

Perspective concerning the recent law recognizing homosexual marriage

This article presents an historical perspective concerning the recent law recognizing homosexual marriage, and what we might expect to see in the relative near future.

By *Jeff Jacoby* of the *Boston Globe*

ONE WAY to approach the same-sex marriage debate is to think about something else entirely. So let's talk about welfare.

In the 1960s, welfare spending soared. Tens of billions of dollars were spent to provide the poor with cash aid, social services, food, and housing. Eligibility rules varied, but in general the bar was low: Welfare recipients did not have to be employed or married to qualify for the dole. They only had to be very low-income, with children to take care of.

All this was urged as a way to help the least affluent members of society, a disproportionate number of whom were black and female. But it isn't hard to imagine the objections a discerning critic might have raised.

Handing out money to unmarried mothers without jobs - in effect, paying for nonmarriage and nonwork - would prove disastrous, our critic could have argued. It will erode the recipients' work ethic and lead to massive illegitimacy. By replacing working husbands with government checks, this Cassandra might have warned, welfare will fuel widespread family breakdown among the poor, and lock in multigenerational dependency on government largesse. You are paving the way for a crime-ridden underclass.

To which the advocates would have replied with derision.

"Alarmist nonsense! How is extending a helping hand to the needy going to threaten anybody's work ethic? Do you really think women will avoid marriage or bear out-of-wedlock children just to get a few dollars from the government? Your critique is insulting, Cassandra. You're opposed to welfare because you're a racist and a snob."

Cassandra would have lost that debate - but she would have been proved right in the end. The rise of the welfare state was a disaster. It caused wholesale disintegration among low-income families, and sent the rate of black illegitimacy and fatherlessness skyrocketing. An underclass did indeed emerge, one plagued by violence, crime, educational failure, and joblessness.

It didn't happen overnight, but the War on Poverty ended up doing great harm. By toppling the social values that had governed life in poor urban neighborhoods, it eventually undermined those neighborhoods and damaged the people who lived in them.

The adoption of same-sex marriage would likewise topple a longstanding system of shared values. It would change assumptions and expectations by which society has long operated - that men and women are not interchangeable, for example, and that the central reason for marriage is to provide children with mothers and fathers in a safe and loving environment.

Society's ideal is for boys and girls to grow up, choose a life partner of the opposite sex, and form a new family. Of course there are people who find it impossible or

intolerable to live up to that ideal, and contemporary American culture provides them with many other options. The big tent we live under now has room for lifelong singles, gay and lesbian partnerships, cohabiting heterosexuals, and second, third, and fourth marriages.

But the ideal arrangement remains the permanent and fruitful union of a loving husband and wife. That is the relationship in which society has its strongest survival stake, and our legal system privileges traditional marriage in order to send the message that it is still, despite all the other choices out there, the ideal.

Legalizing same-sex marriage would change that message. It would signal that we no longer attach unique importance to the union of married opposite-sex couples. It would affirm that same-sex unions are as valuable in every way as conventional marriage. And its most dramatic impact would be not on the gays and lesbians who would joyfully embrace the right to wed today, but on the children who would grow up in a world of normative homosexual marriage tomorrow.

Social behavior changes when society's expectations and values change. Teach children by example - as welfare did - that money can be had without work, and many of them grow up unwilling to work. Teach children by example that traditional marriage is nothing special, and many of them will grow up unwilling to marry.

My foreboding is that a generation after same-sex marriage is legalized, families will be even less stable than they are today, the divorce rate will be even higher, and children will be even less safe.

To express such a dire warning is to be labeled an alarmist, a reactionary, a bigot, and worse. Similar slurs rained down on those, like the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who warned in the 1960s of the disaster that was coming.

But it is not bigotry to try to learn from history, or to point out that some institutions have stood the test of time because they are the only ones that can stand the test of time. A lot of things in American life badly need fixing. The ageless definition of marriage isn't one of them.