

Letters

The Dad Debate

I am grateful to Nicholas Lemann ("Paging Ward Cleaver," April) for his thoughtful review of my book, *Fatherless America*. Even when Lemann disagrees with me, he does so in a way that is intellectually serious. May I respond on a few points?

Lemann says that I believe that the unhappiness for children in fatherless homes "is so great that it outweighs any possible unhappiness that could occur in a two-parent family." I do not believe this and I do not know anyone who does. A single-parent home is much better than a two-parent home containing an ax-murderer or a child-molester, for example. But the real question is whether we believe that, in general, children do better when they grow up with their two married parents. I believe that they do.

Lemann says that I admire "mute, glorious, hard-drinking" fathers who don't show affection to their children and who adhere to a "super-strict masculine role." Those who read the chapter in my book describing "The Good Family Man" will learn that Lemann in this instance is not even close to an accurate or fair-minded description of my views.

Lemann says that I blame fatherlessness solely on the "cultural elite." I do not. I do insist that elites in our generation have been more a part of the problem than the solution, but I attribute the rise in fatherlessness to a much broader cultural embrace of the idea that fathers are not really necessary.

Lemann takes me to task for neglecting the economic causes of contemporary father-absence. Fair enough. But is it reasonable to accept Lemann's thesis that the world's high-

est divorce rate and a 31 percent rate of unwed childbearing can be blamed mostly on the loss of blue-collar jobs? OK, economics matters. But surely our cultural values—what we believe about marriage, masculinity, and fatherhood—matter at least as much.

Lemann repeatedly labels me as a "conservative." I believe that unwed childbearing is wrong, that our divorce rate is too high, and that every child deserves a father. For fathers, I believe in higher standards of responsibility for children and more accountability to mothers. If that makes me "conservative," so be it, but as Lemann states, in my book I scrupulously avoid this type of partisan political labeling.

Lemann says that ours is a society of "relative peace and prosperity," and that therefore any "crisis" of fatherlessness imagined by us gloomy "conservatives" actually demonstrates "a lack of crisis." Most social scientists from across the political spectrum now agree that child well-being is declining in our society, primarily due to family fragmentation. Many—I suspect most—Americans feel that we are now several decades into what might be termed a social recession, exemplified primarily by rising rates of incivility and violence and the weakening of community life. Is this a "lack of crisis?"

David Blankenhorn
President, Institute for American Values
New York, NY

Nicholas Lemann responds: On most of Blankenhorn's points, I think we honestly disagree about what the main impression emanating from his book is—so, like him, I'd urge readers to get

the book and decide for themselves. But there are a couple of places where I'd like to answer. I used "conservative" as a description, not an epithet. *The Washington Monthly* is perhaps the world's only liberal magazine that has consistently praised conservatism, and just recently we jointly sponsored a conference with a conservative think tank, the Manhattan Institute. I think Blankenhorn meets the literal (rather than political) definition of a conservative, in the sense that he cherishes and would like to preserve traditional social forms. Finally, my remark about "a lack of crisis" was made in a paragraph commenting generally on American politics right now, not specifically on the issue of fatherlessness. I do think there's a real difference between a crisis, which we're not in, and "a social recession," which we are.

Bloodying Kenney

When George Kenney resigned from the State Department, claiming an inability to tolerate Washington's policy in Bosnia any longer, I was cheered by the prospect of someone in Washington acting on principle. "Bloody Bosnia" (March) proves my hope was an illusion. The Serbs are masters at disinformation, but Kenney does them one better. Not even they have the effrontery to minimize the death toll, but Kenney does. Where are the bodies, Mr. Kenney? In the 70 percent of Bosnia controlled by the Serbs and which are off-limits to monitors from world bodies! By minimizing the death toll, Kenney wishes to promote the idea of equal guilt of all three sides—a view discredited by the C.I.A. report published in *The New York Times* on March 9. It stated, "To those who

think the parties are equally guilty, this report is devastating. The scale of what the Serbs did is so different. But more than that, it makes clear, with concrete evidence, that there was a conscious, coherent, and systematic Serbian policy."... This is an echo of the Helsinki Watch Report which traced the line of the command for the atrocities to the highest authorities in Belgrade even though they "bent over backwards to be evenhanded.... We have made special efforts to find as many abuses on the other side." Similar findings were made by Doctors Without Borders, the European Union, UNHCR, both Houses of Congress, and many more. This is insufficient proof for Kenney. But he has no problem finding fault with Slovenia and Croatia for respecting the will of their electorate by way of general elections and referenda.

Contrary to Kenney's assertion, there is a common agreement on the problem—Serbian aggression. What is lacking is the political will and moral resolve to put a stop to it, aided and abetted by views such as those espoused by Kenney's article.
John Sola
Mississauga East, Ontario

George Kenney replies: Mr. Sola is beating a dead horse. I agree with him the Serbs have a policy of "ethnic cleansing," but it doesn't make sense to invent statistics about numbers killed to "prove" the Serbs are worse than they are. The problem now is that so many are alive and need help. To help them, and to resolve the conflict, the world must objectively weigh conflicting claims in the region. The outcome of all this, I'm sure, won't be the borders the West precipitously recognized, but something more closely related to reality.

Damn Right!

Morton Mintz's fine piece "Stories the Media Miss" (March), describes mind-boggling examples missed or ignored by the Big Four newspapers. As it turns out, ABC News reported facets

of two of them—the IRS record-keeping discrepancies and the C-17 over-billing stories—as part of our weekly "Your Money" segment, within "World News Tonight" with Peter Jennings.

We've found that this is not only information to which citizens are "damn well entitled," in your phrase, but is the kind of reporting viewers want to see. According to our producers, with 130 reports in two-and-a-half years, "Your Money" has become the most popular segment of the broadcast, which is the most-watched of the three nightly newscasts.

As reporters on the lookout for stories of this nature, we find *The Washington Monthly* an excellent resource. Thanks for continuing to analyze government in this special manner.

John Martin
National Correspondent, ABC News
Washington, DC

Cake Anyone?

Phillip Longman's article in the April issue ("Entitlement Junkies") makes some good points about the financial abyss into which entitlements are about to fall.

But Mr. Longman fails to mention another "entitlement"—corporate welfare—which eats up as much as, if not more than, the federal social welfare budget. I know, I know—the article wasn't targeting welfare of any kind. But doesn't Mr. Longman agree that before we start taking away food, fuel, and medical care from the old and the infirm we ought to cut out those welfare checks being collected by the biggest and the wealthiest corporations in the country?

Please don't tell me that cutting government payments to huge corporations will result in job loss. That's the oldest dodge on the books. It's a scare tactic designed to push the political buttons to get the desired results. Let them eat cake for a change.

Maryellen Lake
Becket, MA

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Tilting at Windmills

A Virginia jury did not buy United Way head William Aramony's defense that his brain was shrinking. He should have sought a change of venue to Wisconsin, where a court held that a defendant was not criminally responsible for a robbery in which he had threatened a victim with a foot-long knife. The grounds for the Wisconsin court's ruling: The defendant suffered from depression....

The GOP's dedication to privatization was recently illustrated when members of the House Resources Committee traveled to New Orleans and San Antonio to hold hearings on endangered species and wetlands. Their meals were paid for not by the government—perish the thought—but by the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation, the Midcontinent Oil and Gas Association, the American Sugar Cane League, the Louisiana Land and Exploration Co., the Texas Cattle Feeders Association, the Texas Sheep and Goat Raisers, the San Antonio Farm and Ranch Real Estate Board, and the Texas Association of Builders, among others that *The Washington Post's* Al Kamen calls “not-so-disinterested” parties....

Another sign that the GOP budget-cutters don't know what they're doing: Senate Republicans are proposing to cut \$80 million from the funds Congress appropri-

ated to help the IRS increase tax compliance by hiring more enforcement officers. Since the IRS gets five dollars in tax revenue for every dollar spent on enforcement, this Republican inspiration will produce a net loss to the government of \$400 million....

Have you heard that union work rules prevented the firing of 911 operators who were caught sleeping—literally sleeping—on the job in Chicago?...

For years I have argued that guilty criminals should not be freed because they were convicted on the basis of illegally obtained evidence. Society, it seemed to me, should not be threatened with having dangerous criminals turned loose when it is the officials who illegally obtained the evidence who should be punished. Keep the crooks in jail and let them be joined by the officials who did wrong. I'm now delighted to discover, thanks to a recent article by Jeffrey Toobin in *The New Yorker*, that there is actually a group of legal scholars who, although they believe the law must be zealous in protecting innocent defendants, are not troubled by the conviction of guilty defendants on the basis of improperly obtained evidence. “The government must always remember,” writes Judge Lance Ito, who Toobin says belongs to the group, “this process is a search

for truth.” Protect the innocent defendant. But don't let the guilty off because of constitutional violations for which others should be punished and which have no bearing on the truth of the case....

For indulgence of criminal behavior, the District of Columbia government, long the nation's standard-setter in the realm of municipal misfeasance, wins the prize. It has given three police officers, who were in the process of being convicted for taking bribes, payments of more than \$20,000 each as incentives to go into retirement, where they will continue to be on the take from the taxpayer for the rest of their natural born lives....

The incompetence of D.C. employees continues to stun even the most cynical observer. Just when you think you've steeled yourself for the worst, a more bizarre example requires that you redefine “worst.” Take the recent major drug bust that was to be conducted at a local housing project by 200 federal agents and police. Unfortunately, the raid was announced on WTOG radio the night before it was to happen, thus warning all the dope dealers to be doing anything but dealing at the appointed hour. Why was the news on WTOG? Because the District's Department of Public and Assisted Housing had decided to put out a press release to praise