



BY DAVID WHITMAN

Teen pregnancy, Bill Clinton says, is the nation's "most serious social problem," and he has vowed to do something about it. The issue is a frequent "talking point" in his speeches, and earlier this month, in an elegant White House ceremony designed to underscore the administration's commitment, the first lady honored a dozen organizations for their work in tackling the problem.

For Clinton, as for politicians of every partisan stripe, lamenting the scourge of "babies having babies" is a no-lose proposition. Who could object? In preaching the virtues of abstinence during adolescence, however, the presi-

proportionate number of teens contract STDs, only 1 in 3 reported cases of gonorrhea and syphilis in 1995 involved people under 20. Teen pregnancy is an urgent problem, hard on mothers and even harder on their kids. But teenagers account for a smaller proportion of unwed births today than 20 years ago. (As late as 1975, teen girls bore the majority of all out-of-wedlock children in the United States.)

Yet when it comes to the negative social consequences of premarital sex between *adults*, there is silence in the White House—and in every other political institution. Conservatives, quick to decry sex between unwed teens and outspoken on many other sexual issues, turn suddenly shy when asked about adult premari-

Adult premarital sex is the 'sin' Americans wink at. But if you think casual sex is a problem only for teenagers, take a look at the numbers for grown-ups

it good for us?

dent and the first lady are not likely to mention one startling statistic: Many more 20-something adults than teenagers give birth to kids out of wedlock. In fact, most of the current social ills tied to sexual behavior—not only children born to unwed parents but sexually transmitted diseases, abortions, and the like—stem chiefly from adults who have sex before they marry, not from sexually active teens.

In an "enlightened" 1990s America, where a person old enough to vote and serve in the armed forces is also deemed old enough to make mature sexual decisions, the elaboration of these statistics is sobering. In 1994, just 22 percent of children born out of wedlock had mothers age 18 or under; more than half had mothers ages 20 to 29. Over half the women who obtain abortions each year, most unmarried, are in their 20s, while just a fifth are under 20. And the same age disparity is evident among those who contract sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS. Although a dis-

tal liaisons. Among those who declined to be interviewed for this article were William Bennett, editor of the anthology *The Book of Virtues*; Gary Bauer, head of the Family Research Council and a former aide to Ronald Reagan; John Podhoretz, a onetime speechwriter for George Bush and deputy editor of the *Weekly Standard* ("he's really not comfortable talking about the subject," said Podhoretz's assistant); and Laura Ingraham, a CBS News analyst who was featured in a 1995 *New York Times Magazine* cover story on young conservatives.

Mum's the word. The clergy, once loquacious on the topic of premarital "sin," are equally subdued. "Have you ever heard a sermon on 'living together'?" asks religious columnist Michael McManus in his 1995 book, *Marriage Savers*. Condemnation of adult premarital sex has virtually vanished from religious preaching, even in the homilies of Catholic priests. "In the pulpits there has been a backing away from moralizing about sex before marriage," says

Bishop James McHugh, the bishop of Camden, N.J.

Why such reticence? The answer may seem obvious. Americans, at least tacitly, have all but given up on the notion that the appropriate premarital state is one of chastity. The Bible may have warned that like the denizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, those who give "themselves over to fornication" will suffer "the vengeance of eternal fire." Yet for most Americans, adult premarital sex has become the "sin" they not only wink at but quietly endorse. On television, adult virgins are as rare as caribou in Manhattan. Several studies have found that prime-time network shows implicitly condone premarital sex, and air as many as 8 depictions of it for every 1 of sex between married couples. And a *U.S. News* poll shows that while most Americans—74 percent—have serious qualms about teens having sex before marriage, more than half believe it is not at all wrong, or wrong only sometimes, for *adults* to have premarital sex.

Yet this surface consensus reflects a rather rapid—and surprisingly complex—transformation in American attitudes. The notion that sex ought to be reserved for marriage may now seem antiquated, but it wasn't very long ago that a large majority of Americans held just that belief. As late as 1968, for example, millions of Americans found it newsworthy that two unwed 20-year-old college students would publicly admit to living together.

Newspapers and newsmagazines replayed the tale of Linda LeClair, a sophomore at Barnard College, and Peter Behr, a Columbia University undergraduate, who conceded they had violated Barnard College's housing regulations by "shacking up" together in an off-campus apartment.

Love and let love. When Barnard students held protest rallies on LeClair's behalf, a beleaguered faculty-student committee relented and decided not to recommend her expulsion from the college. *Time* warned darkly of LeClair's "moment of immoral victory." And William F. Buckley likened LeClair in his syndicated column to an "unemployed concubine." Even the tabloids purported to be shocked by the couple's open cohab-

THE UNWED 30-SOMETHING

Jennifer Grossman, 30, is single and an MSNBC-TV contributor. She's a self-described libertarian but questions today's sexual freedom.

I used to complain to my mother, who is

a liberal, about how boyfriends seemed commitment shy. And she would say, "Well, why buy the cow if the milk is free?" We're in the sexual promised land now, the milk is free, people are surfeited with sex—and yet we're starved for love. In locker rooms, in coffeehouses, women are getting to-

gether with their girlfriends the next morning after their dates and asking in hushed tones: "I hope you didn't sleep with him?"

Some of the men I've dated have been married before. The safe-sex jingle—"You're sleeping with everyone your lover has ever slept with"—has added resonance now: You're sharing emotional space with those ex-wives and girlfriends. You begin to play tricks on yourself—this one wasn't important, this one wasn't meaningful. The acceptance, even encouragement of premarital sex makes it very difficult to sustain the fantasy that we are loved alone.

I didn't kiss the man I'm dating now until the seventh date. I didn't have sex with him until the seventh month. He respects and values me a lot more than the men I dated in college, when I just was a lot more casual with my body. Women have spoiled men.



CLAUDIO VAZQUEZ FOR USN&WR

itation, penning stories with headlines such as "Suffragette of Love and let-love" and "Nine-to-sex coed!"

Between that dimly remembered past and today's indulgence of sexual experimentation before marriage stand the arrival of the pill and the various skirmishes of the sexual revolution. As it turns out, if converting Americans to free love and loose sexual mores was the goal, the revolution was pretty much a dud. Despite the stereotype of the promiscuous American, most men and women are still sexually conservative in belief and practice. Just over 70 percent of Americans say they have had only one sexual partner in the past year, and more than 80 percent report they have never had an extramarital

affair. For the past 25 years, there has been almost no change in how Americans view adultery, homosexuality, or teenage sex—a substantial majority think all three are always, or almost always, wrong.

In the aftermath of that turbulent era, however, there was one definite casualty: Americans' long-held conviction that virginity should be relinquished only in the marriage bed. To be sure, America has never been sexually pristine. Since the first settlers arrived, lots of unwed teens and young adults took a roll or two in the hay. And there was always a perceived double standard for men, who were expected to "sow their oats," and women, who were expected to save themselves for their husbands. Yet there are fundamental

THE ATHLETE

A. C. Green, a basketball star with the *Dallas Mavericks*, is 33 and has never married. He promotes the cause of abstinence through the Phoenix-based *A. C. Green Programs for Youth*.

I am still a virgin. Abstain-

ing from extramarital sex is one of the most unpopular things a person can do, much less talk about. From a sheer numbers standpoint, it can be a lonely cause—but that doesn't mean it's not right.

I abstain as an adult for the same reasons I did as a teen—the principle doesn't change, or the feeling of self-respect I get. My fellow ballplayers do not tell me, "You are crazy"—it's more that they think I'm being unrealistic. It's ironic, but the guys who are parents—and especially the guys who have daughters—tend to look at sex before marriage a lot more carefully now.



DAVID STRICK FOR USA/AM

differences between the premarital sex of the 1960s and earlier eras, and that of the 1990s. In the mid-1960s, many more women were virgins at marriage than is now the case, and men and women who did engage in premarital sex often did so with their betrothed. Cohabitation was comparatively rare, and "shotgun weddings" for pregnant brides were common.

Almost certainly, television has had a central role in eroding the stigma of premarital sex. The sexual content of prime time has changed slowly, so viewers often fail to realize just how differently adult premarital sex is treated today from even a decade ago. Once, adolescents watched *Work and Mindy*, the *Cosby Show*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and the like. Today, more than 6 million children under the age of 11 watch "family hour" shows that include *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Friends*, and *Roseanne*.

Sex, more sex. TV's characterization of out-of-wedlock sex has also done a flip-flop. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan might say that television's treatment of premarital sex is a classic example of "defining deviancy down"—what was once considered deviant or abnormal now is treated as the norm. In his book *Prime Time*, Robert Lichter and his colleagues at the Center for Media and Public Affairs found that prime-time television now by implication endorses unmarried adults' intentions to have sex in about 3 out of

4 cases and raises concerns only about 5 percent of the time. "On shows like *Three's Company* the characters hinted around a lot about premarital sex," says Lichter. "But the shows back then did not specifically seek to justify unmarried sex."

Producers and screenwriters appear largely inured to this permissiveness, though viewers seem troubled. In a *U.S. News* poll last year, just 38 percent of the Hollywood elite were concerned about how TV depicted premarital sex, compared with 83 percent of the public. "Hollywood has glorified adult premarital sex," argues Sen. Joseph Lieberman. "And that is unhelpful if your goal is to reduce teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births."

In this climate, the suggestion that abstinence is preferable to sex for unwed

adults seems hopelessly retrograde, about as timely as recommending that hansom cabs replace automobiles. It is virginity now that makes news. When a *TV Guide* columnist learned recently that college senior Donna Martin, the character played by Tori Spelling on *Beverly Hills 90210*, was scheduled to lose her virginity in the season's finale, the magazine issued a press release to detail this "scoop."

It is possible to argue that, on balance, the removal of premarital sex from the roster of moral or religious transgressions is a good thing. Certainly, most young singles believe they won't personally be hurt by premarital sex because they feel they use contraception responsibly. They minimize their own risk, on the assumption that unintended pregnancies, STDs, and abortions are problems that mostly afflict the careless.

In fact, the *U.S. News* poll shows that a majority of respondents under the age of 45 think that adult premarital sex generally benefits people quite apart from the issue of expanding their sexual pleasure. Unlike their elders, younger adults widely endorsed the sowing-one's-oats rationale for premarital sex, so long as the sowing is not done promiscuously. Less than half of those under 45 thought it was a good idea for adults to remain virgins until they marry. And a majority of respondents agreed that having had a few sexual

The facts about premarital sex

- **Sexual initiation.** In the 1960s, **25** percent of young men and **45** percent of young women were virgins at age 19; by the 1980s, fewer than **20** percent of males and females were.
- **Sexual history.** About **30** percent of Americans say they have had one or no sex partners since turning 18; **30** percent say two to four partners; **22** percent say five to 10 partners; **20** percent say 10 partners or more.
- **Cohabitation.** In the 1950s, roughly **9** in **10** young women got married without living with their partner, compared with **1** in **3** in the early 1990s.
- **Virgin brides.** Percentage of white women married from 1960-65 who were virgins: **43**, from 1980-85: **14**.

Source: Sex in America: The Social Organization of Sexuality, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*

partners makes it easier for a person to pick a compatible spouse.

America's acceptance of premarital sex also makes it easier to avoid rushing into marriage. By delaying family formation until after college, young couples escape being saddled with large loans and child-rearing duties while they are still trying to earn their degrees. And couples who wed for the first time after they turn 25 are less likely to be divorced a decade later than couples who wed while still in their teens. For all the nostalgia about the '50s, few Americans want to turn back the clock to that era, when about half the nation's women wed before their 20th birthday. Less than 8 percent of those surveyed by *U.S. News* thought it ideal for a woman to marry before she turns 20, and fewer than 5 percent thought it ideal for a man to marry before his 20s. The best age for a woman to marry, in most Americans' minds, is 24. For men, the ideal age is 25.

Yet such "benefits" may be more wishful thinking than fact. Cohabitation may seem a good "trial run" for a solid marriage. But in practice, cohabiting couples who marry—many of whom already have children—are about 33 percent more likely to divorce than couples who don't live together before their nuptials. Virgin brides, on the other hand, are less likely to divorce than women who lost their virginity prior to marriage.

But we didn't inhale. Cohabitation is associated with other risks for young couples. Live-in boyfriends are far more likely to beat their partners than are spouses. And young adults who move in together, without being engaged to be married, are more likely to use cocaine and cigarettes after they start cohabiting than beforehand. All in all, muses Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks, adult premarital sex "may ultimately prove to be a little like smoking dope in the 1960s. In retrospect, maybe it isn't so good for you after all."

In a broader sense, the public willingness to tolerate and even condone premarital sex makes it much harder for teachers, clerics, and law enforcement officials to curb other types of extramarital sex that

THE CONVERT

Lisa Schiffren, 37, wrote Dan Quayle's famous 1992 *Murphy Brown* speech in which Quayle criticized the TV character for bearing a child out of wedlock. Schiffren married in 1993 and has a daughter.

I did not abstain from premarital sex. I

was raised in a secular, Upper East Side Manhattan-liberal home and now I'm a quasi-religious conservative. I wish I could say that premarital sex was morally wrong. Sometimes, I think it's OK. It's very hard to send young women to college and tell them they're going to be investment bankers and lawyers, and yet they can't have sex. Plus, we don't really

want people getting married too, too early. I did a lot of things in my 20s I couldn't have done if I were married, like spend a lot of time overseas.

More often than not, though, premarital sex is a bad idea. Nobody I knew at the women's college I went to would have had the guts to say that premarital sex was especially bad. Yet nobody liked a social system where sex was expected in any given relationship. The experience of my generation suggests people very rarely get what they are looking for from premarital sex, unless what they're looking for is purely sexual. When it's too available, sex itself loses its meaning.

Among the elite there is more public posturing about not smoking, or not being fat, than about not having promiscuous sexual relationships. People are afraid to sound like prigs. I myself have overcome this and am happy to be a prig. But I no longer have to date.



CLAUDIO VAZQUEZ FOR USN&WR

are more controversial. Public acceptance of premarital sex has undermined the efforts of government officials to encourage abstinence among teens and to prosecute men who have out-of-wedlock sex with minors, and it has even colored the efforts of the clergy to keep gays and lesbians from being ordained. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recently enacted an amendment barring anyone currently engaged in extramarital sex—heterosexual or otherwise—from serving as an officer of the church. Put another way, sex before marriage has proved to be the runaway horse of traditional values. Once it took

off, all the other old-time mores became more difficult to keep in their place.

An old joke among sex educators is that a conservative is a progressive with a teenage daughter. Few voters, with or without children, question that teens are generally less prepared to shoulder the consequences of sex than adults, or that there is an especially forceful case to be made for having teens—particularly younger adolescents—abstain from sex. Yet it is hard for parents to, say, convince a 17-year-old that she should abstain from sex now but that when she turns 18 or 21 it will be OK for her to start sleeping with her boy-



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THE CLERGYMAN

James McHugh is the bishop of Camden, N.J., and one of the Catholic Church's spokesmen on family issues.

All sexual activity outside of marriage

is wrong and has no moral justification. Sex before marriage diminishes respect for sexuality itself. Many young adults who have engaged in sex before marriage aren't so sure they want their younger brothers and sisters to live through the same experience. But they feel restrained from honestly saying what they think to upcoming generations, either from guilt, ineptitude, or fear that they will be rejected or ridiculed. If everybody's doing it, and everybody accepts that everybody is doing it, then the young man or woman who has a more ennobling vision of human sexuality ends up looking like the oddball.

friends. "I find it easy to distinguish between an adult with some emotional maturity and a 15-year-old having sex," says former Clinton White House aide William Galston, now a board member of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. "Whether the 15-year-old will find it easy to make that distinction is another matter altogether. They may very well view it as hypocritical for a 45-year-old to say, 'Do as we say and not as we do.'"

Drawing a line between teen sex and adult sex is further complicated by the fact that many teenage women sleep with males age 20 and over, not with teen boys. Teen pregnancy is chiefly a result of these older men fathering out-of-wedlock babies with 18- and 19-year-old women, who are responsible for about 3 out of 5 teen births. Only a quarter of the men who impregnate women under the age of 18 are

also under 18. As Mike Males puts it in *The Scapegoat Generation*: "If the president really wanted to prevent junior high sex, he would lecture grown-ups."

Tough love. One renaissance reform for curbing adult-teen sex is enforcement of statutory rape laws, which generally prohibit sex between girls who have not reached the age of consent (typically between ages 14 and 18) and older adult males. In the *U.S. News* poll, 64 percent of Americans said it was always wrong for a man over the age of 20 to have sex with a teenage girl. Both President Clinton and Bob Dole urged states last year to start reapplying the laws, and a handful have done so. But no state is seriously considering enforcing existing antifornication laws—which essentially prohibit consensual sex between unmarried adults.

Some of the reticence might be written

off to the fear of seeming hypocritical, especially among younger conservative lawmakers: We had sex before marriage, so we can't suggest that others shouldn't—at least, not with a straight face. But the trepidation of those on the right has more complex roots, too. Conservatives with libertarian leanings believe that consensual sex between adults is a private matter, one the state shouldn't meddle in. About half those surveyed by *U.S. News* said unmarried couples who live together are "doing their own thing and not affecting anyone else." And at least some on the political right have come to accept the popular belief, echoed in the *U.S. News* poll, that premarital sex between consenting adults generally serves a positive purpose. As Richard Posner, a prominent conservative jurist and intellectual, puts it in his book *Sex and Reason*: "There is no good reason

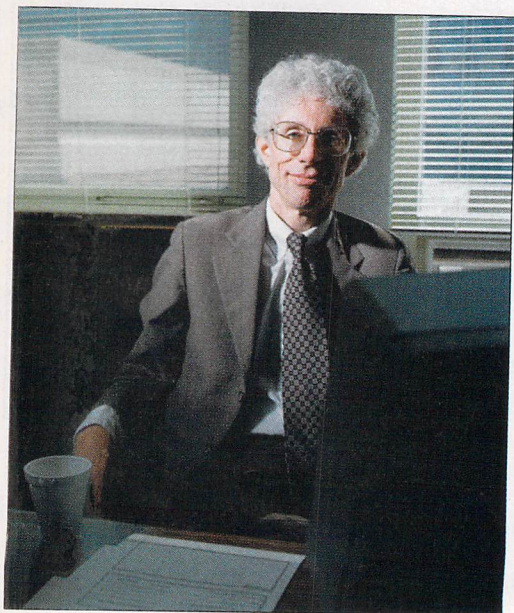
THE POLICY MAKER

William Galston, a former White House aide, helped design President Clinton's teen pregnancy strategy.

As a religious and moral matter, I personally

cannot look at a long-standing relationship outside the bonds of matrimony and say, no, that's totally wrong, that's morally forbidden. I have no problems telling my 12-year-old son he should abstain from sex in high school. I would have a hard time, based on my own experience, telling my son, "Well, after you get to college, I want you to follow the same course of conduct I asked you to follow while you were in high school and lived at home." I don't know that I would want my son to wait until he was 27 or 28 to get married. I got married at 22.

There is a sense in which we believe what we believe about premarital sex because it is convenient for us to do so. It would be extremely inconvenient to conclude that all this premarital sex we tolerate isn't such a good thing, after all.



to deter premarital sex, a generally harmless source of pleasure and for some people an important stage of marital search."

Just what, if anything, can be done about the negative consequences of premarital sex is far from clear. Twenty years ago, Jimmy Carter told employees at the Department of Housing and Urban Development: "Those of you who are living in sin—I hope you'll get married." Carter's suggestion, Galston recalls, provoked "a massive horse laugh, particularly from the press corps." More recently, state officials have begun to ponder how to reduce adult premarital sex in a formal way, owing largely to the new welfare law. During the Reagan and Bush years, Congress authorized several small "abstinence only" programs to teach high school students the benefits of abstinence, without offering information on birth control. The new welfare law sets aside \$50 million for each of the next five years for states to fund abstinence-only programs. In toto, the U.S. government will spend about nine times as much on abstinence education in 1997-98 as in previous years. The vast bulk of the spending will surely be aimed at teens. But the programs funded in the welfare law need not be limited to them.

Deterrence. A second part of the new law deals more directly with the social ills that can attend premarital sex. It provides up to \$100 million a year in bonuses for the five states that can show the largest reductions in out-of-wedlock births without corresponding increases in abortions. Since most out-of-wedlock births are to adults, state officials will, somehow, have to address premarital sex. Yet even conservatives aren't pretending they want the government to discourage most adult premarital sex. Their chief concern is out-of-wedlock births among welfare mothers, more than 90 percent of whom are currently 20 or older. "If the parents can support the child, fine; if they can't, then they ought to be discouraged from having it," says Posner.

The truth, for now, is that nobody has proven ideas about how to reduce adult premarital sex, nor has anyone shown much inclination to do so. The prospects for an en masse return to premarital chastity are almost nil, though some young singles may become more sexually conservative. Earlier this month, the U.S. government announced that the proportion of teens who reported having sexual

THE CHRISTIAN SOLDIER

Ralph Reed is the executive director of the Christian Coalition. U.S. News asked him if he was a virgin when he married.

I wouldn't say that. I would say when my wife and I married, we had both been faithful to each other up until that time. We did not engage in premarital sex and abstaining was important to us. . . . Yes, I think it is morally wrong to have sex before marriage. But I'm not going to condemn someone who is engaged in conduct that I don't agree with. I will encourage my children to abstain until they are married, even if they are adults.

It's hard for me to deliver lectures about finishing college before you get married, since my wife was 19 when I married her. I would prefer to have my daughter finish college before she marries, because career and livelihood issues are much more easily resolved now if you have a college degree. But I don't think you want to set up a situation where you've been so Pharisaic about not approving marriage until after college that you end up having children elope.

Even though we had to struggle financially, my wife and I were infinitely better off having gone ahead and gotten married. If we'd had to wait, it would have been harder to remain consistent with what we believed was morally right. It shouldn't be the overwhelming reason, but the truth is, the sexual drive is one of the things that brings you to your mate.



DAVID BARRY—OUTLINE

intercourse went down for the first time since similar surveys began in the 1970s.

The budding discomfort with casual sex is evident, too, in the enormous popularity of *The Rules*, the retro-guide that advises women how to coyly lure Mr. Right to the altar. Its authors don't counsel chastity. But they do advise "Rules girls" not to kiss a man on the first date and to put off sleeping with him for a few weeks or months. Jennifer Grossman, an MSNBC-TV contributor who is single, 30, and writes often on women's issues, argues that the appeal of *The Rules* among college-educated women reflects their search for a middle ground between casual sex and premarital chastity. "This all-you-can-eat sexual buffet is leaving a lot of men and women feeling very empty," she says. "I see a pattern among my girlfriends—when they sleep

with men, they cry. Sleeping with a man you've known for a week is such an 'almost.' It's almost what you want—but a chasm away from what you really need."

In theory, more responsible use of contraception might provide another avenue for eliminating the worst complications of sex before marriage. In practice, though, the increased availability of contraception has not halted the rise in out-of-wedlock births or put an end to abortions and STDs. Adult premarital sex, the little-noticed heart of the sexual revolution, is here to stay. There may be little to do about this silent "epidemic"—except to acknowledge that sex before marriage may not always be the simple pleasure that many Americans assume it to be. ■

With Paul Glastis and Brendan I. Koerner