



# Violent Men, Violent Couples

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*The Dynamics of Domestic Violence*

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## Preface

**T**his book may be regarded as a sequel to our first book on family violence, *The Family Secret: Family Violence in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983). That first book, with its focus on the victims of family violence, received a number of favorable reviews and an overall positive response from activists in the women's shelter movement. We advocated more shelters as well as additional public and private support for them.

In this volume we shift attention to the perpetrators of violence, both men and women. Our basic argument is that family violence is overdetermined—that is, it has a number of separate causes that frequently interact. While we examine a number of institutional influences, such as military service and religion, there is no way in one volume to cover the entire spectrum of contributing factors. Our purpose, therefore, is to expand understanding of this problem, not to provide definitive solutions.

We also hope to raise issues that often have been buried or not adequately confronted. Our research since *The Family Secret* has introduced and sensitized us to how politicized the family violence field has become. Studies on violent men, women, and households seemingly have posed a double threat to some women's advocates: first because money that would otherwise go to women's programs might be spent on counseling programs for persons who are not victims of violence or not women; second because male sexism is not always found to be the root or only cause of men's violence against women.

We anticipate conflict and polarization around such issues in the future, as priorities must be set in the face of limited public funds. The outlines of this struggle have become clear, as we argue in the final chapter, and its effects are already being felt. We deplore this conflict and urge everyone concerned to set aside ideological interests to consider the growing information base about the long-range dynamics of family violence. Nothing gives the detractors of any social movement more ammunition than internal bickering and factionalism. As everyone in the family violence field is well aware, a host of right-wing politicians, fundamentalist ministers, and antifeminists waits in the wings ready to exploit these disagreements.

We see the information presented in *Violent Men, Violent Couples* as contributing to a more realistic approach to solving family violence. For that reason we have presented our findings in a way that will be most useful to general readers, counselors, judges, law enforcement officers, and clergy as well as scholars and teachers. To the extent that such persons become more sensitized to the family violence problem and better informed about its various dimensions, we will have accomplished our purpose.

## Acknowledgments

**W**e relied on many sources in preparing this book and are indebted to a number of people. In particular, we wish to thank Robert Bowman, Director of the Child and Family Service in Austin, Texas; John Patrick, Carol Mantooth, and Dawn Knowles of the East Texas Crisis Center in Tyler, Texas; and Drs. Jeanne Deschner and John McNeil of the Community Service Clinic in Arlington, Texas. They generously provided us with case file and anecdotal data from their counseling programs while carefully protecting their clients' integrity and identities. Ms. Pat Crawford, formerly director of a central Texas women's shelter near Fort Hood, provided invaluable service in helping us obtain information about abuse in military families. All exemplify professionalism and a nondogmatic interest in providing violent families with effective assistance.

Funds to conduct the follow-up study of violent men discussed in chapter 6 were supplied by the Texas Department of Human Resources during the summer of 1984. We are most appreciative to the staff persons of that agency for their help. In the front lines our colleagues and assistants Dennis Brown, Richard Breen, Jim Sawyer, Lynda Blakeslee, Karen Roberts, Pam Schott, and Gaea Logan-Hines helped us as coresearchers to track down the graduates of anger-control programs and their spouses. Brown and Breen also aided in preparing some topics discussed in this volume.

At the end of acknowledgment sections, authors typically issue the caveat that no one other than themselves is responsible for the interpretations of research projects. This would be misleading in our case, for all the people named above, as well as others, in some measure contributed to our analysis. Whether or not they want to identify with the views expressed here is a choice we leave to them.

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# Part I

## The Dynamics of Family Violence

**P**revious research on family violence has dealt largely with its most visible and accessible participants: the victims. Women and children in shelters have been studied by sociologists, psychologists, and social workers to the point where there is no longer much question of why women endure violence in homes rather than leave, how their self-esteem and personalities are affected, or what impact spousal violence has on children.

At the same time, the perpetrators of family violence have until recently remained a virtually unknown element of the problem. Except through the indirect testimonies of battered women, their spouses have not been accessible to researchers. Nor has the possible role of women in contributing to violence been explored.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the family violence problem: its historical antecedents in the United States and elsewhere, its inception and development as a social concern, and its status in the public eye by the mid-1980s. We analyze family violence as a social movement and, accordingly, identify its ideologies, vested interests, and conflicts. We maintain that the very logic by which the women's shelter movement brought the problem of woman abuse into public awareness virtually ensured that treatment programs for violent men and even violent women eventually would be developed.

Chapter 2 represents a mix of sociological and psychological perspectives that explores the dynamics of male violence using the largest sample of violent men yet assembled. The roles played by various stress factors in the adult lives of these men, their previous learning, and traumatic childhood experiences that shaped their personalities are considered both separately and in combination.

Chapter 3 examines what has been a largely taboo and ignored subject: women's violence toward men. This violence takes three forms: violence by women to protect themselves against violent men, women's violence that complements their mates' equally abusive tendencies, and women's violence

directed at nonviolent men. The dynamics of much women's violence is remarkably similar to that of men. Indeed, in the case of many violent couples, the emotional needs, lack of communication skills, poor anger control, and psychological insecurities of one sex mirror those of the other.

Part I deals with violence at the individual or social psychological level. The impact of larger society and culture are considered but only where specific, troubled individuals are concerned. Having sorted out the various separate but related sources of violent behavior in these chapters, we will then move in Part II to wider institutional domains to consider how they confine and structure violence.

# 1

## Domestic Violence: The Evolving Problem

Family violence . . . can be likened to a cancer, which is part of an organism but which at the same time fatally corrupts and destroys its host.

—*The Family Secret*

Late on Wednesday afternoon, July 18, 1984, a 41-year old ex-security guard James Oliver Huberty walked into a McDonald's restaurant in a San Diego suburb carrying an automatic rifle, a shotgun, and a handgun. Huberty, shouting "Everybody down! I've killed thousands, and I'll kill thousands more!" began firing at the workers and into the throng of patrons. For more than one hour Huberty went on a berserk rampage, reloading his weapons frequently as he mowed down anyone who moved. Witnesses recall Huberty's walking up and down the aisles spraying bullets, many of them armor-piercing, into the booths. He killed two children who innocently rode up to the front door on their bicycles and another woman outside before they could enter. He shot at police cars and fire trucks as they drove into the parking lot to help the victims. Before a police SWAT team sharpshooter finally killed him, Huberty slew twenty-one people and wounded nineteen others. It was the worst one-day slaughter by a single person in U.S. history. As one San Diego police officer described the bloody scene, "It's a slaughterhouse; they were just executed."

Ironically, that same day two of the authors of this book were traveling to Austin to join the third and begin an important research project contracted with the Texas Department of Human Resources. We were to evaluate three programs that counsel violent men and violent couples. Our assignment was to follow up on the men and women who had completed these programs, to see what had become of their lives and to learn whether counseling can actually cut through the patterns of violence among mates and children.

None of the backgrounds of the men we contacted in the next several months rivaled the appalling record set by James Oliver Huberty. Indeed, most people studied were not violent outside their homes. But such violence runs along a continuum, often escalating from initially milder forms to more

serious acts. Given the prevalence of weapons in our society and the inability of many persons to control anger or to deal with others' emotions, the potential for serious harm and even death rarely is remote, as police officers and the staffs of women's shelters can attest.

It turned out that Huberty had been a violent husband and father. From what police later learned, there is good reason to believe that the McDonald's massacre of July 18, 1984, was a supreme expression of personal frustration and family problems that Huberty never resolved at home. He eventually turned these feelings outward onto others through a mass killing, telling his wife as he left their apartment that afternoon: "I'm going to hunt humans!"

The San Diego tragedy is symptomatic of a larger trend that we termed a cult of violence in our previous book, *The Family Secret: Domestic Violence in America*. This cult is actually a cluster of tendencies to act and react violently that are becoming all too frequent in our society. Among such tendencies are the impersonal sources of stress and frustration built into life in our urbanized, superindustrialized society. These are the pressure points with which people are increasingly unable to cope. They extend from crowded freeways to fickle economies, to alienating bureaucracies in government, businesses, and universities, to those maddening errors and confusions that computers supposedly cannot make. In response to these strains, there is a growing number of violent actions, sometimes committed out of sheer rage and sometimes out of ignorance. They translate into freeway murders where rush-hour commuters shoot each other over fender-bender accidents; into wanton acts where unreasoning hatred (as in the McDonald's massacre) seem literally to explode; and into a situation where a frustrated husband punches his wife or an exasperated mother throws a baby down on the floor. Not all violence resulting from these trends is homicidal or suicidal, but much of it could be under the right circumstances.

Thus we believe now, as we did when we initially suggested the existence of this cult and its cancerous, corrosive effect on the American family institution, that the situation continues to become worse, not better.

## Reasons for Optimism

In the short time since *The Family Secret* was published in 1983, a number of encouraging developments have nevertheless occurred in the field of domestic violence. Here are four important reasons for optimism.

### Public Awareness

Public awareness of the domestic violence problem has never been higher in the country. Perhaps we are approaching a time when wife beating, child

abuse, and other forms of such violence are treated seriously. Meanwhile, numerous civic and church groups in communities across the country have made women's shelters a part of their volunteer and charitable agendas. Journalists have publicized the extent of the problem and the plight of victims. Family violence regularly is taught as a unit in many college courses on marriage and the family. In Berkeley, California, the city's board of education unanimously approved a high school program on domestic violence.<sup>1</sup> And there is more official awareness of the violence crisis. In late 1984, for example, the New York State Social Services Commission announced a toll-free twenty-four-hour hotline for victims of domestic violence. Hotline counselors provide information, referrals, and crisis counseling to callers.<sup>2</sup>

Even television has discovered family violence. In the fall of 1984 NBC broadcast a made-for-TV motion picture titled *The Burning Bed*. Farrah Fawcett starred in the role of Francine Hughes, a real-life physically abused Michigan housewife who in 1977 finally ended her torment by dousing her sleeping husband's bed with gasoline and setting it afire. According to Nielsen ratings, this movie was the number one show of the season.<sup>3</sup> Immediately after its showing, the Associated Press reported that thousands of women, apparently motivated by seeing the movie, began calling local shelters for help with similar abuse problems. Many television stations had flashed telephone numbers for local shelters and hotlines on the screen during the movie. The publicity worked. One Oklahoma hotline received almost two hundred calls during the movie, and other shelters, including one in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolplex, found their telephone lines jammed for days afterward. Phoebe Soars, a staff worker at the Transition House Shelter in Cambridge, Massachusetts, reported, "I got a call from a woman whose husband had just beaten her because of the movie. He said she wasn't going to get any ideas from the movie, and he would get her first."<sup>4</sup>

In other cases as well the movie inspired violence. Police detectives in Columbus, Ohio, credited *The Burning Bed* with influencing a woman who shot her live-in boyfriend three times.<sup>5</sup> Coincidentally, that same week an Abilene, Texas, woman who had doused her sleeping husband with gasoline and set him afire (without having heard of Francine Hughes) was acquitted of murder on the ground of self-defense.<sup>6</sup> And there was one case of a Milwaukee, Wisconsin, husband who watched the NBC drama and then set his wife on fire.<sup>7</sup>

In short, the public response to this film was phenomenal. After years of feminists and concerned activists, social workers, social scientists, and police testifying at public hearings, the response proved, without a doubt, that the problem of family violence is widespread. In one sense the movie's success should have come as no surprise: The commercially minded moguls of Hollywood, with their hands on the public pulse, should be able to recognize a story with which millions of viewers can readily identify.

**Political Awareness**

Political awareness of the domestic violence crisis also has expanded considerably. Much of the credit must go to feminists, counselors who work in the trenches with family violence victims, and sympathetic researchers and other professionals. Part of the credit also must be given to politically alert officials who have finally awakened to the undeniable interests of their female voting constituencies, many of whom are, have been, or might be family violence victims. In addition, there are glaring economic realities of how much domestic violence costs the law enforcement establishment in terms of police time spent on disturbance calls, police injuries, and expensive prosecutions.

During 1984 the Texas attorney general took up the cause of family violence, suddenly endorsing legislation to curb this problem and speaking about his new-found concern to various women's groups. Such state-level activity across the nation has become commonplace in the past few years.

Perhaps more significantly, in the fall of 1983 President Ronald Reagan (who would be the incumbent in the 1984 election) commissioned U.S. Attorney General William French Smith to establish the Task Force on Family Violence, which would hold a series of public hearings across the nation, gather data, and issue policy recommendations. This represented something of a turnabout for a president who, up until that time, endorsed a traditional, hands-off policy toward the family and seemed to support the old-fashioned patriarchal model. Indeed, one of the first programs wiped out by the Reagan administration in 1981 had been the Office of Domestic Violence (established in 1979 by Reagan's predecessor, Jimmy Carter, to monitor the problem on a nationwide level and provide start-up funding for antiviolence programs). Many of Reagan's staunchest supporters, however, have little knowledge of, or sympathy for, the issue of domestic violence. Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, for example, has had some harsh words to say about helping abused women. He is on the record as once having said that shelters for battered women promote the "disintegration" of the family.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless in mid-September 1984 the task force issued its report, complete with sixty-three recommendations for monitoring family violence and for taking meaningful remedial steps. Little if anything in the report broke new ground, however, and after the high hopes raised in professionals working in the domestic violence field, the report seemed doomed to the archives, where other much-ballyhooed government reports have found a final resting place. The majority of the recommendations entailed costs that financially strapped local and state governments and that the federal government would be unlikely to assume anytime soon.

At the report's release, Attorney General Smith expressed vague concern about the general problem (such as "for too long our legal system has not adequately protected the victims of family violence. . . ."), but he also ad-



mitted that he had not even read the report. While Smith assured the media that “the federal response to this problem is coordinated and comprehensive” (without specifying just what that response was) and proclaimed that “the federal government can provide leadership on the issue” (without indicating how), he then asserted practically in the same breath that the federal government should not “mandate” the conduct of abusive parents and spouses.<sup>9</sup> This was a contradiction of the report’s content, for eight (or more than 10 percent) of the task force’s recommendations concerned federal executive and legislative actions that would make the federal government a decisive intervener in certain abuse matters.<sup>10</sup>

Still, most observers, whatever their hopes or pessimism, considered it a coup of sorts that federal recognition had been gained for what had for so long remained a locally combatted problem. The task force report was a detailed and well-planned document. Never again could anyone assume that the national scope of the problem had not been identified.

### *Legal Changes*

Within the past two years, legal changes have been rapidly redefining the victimology of family violence. Virtually all the changes seem to be in a direction that will benefit women, the most frequent victims of spousal abuse, without jeopardizing men’s rights. And all these changes are long overdue. For example, from 1983 to 1985:

✓ Local courts did not dismiss charges against widely known male celebrities who committed spousal violence. Television actor David Soul and Indianapolis Colt running back Curtis Dickey, for instance, had to face judges after being convicted of beating their wives.<sup>11</sup>

✓ The state of Washington became the seventh in the nation to require arrest if police are called to calm violence in the home, even if the victim does not want to press charges (following the example of Oregon, Minnesota, Delaware, Maine, North Carolina, and Utah). Based on the experience of the first ten weeks under the new law, the Seattle Police Department estimated that it would arrest about 2,800 persons during 1984 on domestic assault charges, compared to 387 persons in 1983.<sup>12</sup>

✓ The New York State Court of Appeals ruled 6–0 that men who force their wives to have sex with them can be prosecuted for rape. Such rulings are on the increase as all levels of the criminal justice system are becoming familiar with the facts on family violence. One New York State Supreme Court justice wrote us that recent publicity over sexual/child abuse