

Marriage needs help; yet political differences have thwarted attempts to boost matrimony
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WASHINGTON -- How on earth did marriage get to be such a political football?

You may recall that in 2002 President Bush put forth a "Healthy Marriages Initiative." He proposed to spend \$300 million on innovative ways to promote marriage.

Liberals didn't know what to make of it. Many conservatives, supposedly wary of government meddling in private matters, were unsure where it was headed.

Sadly, the campaign on behalf of marriage went awry. For one thing, it became one of the issues the Bush administration stupidly paid a few unscrupulous commentators to tout. And it was politicized. Some groups pulled out of a "healthy marriage" clearinghouse because its Web site was to carry a picture of George and Laura Bush.

The White House began spending most of its time making war, not love. Congress didn't provide the \$300 million.

Marriage fell by the wayside.

It's a shame.

This country needs an unpoliticized rebirth of respect for and interest in the institution of marriage. It is irrefutable that poverty is reduced and children benefit by living with parents who have a stable marriage. One of every three children in America has no father at home. Such children are more likely to be poor, ill-educated, on drugs, physically or emotionally abused or on the road to crime.

But that does not mean we make marriage a panacea for every societal ill or a goal for everyone. It does not mean Uncle Sam should be present at the altar. It does not mean the government should favor married heterosexual couples over other types of families, as some officials have suggested.

The National Fatherhood Initiative works to keep children connected by wallet and heart to their fathers and was started in 1994 by Wade Horn, Bush's point man on marriage. It recently paid for a survey about attitudes toward marriage.

The survey found that most people still want to get married, that only one-third of marriages are successful, that Americans are waiting on average five years longer to get married than they did three decades ago.

The survey was done last year by the University of Texas in Austin and included 1,503 interviews with Americans over the age of 18.

Ninety-seven percent said fathers are as important as mothers for the development of a child, and 88 percent disagreed with the statement: "Marriage is an old-fashioned, outmoded institution."

But according to Roland Warren, president of the fatherhood initiative, there is an enormous backlash against marriage in the black community. When his 22-year-old son got married, Warren said, the son's friends were appalled. Ron Haskins, a senior scholar at the Brookings Institution, agrees. "Marriage among blacks is plummeting. It's a disappearing institution in the black community."

Barbara DeFoe Whitehead, co-director of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, is intrigued with the climbing age of marriage and the survey's finding that being older when first wed does not equate with a greater likelihood of having a successful marriage.

Nobody as yet knows why, according to Norval Glenn, a University of Texas professor who conducted the survey, but the results seem to indicate that those who marry between the ages of 24 and 27 are most likely to have successful marriages.

The three main reasons for getting divorced are lack of commitment, too much quarreling and infidelity. "Unrealistic expectations" was a fourth. "Hollywood lied to me," said one unhappily married woman. Two-thirds of those who are divorced said they wish their spouses had worked harder to stay married, a mathematical anomaly.

Clearly, marriage is changing. But how do we promote better marriages?

Some liberals favor mandatory premarital counseling, focused on conflict resolution and communication skills. But conservatives are wary of the word "mandatory."

Some favor forgiving student loan debt, which burdens many young adults. But the nation already has a huge deficit.

Some want programs in elementary and high schools that teach how to develop a good marital relationship. Unlike with sex ed, schools that have gone that route met no roadblocks from parents, who, by anecdote, sometimes steal the manuals for themselves. But with widespread school curricula cuts, new non-academic courses are unlikely.

Counseling works. Friends who support friends during marriage help (what's a best man for?). A lot more work to keep marriages from disintegrating for insufficient reason would be great. Young people should be taught that having babies does change everything and that good parents sublimate their needs to those of the children.

The government since 2002 has spent about \$56 million boosting marriage, mainly on counseling programs and forums on building successful marriages. It spends about \$1 billion a week on the war in Iraq.

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