan Crawford, featured in the 1930s for her independence and ambition, became "another incredibly devoted and capable mother. . . . Every time she talked of her children I knew a sense of unreality. . . . It is a wonderful thing that these glamor girls insist upon being mothers."¹⁷

In "Should War Wives Have Babies?" actress Carole Landis Wallace answered in the affirmative and offered a lengthy lament:

It is a great disappointment to me that I am not expecting along with several other of my married friends. Both my husband and I feel that it is time to forget about the superficial things in life. It is the natural, wholesome way of living—having children and establishing a home—that counts. Having a child makes a soldier realize that he has something very real to fight for. With a home and a family waiting for him, he has an incentive to give everything he has. When the war is over, we intend to buy a large ranch in Nevada. Lots of space, several children, simple living is our dream. Although my career is secondary, it will be necessary for me, and a lot of other wives, to help financially until my husband gets back into civilian life.¹⁸

Echoing this theme, Maureen O'Hara shared her maternal sentiments during her wartime pregnancy: "I am waiting for my baby. . . . I am aware of the power [my body] holds. It's a kind of spiritual awareness, a reverence, because within me I feel the gentle movement of another body. . . . Today I know the completeness of being a woman, a warm human being." She revealed her earlier illness and the anguish she felt when she had difficulty conceiving: "Everything in life for me focused on my determination to have a baby." How she envied a friend who was pregnant, "How empty . . . I felt inside myself because it wasn't happening to me!" After she told her husband the news of her pregnancy, "he walked more briskly, like all prospective fathers. His eyes sparkled. His voice had a new ring of authority."¹⁹

Protesting the popular image of Hollywood as corrupt and decadent, Rosalind Russell wrote an article for *Look* magazine proclaiming that "the glam-

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our era" was over. Gone were the "sins of the fathers who helped their fans to sin vicariously"; gone were the "Commies." Hollywood inhabitants, she insisted, were early-to-bed churchgoing folk who doted on their children. Illustrating her point were photographs of Dorothy Lamour hosting her son's fifth birthday party, Loretta Young at a backyard family gathering, and Russell herself with her son and his toys.²⁰

The message in the popular culture was clear: Motherhood was the ultimate fulfillment of female sexuality and the primary source of a woman's identity. Even during the war, when families were disrupted and women entered the workforce in massive numbers, maternal themes flourished. Female readers of *Life* magazine were assured that motherhood would enhance their physical attractiveness. In a 1944 feature article entitled "Model Mothers," *Life* focused on several professional models who had babies. The article began, "Here are family poses of some professional beauties who have found that having a baby is fine for their careers. . . . Having babies is no hindrance to the careers of the professional models who make a good living displaying their pretty faces and fine figures for photographers and illustrators. Motherhood, in fact, seems to help them. According to John Robert Powers and Harry Conover, heads of the leading model-booking agencies in New York, being a mother usually improves a girl's disposition, her attitude towards her work, her looks and even her figure." The article was illustrated with several photographs of glamorous models with their babies. One posed with her infant in front of a poster of war planes; the caption noted that her "husband is a seabee." In this twist on Rosie the Riveter, the female reader was assured that having a child could actually enhance her beauty as well as her ability to earn money while her husband was off fighting the war.²¹

Children promised to fulfill both sides of the postwar domestic equation: security as well as fulfillment. Nothing better tamed the wayward tendencies of postwar Americans than the arrival of a child. Popular stories and films at the time articulated this message in no uncertain terms. The editor of *Better Homes and Gardens*, for example, wrote about the moralizing and harmonizing effects of children:

The young fellow who lives in the little house with the vines . . . used to be quite a "stepper." He didn't change his ways much when he married his little redhead. Nor, for that matter, did she. Her bright mop of hair was a danger signal, all right. . . . We don't worry about this couple any more. There are three in that family now. The little fellow[s] mother lives every moment for his comfort and welfare. His father is thinking, not about an evening with the "boys," but away off

in the future—about the kid's schooling, about the sort of country and the sort of world in which the lad will live someday.

The editor concluded, "Perhaps there is not much more needed in a recipe for happiness. . . . We become complete only thru our children."²²

In 1941, as the depression gave way to wartime and the declining marriage rate and birthrate began to turn around, *Penny Serenade* captivated film audiences around the country. Virtually every anxiety of the early 1940s appears in this film, with one solution offered to all the problems of the age: children (see Figure 14). The film begins with Roger (Cary Grant), the restless newspaperman, wooing Julie (Irene Dunne), the young working woman. The night before the hero is transferred overseas (not to war but to become a foreign correspondent in Japan), the couple wed. Three months later, Julie joins Roger in Tokyo, where he has leased a luxurious house with Japanese servants (who have three cherubic children). Julie tells Roger she is pregnant, obviously since their wedding night. For Julie, it is a dream come true, but she worries about Roger's reckless extravagance. With the depression fresh in the mind of the audience, Julie chastises Roger for giving up a steady job to chase a dream of owning his own newspaper, and for buying her fancy clothes and planning an international vacation when they should be saving for the child. But all the plans are thwarted when an earthquake strikes, causing Julie to miscarry and rendering her permanently infertile. When Roger promises to give up his foolish ways and to settle down in a nice home of their own, Julie tells him that nothing matters to her anymore, since "the only thing that would have made me happy I can't have."

But happiness comes their way when they adopt a baby daughter. Long scenes focus on the mundane routines of feeding, diapering, and bathing the baby, with endless close-up shots of the face of the angelic girl. No romantic encounter between Dunne and Grant receives as much cinematic attention as the face of the child. After a year of tender, loving parenting, Roger's newspaper goes out of business just as the adoption probation period comes to an end. Roger goes to court, but the judge rules that the baby must be returned to the orphanage. In a tearful speech before the judge, the father articulates the resolutions of postdepression men. He vows to give up everything for the family and promises that his love for his child will make him a responsible provider. "Look, Your Honor," Roger pleads, "she's not like an automobile or a piece of furniture or something you buy on time and then when you can't keep up the payments they take it away from you. . . . Anyone can give up those kinds of things; but I ask you, Judge, how can you give up your own child?"

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FIGURE 14 Dad (Cary Grant) dotes on his daughter as mom (Irene Dunne) confers with the adoption agency representative in a scene from *Penny Serenade*. In this 1941 film, as in the nation at large for the following two decades, babies entered center stage. (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive. Courtesy of Photofest.)

As the baby whimpers, Roger continues, "I'm sorry, Judge, but . . . you don't know how badly my wife wanted a child. It wasn't so important to me. I—I dunno, I suppose most men are like this but children never meant a great deal to me, but the first time I saw her . . . she just sort of walked into my heart, Judge, and she was there to stay. I didn't know I could feel like that." The child transforms the man into a responsible citizen: "I'd always been, well, kinda careless and irresponsible, I wanted to be a big shot. I couldn't work for anybody; I had to be my own boss—that sort of thing. . . . Look, I'm not a big shot now. I'll do anything—I'll work for anybody—I'll beg, I'll borrow—Please, Judge, I'll sell anything I got until I get going again—she'll never go hungry and she'll never be without clothes not as long as I've got two good hands to help me." Roger proves his case. Although his wife had been employed before marriage, the man would clearly "beg or borrow" before he would suggest that she go back to work.

Joy fills the screen as father and baby return to mother waiting at home. But the joy does not last. Just after the child enters school, she becomes ill and dies. We never see the dying child, only the miserable parents, whose meaning in life, and in their relationship, has been destroyed. Roger withdraws into silence, and Julie prepares to leave. Just as Julie heads out the door, the phone rings. It is the adoption agency, with another child for them. Instantly the two burst into smiles and embrace. They will have another chance to renew their purpose in life and to find meaning in their marriage.²³

Penny Serenade won an Oscar nomination for Cary Grant and for the writers of the screenplay, Garson Kanin and Ruth Gordon. It was an ideal film to inaugurate the 1940s. Like the hero, men would need to accept positions of subordination in large organizations rather than risk insecurity by going into business for themselves. Compensation for the loss of independence and creativity would be provided in the family, where fatherhood gave life meaning. The arrival of the child tamed the husband's extravagance and recklessness, making him a responsible provider. For the woman, the child meant everything. Without the child, even the marriage was worthless.

Just at the time when *Penny Serenade* drew crowds at the theaters, film magazines began to feature former sex symbols as wives and mothers, and former studs as dads. The dangerous potential of female sexuality found its safest expression in motherhood. Within a few years, Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg would write a best-selling volume, *The Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, insisting that the true fulfillment of female sexuality was in motherhood.²⁴ In spite of the increasing use of birth control devices, which had increased the time between marriage and parenthood before the war, the time gap began to shrink during the 1940s, clearly as a result of personal choice. People were marrying and having children right away. As for Julie in *Penny Serenade*, who became pregnant on her wedding night, the very meaning of marriage began to be identified with children.²⁵

Penny Serenade also introduced the new theme of fatherhood. Once the child arrives, gone from the screen are the whirring presses and the impressive headlines emerging from the workplace. In fact, viewers do not know what the father does for a living once the baby arrives and his effort to create a thriving paper fails. He no doubt has a job, but he is not seen doing it. Within a decade, family dramas would take place primarily in the home. Particularly on television, the home entertainment, fatherhood became the center of a man's identity. Viewers never saw the father of *Father Knows Best* at work or knew the occupation of the Nelsons' lovable dad, Ozzie. They were fathers, pure and simple. Whatever

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indignities and subordination they might suffer at their unseen places of employ-
ment, fathers on television exercised authority at home. The only time men's
occupations were mentioned was in working-class situation comedies, like *The*
Honeymooners or *Life of Riley*, in which the men were portrayed as buffoons.

The possible exception was Ricky Ricardo of *I Love Lucy*, who played a Cuban
bandleader married to the American Lucy, who yearned for a career in show busi-
ness only to be continually thwarted. Ricky was a successful breadwinner, but he
was outside the middle-class mainstream as a result of his foreign and ethnic
background and his occupation as an entertainer. Full assimilation arrived in the
form of parenthood: Ricky and Lucy's greatest triumph was Lucy's pregnancy and
the announcement of the arrival of their television and real-life child on the
show itself—an event witnessed by one of the largest television audiences ever
assembled. On television, upward mobility into respectable middle-class life
emerged in the form of fatherhood, when men ceased to be workers and became
“dads.” In fatherhood, a man could exert true authority and manliness.²⁶

Fatherhood became a new badge of masculinity and meaning for the postwar
man, and Father's Day a holiday of major significance. Men began attending
classes on marriage and family in unprecedented numbers. In 1954, *Life* maga-
zine announced “the domestication of the American male.”²⁷ Fatherhood was
important not just to give meaning to men's lives, but to counteract the over-
abundance of maternal care. Although mothers were, of course, expected to
devote themselves full time to their children, excessive mothering posed the
danger that children would become too accustomed to and dependent on female
attention. The unhappy result would be “sissies,” who allegedly were likely to
become homosexuals, “perverts,” and dupes of the communists. Fathers had to
make sure this would not happen to their sons. “Being a real father is not ‘sissy’
business,” a male psychiatrist wrote in *Parents Magazine* in 1947. “It is an occu-
pation . . . the most important occupation in the world.”²⁸

The outpouring of attention to fatherhood in the popular media belies an
undercurrent of uncertainty: Were fathers really involved in child rearing? A
writer in *Better Homes and Gardens* asked, “Are we staking our future on a crop
of sissies? . . . You have a horror of seeing your son a pantywaist, but he won't get
red blood and self reliance if you leave the whole job of making a he-man of him
to his mother.” The author recounted an incident in which a well-meaning
mother tried to stop her small son from a harmless frolic. Her husband restrained
her gently, saying, “Let him go, he'll be all right.” The author explained that the
mother was exercising her “perfectly normal and necessary instinct to protect
her children from harm,” but the father “knew that a boy has to have chances to

try things on his own, to go off on new adventures. He understood that it is a father's job to encourage his son to adventure."²⁹ Even in parenting, strict gender roles applied: It was as inappropriate for the man to protect the child as for the wife to encourage the adventure.

An English anthropologist stated that worry about children becoming "sissies" was "the overriding fear of every American parent." The foreign expert apparently saw this as a uniquely American obsession. Professionals in the fields of psychology, education, sociology, and child development interviewed by the author believed that "the fears are well grounded. Millions of American boys and girls, they say, are so far on their way to being sissies that only professional help will save many of them." The expert suggested that one problem was weak men overshadowed by strong women: "Many fathers are not fully grown up and self-reliant themselves. . . . Too often the early years of a boy's life are dominated by women. . . . But the biggest single reason is absent fathers. . . . Even if you are away from home all day, you can make it up to your children during the hours you are home."³⁰

Parents had to know what a "sissy" was to prevent their child from becoming one. Dr. Luther E. Woodward, psychologist and coordinator of the New York State Mental Health Commission at that time, provided the following definition: "A sissy is a boy (or girl) who gets too much satisfaction from what his mother does for him and not enough from what he does for himself [sic]." Fathers were told to start prevention early, by helping care for the child as a baby: "Any father who works an 8-hour day is around the home enough to do it."³¹ *Parents Magazine* joined in, giving "A Build-Up for Dad." The article began with the basics, assuming that men knew virtually nothing about how to interact with children. Fathers should describe what they do at work, so their youngsters could be proud of them. Another article told men to do carpentry projects or play sports with their children. Men should venture into previously female realms as well: "It's a brave father who attends a parents' meeting, but he belongs there." Still, it was the woman's job to begin this "masculine regeneration. . . . The women of the country . . . may really have to work at it." It was up to the women to offset the imbalance, since they were responsible for "the overfeminization of schools and households."³²

For those who needed help, the same issue of the magazine included a full-page advertisement for a fourteen-volume *Childcraft* guide, with four volumes of "expert advice" covering "every phase of your child's development. . . . You know what is normal behavior and what is not. You know how to . . . direct your child's growth and character." And just in case some questions were not

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answered in the guidebooks, "To help you solve any unusual or different problems . . . *Childcraft* offers a FREE, confidential Advisory Service of expert personal advice." *Woman's Home Companion* noted that "Fathers Are Parents, Too," and offered a fully illustrated "do's and don'ts" guide for fathers, including photographs of dad in an apron, feeding his children, helping them make a box car, and teaching them about cars. *Parents Magazine* ran a feature, ". . . Specially for Fathers," giving tips on parenting to men. Another expert, writing in the *Ladies Home Journal*, encouraged women to get their husbands involved with the children in an article entitled "Making Marriage Work." It was important not only for the child but for the marriage. The writer assumed that fathers were inept with children unless coached by their wives: "Point out specific things he can do which you cannot. Tell him how much it means to you as his wife for your children really to know the man you love. If he's a husband worth having, he will try to cooperate." Then came a number of suggestions, such as "provide things to do" and "make the time short."³³

An article in *American Home* had the title "Are You a Dud as a Dad?" The author argued that parenthood provides men with the opportunity for achievement free from all the impediments that might obstruct success in the world of work: "Here is one area in your life which doesn't depend on 'breaks' or ability, or education or money. A man can be a success as a father, a real 'dad,' if he cares enough to try. . . . Share your small son's hobbies, laugh at his jokes, lend a listening ear to his problems, the kind of things a fellow wants to talk over with a man."³⁴ In the face of the highly organized world of work that stripped men of their autonomy, fatherhood could be a substitute source of meaning and creativity. Nowhere else was it easier for a man to be his own boss than in fatherhood.

Of course, women were also expected to achieve their greatest fulfillment in parenthood.³⁵ So prevalent was the assumption that women were naturally fulfilled in motherhood that anxiety or ambivalence surrounding pregnancy was actually considered a pathological condition. In 1953, a Cornell University obstetrician reported to the American Academy of Obstetrics and Gynecology his findings that repeated miscarriages might be caused by emotional factors and that a miscarriage might be the result of "an unconscious rejection on the mother's part of repeated pregnancies and of motherhood. Worry, tension, fear and other psychological stresses . . . may bring on the miscarriage." The researcher concluded that "psychiatric treatment will do more to help these women achieve happy motherhood than such prescriptions as vitamin E, sex hormones, or complete bed rest." The doctor reported "successful maternal psychotherapy" with "psychiatric care, aimed to relieve anxieties and possible fear of motherhood." The women in

the study stopped having miscarriages, seemed to gain confidence, and "once these patients develop a pattern of success, they continue to do so time and again."³⁶ Although the conclusion that stress is unhealthy is sound and hardly surprising, the conditions that may create real stress in a woman embarking on motherhood were not at issue in the medical study. The point was not to address the sources of stress. Rather, the stress itself was considered pathological.

Given the strong connections among female sexuality, marriage, and motherhood, one might expect the birth control movement to have withered during these years. On the contrary, the movement gained momentum. Under the leadership of Margaret Sanger, birth control had gained a significant amount of liberal support during the 1920s and 1930s, with roots in feminism and socialism. The number of birth control clinics in the nation grew from fifty-five in 1930 to over eight hundred in 1942.³⁷ In 1942, the Birth Control Federation of America changed its name to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA), signaling a major shift in the movement's direction. New goals included the strengthening of the family through the liberation of female sexuality in marriage. As historian Linda Gordon noted, "Part of the PPFA program of family stability was the recognition of mutual sexual enjoyment as an important cement in marriages, and of women's sexual repression as a dangerous, explosive frustration."³⁸ By eliminating the fear of pregnancy, birth control would contribute to women's sexual satisfaction and would tame and channel the power of female sexuality into rationally planned families.

The effect of the new direction was to bring contraception under professional control, making birth control devices more widely available and ultimately more effective. Most of all, PPFA gave the birth control movement "a clean image," emphasizing not women's rights, individual freedom, or sexuality, but as *Scientific American* noted, "the need for individual couples to plan their families and for nations to plan their populations."³⁹

The focus on population planning emerged during World War II. At first, planning was geared to domestic needs, particularly the ideal of the postwar family. A 1943 PPFA pamphlet stated that "victory cannot be won without *planning*. . . . Planned Parenthood . . . can . . . be made to mean that more healthy children will be born to maintain the kind of peace for which we fight." Margaret Sanger herself called for "national security through birth control." At the same time, the war gave rise to the first direct connections between the American birth control movement and population control abroad. As the organization looked toward the postwar era, it became more concerned with the international implications of contraception. In a mass mailing sent to lawyers and business-

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men, the PPFA argued, "Any sound peace plan must take into consideration population trends and natural resources, when we face such divergencies as the population of India." Healthy markets abroad were also an important consideration: "Sound planning for business expansion on a national scale must also consider carefully not only the numerical growth of people, but their purchasing power."⁴⁰

These international issues fed directly into the postwar increase in support for research on contraception. Historian James Reed showed how the major funding for research that ultimately led to the development of intrauterine devices and oral contraceptives resulted directly from cold war concerns: "Nations newly liberated from colonial status wanted to share the prosperity of the West. Failure to develop their economies would lead to more bitter internal divisions and rejection of Western alliances in favor of communist models of development. Thus, political stability depended on rapid economic development and that development in turn could only succeed if the rate of population growth did not eat up the capital needed to finance development."⁴¹ The anticommunist thrust of the funding for contraceptive research was obvious at the time. The Hugh More Fund distributed a pamphlet, frequently reprinted through the fifties and early sixties, entitled *The Population Bomb*. It claimed, "There will be 300 million more mouths to feed in the world four years from now—most of them hungry. Hunger brings turmoil—and turmoil, as we have learned, creates the atmosphere in which the communists seek to conquer the earth."⁴²

Scientific, rational procreation at home and abroad fit the needs of the cold war and justified the acceptance of contraception by many liberal institutions. *Ebony* magazine assured its black readers that contraception "helps parents space babies to make them a blessing rather than a burden." Throughout the 1950s, religious groups, with the notable exception of the Catholic church, began to sanction birth control for family planning. The Very Reverend James Pike, a leading Episcopal spokesman, advocated contraceptive measures as "a positive duty" if a married couple, whether for reasons of health, emotional instability, or financial straits, did not want a child at a certain time. It was assumed, of course, that these circumstances were unusual and extraordinary, as well as temporary, and that the couple would procreate when these unfortunate conditions no longer existed. Under happier circumstances, the duty of parents was unquestionably to have children: "If the answer at a particular time is that they should be having a child, then they have a positive ethical responsibility to . . . carry out this intent, including medical assistance toward fertility." Pike's advocacy of birth control, then, was toward planned families: having children at the right

time. Planned-parenthood workers, he urged, should be just as concerned with "planned procreation" as with the "limitation of birth."⁴³

By 1961, the National Council of Churches of Christ had approved the use of contraceptives. Nonorthodox Protestant and Jewish organizations, according to one study, moved "from uncompromising hostility to birth control to fervid endorsement of its use, even making it a moral obligation to control family size."⁴⁴ The medical establishment concurred. At the same time, legislatures were loosening their restrictions on birth control. Before the war, most states banned the dissemination of contraceptive information and materials, even for doctors. But by the late 1950s, only two states, Connecticut and Massachusetts, still had these statutes on the books. Within the space of a few decades, major institutions shifted their perceptions of birth control from a threat to the social order to a positive tool for the nation's benefit. Throughout the 1950s, proponents of contraception continued to promote it as a means of controlling fertility abroad and spacing children at home.

Increased availability and legitimation led to the widespread use of birth control devices among married couples. American society was certainly ready to accept birth control as a means of improving marital sex and family planning. But it was not ready to accept its potential for liberating sex outside marriage or for liberating women from childbearing to enable them to pursue careers outside the home. As a result, contraception in the postwar years encouraged scientific family planning, rather than premarital sexual experimentation or alternatives to motherhood for women. American public opinion, legislative bodies, and the medical establishment all did their part to make sure that the birth control technology would encourage marriage and family life.⁴⁵

In the early postwar years, the contraceptive technology actually reinforced existing mores and further encouraged the drop in the marriage age. It was widely argued that responsible young people could now marry young, even if they were in college or still economically dependent on their parents, because they could postpone the responsibilities of parenthood until they were ready. As late as 1968, one physician who was concerned about premarital sex stated, "I would certainly rather see a young couple marry early and postpone having babies than have them stumble into a sexual liaison in which they inadvertently start an unwanted life." He continued by endorsing sexual containment: "The sex drive, like hunger and aggressiveness, can be controlled in socially acceptable ways until marriage is possible."⁴⁶

By enabling couples to marry young, postpone childbearing, and space their children, contraception fostered the modernization and professionalization of

domestic roles. Like labor-saving appliances, birth control devices could contribute to enjoyment at home and heighten the standards for domestic conduct. Both kinds of products, however, placed the burden of responsibility on women and rooted them more securely as the custodians of the scientific home. Contraception thus reinforced the imperative to contain sex within marriage, and it underscored the ideology of modern domesticity that included reproductive responsibilities and traditional roles for women. Consequently, one of the most explosive technological developments of the postwar years, which held the promise of freeing sex from marriage and marriage from procreation, did neither. That potential was not realized for two decades.

Advocates of family planning endorsed contraception but drew the line at abortion. Unlike contraceptives, which were promoted as a means of strengthening the family, abortion was considered a threat to sexual morality and family life. While contraception was the reward for the virtuous, abortion was the punishment for the immoral. Public health pamphlets published by the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), a conservative group of health professionals, contained implicit warnings that sexual transgression could lead one to a dangerous abortionist's door. ASHA placed itself in the vanguard of the sex education movement, but the education it promoted was based on fear. One chapter of ASHA requested a cover design for a pamphlet on abortion that would picture a frightened-looking woman walking up a dingy stairway in an obvious slum.⁴⁷ Illegal abortions were indeed dangerous, but ASHA urged individual caution rather than legalized abortion.

Legal abortions had been available for several decades at the discretion of physicians, but they became more difficult to obtain in the 1940s and 1950s. "Therapeutic" abortions could be performed legally in hospitals only if the physicians decided that continuing the pregnancy would present a danger to the life or health of the woman, and criteria were haphazard and arbitrary. In most states, physicians were able to interpret the danger as they saw fit, and some women were able to have safe operations. Legal abortions, however, accounted for only part of the terminated pregnancies. A thriving underground business provided illegal and often dangerous abortions to an estimated two hundred and fifty thousand to 1 million women each year during the postwar years. These illegal abortions were also responsible for an estimated 40 percent of all maternal deaths. Kinsey reported that among his sample, fully 24 percent of the wives had had abortions by the time they were forty, and that almost 90 percent of premarital pregnancies were aborted. Most of these operations were illegal.⁴⁸

Clearly, illegal abortions were a serious health problem. But the problem was not new. In fact, Kinsey's evidence suggests that fewer abortions were performed in the postwar era than in the 1930s. Even though the actual number of abortions may have been going down, articles in the popular press increased.⁴⁹ Sensationalist coverage of illegal "abortion rings" were warnings to young women. Although these articles condemned the illegal abortionists, they also condemned the women who died at their hands.

Although many abortions were performed in safe and hygienic conditions by physicians who risked their reputations and even their licenses by doing so, it was the illegal abortionists who attracted the most attention. One who gained public notoriety was a "Dr." Faiman, who allegedly deluded young women with his "look of respectability." *Time* described Faiman as "living in an exclusive section of Dallas. . . . He has been supported in his pleasant position by panicky pregnant girls." Faiman was portrayed in much the same way as the "white slavers" of the Progressive Era: predatory, dark, sly, and foreign. He was believed to be an immigrant, "apparently born in Riga."⁵⁰

Despite the publicity surrounding abortion scandals, most Americans still advocated restricted access to legal operations. Even physicians did not call for increasing the availability of legal abortions, which would minimize the risks involved. Rather, by the end of the 1940s, the medical establishment systematically reduced the number of abortions performed in hospitals by denying a greater proportion of the requests for therapeutic abortions. Moreover, hospitals began to change their policies by removing the discretionary power from individual physicians and requiring a hospital committee to rule on each abortion request. As a result, requests for legal abortions were more frequently denied than granted. A few voices called for legalized abortion, but they were faint compared to the roar that condemned the practice. The weight of public opinion was on the side of reproduction: Women who have sex should be married, and married women should have babies.⁵¹ Medical advances in contraception might assist that effort, but abortion represented a threat to the family-planning ideal.

The behavior of the respondents to the Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS) would have pleased those who advocated the use of contraceptives for family planning. Reflecting the concerns of the day, the KLS asked respondents to provide information about their plans for having children, their experiences with pregnancies and births, and their use of birth control. (The KLS questionnaire had forty-seven questions on reproduction alone.) Like most of their middle-class peers, the KLS respondents were conscientious family planners; 98 percent

reported using some form of birth control, and nearly all used contraceptives to delay having children at the beginning of their marriage and to space their children afterward. There were, however, some accidental, unplanned pregnancies. Since the methods used at the time were less effective than the oral contraceptives and intrauterine devices that were available later, 30 percent said that at least one child was conceived while they practiced some form of birth control. Nevertheless, nearly all the 30 percent reported no negative effects from these accidental pregnancies. Although the KLS did not ask about premarital abortions, fewer than one in ten reported any "intentional termination of pregnancies" during the marriage.⁵²

The KLS respondents' use of contraception is consistent with findings from other studies. Kinsey found that among white women born between 1920 and 1929, 94 percent used contraceptive devices; 57 percent used diaphragms and 37 percent of their husbands used condoms. National fertility studies in the 1950s showed that 81 percent of the white wives of childbearing age used birth control and 7 percent more planned to do so. The trend was toward using birth control earlier in marriage to plan first births and space the rest. By 1957, the peak year of the baby boom, a University of Michigan survey found that nearly all American couples were planning the size of their families. But they were planning for more children than in the past. Between 1940 and 1960, the "ideal" number of children went from two to four. In addition, planned children were born to young parents. In the 1950s, women had their first child at a younger age than did their grandmothers. Compared to white middle-class Protestant couples, blacks, Catholics, and those with less education were less likely to use contraception or to use it early in marriage. But by the 1960s, when oral contraceptives became available, these differences among groups were shrinking.⁵³

The KLS respondents fit the national pattern: 70 percent of the couples had two to four children. Most began having children during the war; a small number in 1955 said they still would like more children. The majority had given birth to all their children within six or fewer years, and 80 percent within ten years. It seems clear that these respondents used birth control to postpone conception at the beginning of their marriage (most did not have children in the first year of marriage) but then chose to have children in rapid succession, ending their childbearing in most cases by their late twenties or early thirties. Birth control methods allowed them to plan their families according to their wishes, which matched the prevailing norms.⁵⁴

As time went on, the couples in the KLS desired larger families, and there was 90 percent agreement between spouses about the number of children they

wanted. Before the couples married, only 20 percent wanted four or more children. By the mid-1950s, 39 percent wanted at least four children. As one wife recalled, "Children were not discussed [during the engagement]. That was a time of depression and our desire was to afford marriage. . . . After the first baby, I wanted company for her and had a second daughter. A miscarriage left me with such a feeling of failure that I wanted the third child. The fourth was a happy accident. So now we're really 'happy' to be blessed with our 2 boys and 2 girls."⁵⁵ Miscarriage meant "failure"; unplanned pregnancy was a "happy accident." This woman articulated the widely held belief that a large family was a successful family and a happy one.

Only 14 percent of the KLS respondents said they had more children than they had originally desired. In contrast, 48 percent had fewer than they had hoped, and 61 percent said their family was smaller than they wished. More than 25 percent reported some difficulty in conception, and nearly 40 percent had lost at least one baby through a miscarriage or stillbirth. Those couples who had fewer children than they had wished did so primarily for financial reasons or physical difficulties, usually the health or age of the mother or infertility problems.⁵⁶ As the mother of an only child explained, "If able to carry them I would have wished to have four." Some women suffered at the hands of the medical profession. Explaining why she ended up with two children instead of the four she and her husband originally wanted, one woman blamed "the assembly line method . . . in hospitals when babies are born. Due to carelessness by a well known (woman's) specialist the after-birth was removed one week after 1st child was born. Before then 5 blood transfusions and many saline solutions were administered. . . . Usual rush and hasty use of forceps broke collar bone of 2d healthy child. Doctor denied anything wrong but 20 days later when dismissed from hospital X-ray showed broken collar bone mended and to this day child has not proper use of arm."⁵⁷ In those days, before the boom in lawsuits for medical malpractice, this mother kept her bitterness to herself and decided to stop having children.

The desire to provide a college education for each child was another major reason why some parents limited the size of their families. The comment of one woman was typical: "I think if money had not been such a worrisome thing and if we had not had so many periods of unsteady jobs, we might have had more children." Another woman had similar concerns but still considered the possibility of having more children: "After the first two were born and we appreciated the joys of parenthood it was mutually desired to have more children. We have stopped at 4 only because we feel the financial burden of educating more than 4

is more than we can see our way clear to assuming. We would both like six children. And it is not too late to change our minds about stopping at 4!"⁵⁸

A few women in the sample who admitted that they believed there was more to life than constant child care gave personal reasons for limiting the size of their families. Joan Morey, for example, explained why she stopped at two children: "The expenses of raising a child made us feel 2 would be enough. For we wanted to give a college education, music lessons, etc. to each child, if he showed interest. Also the interests I have had in church and community activities made me discontent with constant baby or child care."⁵⁹ This final comment suggests another issue that surfaced: the stresses of motherhood. Although it was unfashionable to complain about these stresses, given the widely shared belief that children provided women with happiness and fulfillment, some of the women expressed their dissatisfactions in the privacy of the anonymous questionnaire.

Joan Morey wished to devote more of her time and energy to voluntary activities, which were an important route to public life for many homemakers at the time. Other women were more explicit about the burdens of full-time motherhood. Carol Hubbard was one mother for whom the strain became unbearable. Joseph Hubbard claimed that he and his wife modified their original desire for six children because of the costs involved in raising them. But his wife gave another explanation. She claimed that the reason was "my nervous condition after the third and my husband's indifference to my problems and his lack of assistance." Carol's perception of Joseph's denial of her trouble was confirmed in his responses to the questionnaire. When asked if his wife had experienced any emotional disturbances, he checked "a little" and noted, "General nervousness during menstrual period." His wife, however, described her emotional difficulties differently. Checking the highest category, "a great deal," she went on to explain, "Due to loss of sleep for 5 months with third baby and care of 2 other small children, I believe I had a nervous breakdown but did not realize a doctor could have helped me. Cried frequently, 'boiling' sensation inside would rise up to my head and then caused shrill screams. Inability to concentrate. Could not read or even sit down for long."⁶⁰

The stresses of parenting did little to dampen the enthusiasm for having children, however. The desire for large families exhibited by wives in the KLS sample was shared by younger women as well. John Modell and John Campbell's study of 192 single women aged eighteen to twenty-one in 1955 found that they had a strong desire to have several children. These women were at least a decade younger than the KLS respondents, but they had many similar views. They were much more likely to express their desire for children than their eagerness for

marriage (a much higher proportion associated pleasure, love, and joy with having children than with getting married). They also gave more reasons for having children than for getting married.

The researchers found few differentials by class, although the sample was all white. Their respondents expressed unromantic notions of marriage but saw children as providing a means of personal fulfillment. Many more among all classes rated children—rather than the marriage itself—as the most important aspect of married life. In addition, they strongly believed in planning for several children, a finding that suggests that the continued baby boom was the result not of a “baby binge,” but of rational planning and a continued adherence to a pronatalist ideology. Economic well-being had only a minor impact on child-bearing aspirations; the respondents were more likely to decrease their fertility expectations if their financial circumstances became reduced than to increase them in flush times. The attitudes of these young single women suggest that by the mid-1950s a strong ideology prevailed that would keep the birthrate booming for nearly another decade.⁶¹

The baby boom was accompanied and reinforced by a widespread ideology favoring large families, reflected in everything from media images and medical theories to public policies. The popular press practically deified parenthood, while such measures as tax exemptions for dependent children and financial incentives for suburban home ownership encouraged postwar couples to have large families.⁶² Still, one needs to ask why parents—especially women—wanted large families. Clearly, affluence alone cannot explain the baby boom. As one study concluded, the evidence “provides no support at all for the hypothesis that income bears a positive relation to fertility.” Nevertheless, fertility fit “the consumer choice model,” indicating that numerous children, like numerous commodities, reflected an abundant home. The desire for many children expressed widely shared societal norms: “The basic idea is that couples pick out a reproductive target and then are more or less successful at hitting it. The target chosen reflects the reproductive norms they have internalized.” The researchers who documented this trend were at a loss to explain it. They concluded, “The level of fertility [went] up for every subgroup and then it [came] down for every subgroup, and we are far from an understanding of why that happened and whether it will happen again.”⁶³

An examination of the cultural factors offers some clues to this phenomenon. For instance, many educated women “professionalized” homemaking and made it their career, investing it with skills, prestige, and importance. Considering the difficulties women faced in combining a family with an occu-

pation outside the home, it is not surprising that many women poured their creative energies into their families. The same impulses that promoted college training for homemakers would seek to elevate child rearing to fit a quasiprofessional model, complete with guidebooks and standards. Women whose aspirations for personal achievement had little chance of realization in the wider world put their energies into full-time motherhood. As the *Ladies Home Journal* noted, "Increasing numbers of women, disillusioned with their present roles or with what the workaday world can offer, will turn toward motherhood as the happiest road to fulfillment." But motherhood could only be full time as long as there were young children at home. Once the children entered school, full-time motherhood was not possible unless the women had more children. In addition, since widely read experts like Dr. Benjamin Spock stressed the vital importance of the early years, women could increase their sense of usefulness and importance by increasing the number of small children at home. In that way, they could extend their commitment to the "absorbing, creative profession" of parenting.⁶⁴

It is no wonder that women responded to Dr. Spock's call for professionalized child rearing and propelled his guide to baby and child care to the top of the best-seller list.⁶⁵ If the occupational achievement of men was reflected in the income they brought home, that of women might be reflected in the number of children they raised successfully. Large families were an indication of a man's potency and ability to provide, and of a woman's success as a professional homemaker.

Thoughtful observers have suggested that the baby boom was a response to feelings of impotence in the wider world, which fostered the greater privatization and isolation of the family. As one team of scholars concluded, "If [men and women] lacked the hope to affect congressional decisions, they could still hope to influence their children and the local school board."⁶⁶ Although there is some truth to this view, procreation was not simply a "reaction to their loss of hope for significant influence on the world," as the authors claimed. Rather, child rearing was one of the few ways of exerting influence on the world. Domesticity was not so much a retreat from public affairs as an expression of one's citizenship. Postwar men and women were endorsing and affirming, through their families, the goals expressed by major political leaders and experts. With the support of public policies and institutions, and in conformity with widely shared political goals, they joined in the affirmation of planned families, took advantage of contraceptive techniques to space their children scientifically, accepted governmental benefits, and followed the prescriptions of the medical establishment. Rather than

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e man declared in 1955, "I'd like six
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exuality, most had the same procreative
e behavior. They used contraception,
amilies.

a successful marriage and family life;
riotism, and achievement. They would
d fulfill the sexual energies of women.
nd exhaustion, parents still pointed to
ment.

omestic ideal, however, the children in
much of themselves could not possibly
dults would wring their hands over their
ial circles; authorities would fret about
y; and those treasured children would
60s and, eventually, grow up.⁶⁹ As the
rearing would take its toll, especially on
in an "empty nest" at a relatively young
their lives. But in the years of the baby
ne potential disappointments that might
personal fulfillment in child rearing. As
s and settled in with their growing fami-
living out the postwar version of the
life that spread a beacon to the free world;
ng against hostile outside forces.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE COMMODITY GAP: CONSUMERISM AND THE MODERN HOME

As a normal part of life, thrift now is un-American.

—WILLIAM H. WHYTE, JR., 1956

No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist.
He has too much to do.

—WILLIAM J. LEVITT, DEVELOPER OF LEVITTOWN, 1948¹

THE SEXUALLY charged, child-centered family took its place as the embodiment of the postwar American dream. The most tangible symbol of that dream was the suburban home—the locale of the good life, the evidence of democratic abundance. It did not take long for this consumer-laden dream house to land squarely in the middle of cold war politics. One remarkable example demonstrates the direct link between the suburban American dream and the international dynamics of the cold war. In 1948, when Europe was still recovering from World War II, American officials worried that political instability might lead some nations to embrace communism. Leaders in the United States