

# Paging Ward Cleaver

*Conservatives are right that fatherless families are a problem.  
But a return to the fifties sitcom version of the family is no solution*

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

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**Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem**

David Blankenhorn, *Basic Books*, \$22

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Perhaps the essential difference between the conservatism of the eighties and the conservatism of the nineties is that the former was mainly economic and upbeat and the latter seems to be mainly cultural and gloomy. The books that best convey the mood of Reagan conservatism are exuberant briefs for tax-cutting, like *The Way the World Works* and *Wealth and Poverty*. Now we're getting a spate of neo-Hobbesian works that see the country socially disintegrating and wish for a stabler social order—it's evening in America. *Fatherless America*, which gazes out across the land and sees "a society that is spinning out of control," is a good example, and also the best one of these books that I've read so far.

The current conservative mood has a delayed-reaction quality. Most of the social indicators now causing alarm—crime rates, black out-of-wedlock birth rates, the slow down in median family income, the size of welfare rolls, drug use, the frequency of premarital sex and abortion—rose most steeply during the sixties and seventies, and now show signs of becoming, if not less alarming, at least not increasingly alarming. Newt Gingrich's almost daily railings against the sixties are evidence of the retrospective quality of conservative politics today. Imagine politicians and intellectuals of the 1860s spending most of their time debating the

pros and cons of the Andrew Jackson era. They couldn't, because they were too busy fighting a war; our ability to contemplate the long-term corrosion of the social fabric is a luxury arising out of the relative peace and prosperity of our own historical moment. We're in a crisis enabled by a lack of crisis.

The specific ill that concerns David Blankenhorn is what he calls fatherlessness—that is, the increase (from about one-sixth in 1960 to about one-third today) in the portion of American children who don't live with their natural father. It's an original rubric, under which he places a wide range of familiar social problems, from divorce to violent crime, to out-of-wedlock childbirth. All these, he says, are best understood as consequences of the erosion of the ethos of traditional fatherhood. It's interesting, and a good illustration of the current conservative mood, that Blankenhorn barely mentions government and politics as contributors to the problem that so concerns him. The "cultural elite" (which can't be overthrown by elections) is the villain.

*Fatherless America* begins with an enormous drum-roll about the importance of the problem. On the first page, Blankenhorn uses the phrases "a problem with no name" and "two groups, separate and unequal"—references to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and the Kerner Commission report on the urban riots of the sixties. Clearly he wants to start a movement (right now he's barnstorming the country, col-

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lecting “fatherhood pledges”). The heart of the book, though, is devoted to a demolition of contemporary liberal bromides about the family, all of which are variations on the theme of “there is no one family structure that is best for children.”

Blankenhorn has no use, for example, for the idea that the traditional father was deficient in any important way, or that it’s heartwarming when a single woman decides to become pregnant and raise her child alone, or that men need to become more emotionally open and nurturing in order to be good fathers. Again and again he blasts away at heartwarming lifestyle-page visions of what’s good for children that don’t involve married parents. It would be better for a child, he says, for his father to die than to leave his mother. Domestic violence and child abuse are associated with single parenthood, not the traditional family. Child-support enforcement isn’t working and wouldn’t do much good if it did. Stepfamilies “comprise the most unstable and volatile family form in our society” and “are inherently fraught with bad outcomes for children.” To Blankenhorn (who has perhaps been spared much experience with the dark side of the intact family), the unhappiness, for children at least, of one-parent or “blended” families is so great that it outweighs any possible unhappiness that could occur in a two-parent family.

What’s best about the book is the energy, fearlessness, and sophistication with which Blankenhorn pursues what’s essentially an academic “review of the literature” on the family. Other than a mildly indiscriminate throwing around of the word “elite,” he admirably avoids clichés—this is the rare conservative book in which the phrase “politically correct” appears only once, and then in a quotation of somebody else. He actually takes the trouble to explain why the people he disagrees with are wrong,

rather than allowing sarcasm, misrepresentation, exaggeration, or indictment-by-association to take the place of argument. He is comfortable, and perceptive, discussing everything from children’s stories to correlation coefficients to the arcana of neo-Freudian theory—all the while also conveying the sense that what he cares most deeply about is the problem itself, not the intellectual jousting over it.

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One of Blankenhorn’s central disagreements with the liberal view of fatherhood (which he characterizes, somewhat unfairly, as being that it is “superfluous”) is over the idea that male aggression, violence, and sexual promiscuity are the result of social conditioning. He holds the true conservative belief that the “state of nature” is something very bad, and that society is essentially civilizing, not corrupting; men in particular are inherently brutish, but can be turned “toward pro-social purposes”

by marriage and fatherhood, which allows them to channel their aggressive impulses into breadwinning. (Readers of George Gilder’s *Sexual Suicide* will find this theme familiar.) What men’s children primarily want from them, Blankenhorn says, is this aggressiveness-harnessed-toward-work. If their fathers also happen to give them hugs and change their diapers, that’s fine, but it doesn’t happen very often and it isn’t necessary. If children don’t have fathers, they will begin to revert to the state of nature, becoming cartoonishly aggressive if they are boys and fertile if they are girls. Needless to say, Blankenhorn believes that gender differences are innate, not constructed.

Fatherlessness, on the other hand, does originate in the culture, specifically that part of the culture controlled by the cultural elite. Blankenhorn has come up with many, many examples of tinny rationalizations by experts about the possibility of happy, healthy, father-absent childhoods, but he hasn’t convinced me that these rationalizations are the cause of the phe-

nomenon he's right to deplore. Some of the material he cites is feminist wishful thinking, some is after-the-fact attempts to cheer up single parents, and some simply doesn't have the influence that Blankenhorn attributes to it. He would answer that what's in the tiny psychological quarterlies today will be on "Donahue" tomorrow. True, but the media are so ravenous for material about the family that any and all theories tend to be disseminated almost indiscriminately. That's why Susan Faludi's *Backlash*, working from the same media/pop culture database that Blankenhorn uses, could make the case that anti-feminist dogma is everywhere as convincingly (well, maybe a little less convincingly) as he makes the case that it's pro-feminist dogma that's everywhere. Blankenhorn himself is sure to become ubiquitous on talk shows in the coming months.

What, other than the cultural elite's relativism about family structure, could be responsible for Blankenhorn's epidemic of fatherlessness? The obvious answer is economic forces—the loss of unskilled jobs that William Julius Wilson and Katherine Neckerman blame for the near-universality of out-of-wedlock childbirth in ghettos (a theory that Blankenhorn, while citing their work, doesn't mention), the decrease in blue-collar men's real wages, and the large-scale entry of married women into the workforce.

The three phenomena are related, all being consequences of the increasing importance of white-collar jobs that can be done equally well by women and men. Surely when women were no longer presented with a stark choice (if you want the joy of children, you have to have a man supporting you), many of them kicked out their doggy husbands. For all his thunderousness, Blankenhorn tiptoes a little on the issue of women and work: He repeatedly uses words like "breadwinner" and "provider" as synonyms for the masculinity he wants to see restored, but he insists that real men don't have a problem with the idea of their wives working.

All works on social problems are weakest when proposing solutions. *Fatherless America*, no exception to the rule, ends by calling for a combination of from-the-ground-up volunteer efforts by "guys from Paducah and Dubuque" to promote fatherhood, and new government

studies of the issue, which if mandated would constitute a welfare program for exactly the kind of relativistic family experts Blankenhorn hates. Actually, Blankenhorn himself, as head of a widely quoted think tank, is a member of the cultural elite, and his book will help promote a healthy from-the-top-down glorification of the two-parent family. The superficiality of Blankenhorn's remedies is partly a product of his unwillingness to acknowledge that there is any barrier but the cultural one to a return to the family norms of the fifties. To put it another way, he finds the previous system to have been so good that the removal of women's economic dependence on it contributed nothing to its demise and doesn't now stand in the way of its restoration. What if those mute, glorious, hard-drinking guys that Blankenhorn loves so well were artifacts of the industrial age? Anyway, wasn't the super-strict masculine role they had to play even a little bit constricting? The family we'd all like men to return to would have to be conducted on at least somewhat more equitable terms if husband and wife were both working. Besides that, it would have to be enabled by some economic change in addition to the cultural one Blankenhorn wants. Either we could get some footing under men or take it away from women. I know which one I'd pick. □

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# Out of the Melting Pot, Into the Fire

*By refusing to acknowledge immigration's downsides, elites invite nativism. But does a taste for burritos really make you a traitor?*

**BY PAUL GLASTRIS**

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## **Alien Nation: Common Sense About America's Immigration Disaster**

Peter Brimelow, *Random House*, \$23

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One of my favorite Chicago haunts is Devon Avenue, a gritty strip of brick storefronts on the city's far north side. Once a middle-class Jewish shopping district, a place where women bought bat mitzvah dresses, Devon was going to seed in the seventies as upscale Jewish families headed for the suburbs. But then some enterprising Indian immigrants opened a few modest sari shops, the city's first. Business boomed, and soon dozens more Indian stores opened, hawking handmade jewelry, burlap sacks of basmati rice and 220-volt appliances for smuggling to relatives in protectionist India. Now, on summer evenings, Indian families from all over the Midwest parade up and down the avenue in saris and Nehru jackets, past the restaurants and retail stores, the sweet, musty scent of sandalwood incense wafting out of open doors on air-conditioned breezes.

Though Indians dominate Devon Avenue, other groups shop here, too. American-born Orthodox Jews hit the kosher butchers and religious bookstores. Assyrians sit in shabby all-male cafes, playing backgammon and staring menacingly out the window, their open shirts revealing mats of thick black hair. Greek greengrocers stack boxes of mangos on the sidewalk, stiffly enforcing the rule against mixing and matching

mangos from one box with another, a rule which women of every ethnic group love to break. Russian men in threadbare suits sit with their wives for hours on sidewalk benches, watching the melting-pot spectacle with vague disapproval.

Unlike the immigrants, with their sectarian suspicions, I take a catholic delight in the whole Devon scene: It's a cheap alternative to the exotic foreign travel that I wish I could afford to do. This, however, makes me a traitor in the eyes of Peter Brimelow. A conservative, British-born senior editor at *Forbes*, and a naturalized American citizen, Brimelow argues in *Alien Nation* that the benefits of immigration have been hyped and the costs played down by an elite class of immigration advocates—economists, congressional aides, and journalists who derive a strange psychological pleasure from the presence of exotic foreigners on U.S. soil, a pleasure most other Americans do not share.

Elites from both parties share this enthusiasm, though for somewhat different reasons. Liberals welcome immigrants out of humanitarian impulse, the prospect of more Democratic voters or, for multi-culturalists, diversity for diversity's sake. Conservative free-marketers stress the economic benefits of immigrants, while neoconservatives see their work ethic and family values as antidotes for American moral decline. Yet beneath this bipartisan immigration

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