ELAINE TYLER MAY

HOMEWARD BOUND

American Families in the Cold War Era

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Homeward Bound

In Memory

of

Ken Edwards

who taught me the meaning of courage;

For

Sue Tyler Edwards

who taught me the meaning of strength.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AFTER WRITING so many words for so many years, I never thought I would find myself at a loss for words when I finally reached this point. But I cannot find adequate words to express the gratitude I feel to all the friends, colleagues, and students who helped me along the way.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

IN SUMMER OF 1959, a young couple married and spent their honeymoon in a bomb shelter. *Life* magazine featured the "sheltered honeymoon" with a photograph of the duo smiling on their lawn, surrounded by dozens of canned goods and supplies. Another photograph showed them descending twelve feet underground into the 22-ton steel and concrete 8-by-11-foot shelter where they would spend the next two weeks. The article quipped that "fallout can be fun," and described the newlyweds' adventure—with obvious erotic undertones—as fourteen days of "unbroken togetherness."[1] As the couple embarked on family life, all they had to enhance their honeymoon were some consumer goods, their sexuality, and privacy. This is a powerful image of the nuclear family in the nuclear age: isolated, sexually charged, cushioned by abundance, and protected against impending doom by the wonders of modern technology (See Figures 1 and 2).

The stunt was little more than a publicity device; yet, in retrospect it takes on symbolic significance. For in the early years of the cold war, amid a world of uncertainties brought about by World War II and its aftermath, the home seemed to offer a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world. The message was ambivalent, however, for the family also seemed particularly vulnerable. It needed heavy protection against the intrusions of forces outside itself. The self-contained home held out the promise of security in an insecure world. It also offered a vision of abundance and fulfillment. As the cold war began, young postwar Americans were homeward bound.

Demographic indicators show that in this period, Americans were more eager than ever to establish families. The bomb-shelter honeymooners were part of a cohort of Americans who lowered the age at marriage for both men and women, and quickly brought the birthrate to a twentieth-century high after more than a hundred years of steady decline, producing the "baby boom" (See Tables 1 and 2). These young adults established a trend of early marriage and

Figure 1 Atomic-age newlyweds prepare for their "sheltered honeymoon" in their new fallout shelter. Surrounded by consumer goods and other supplies, they pose for *Life* magazine. At the rear of the photo, next to the portable toilet, is the entrance to the shelter. (Courtesy of Bill Sanders, photographer.)

relatively large families that lasted for more than two decades. From the 1940s through the early 1960s, Americans married at a higher rate and at a younger age than did their European counterparts.

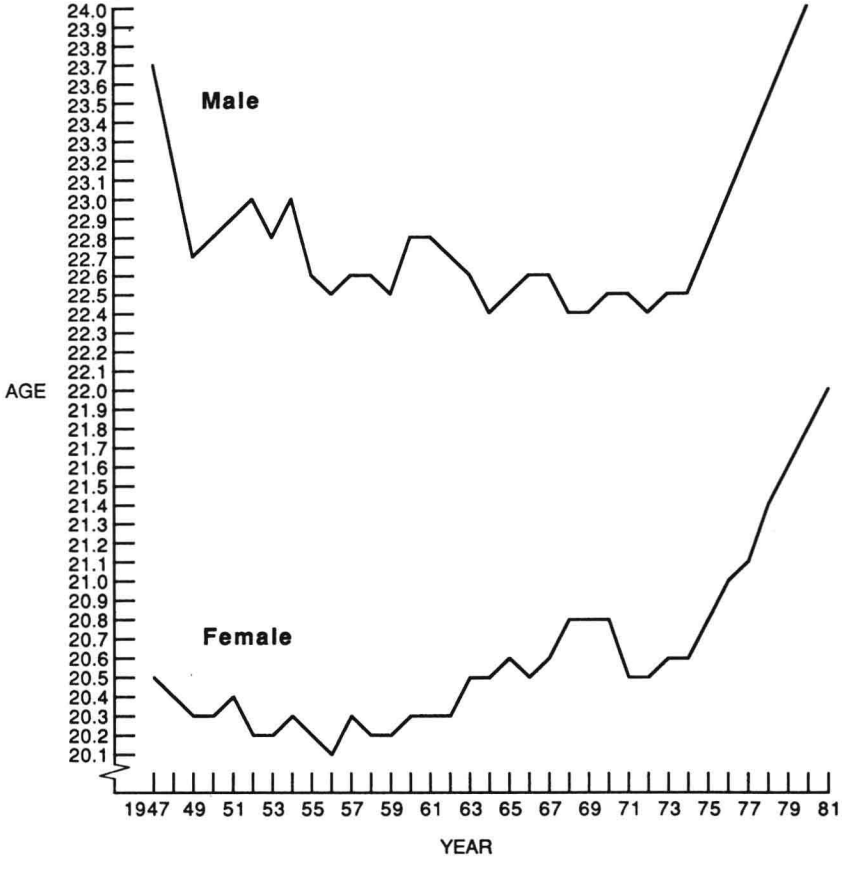
Less noted but equally significant, the men and women who formed families between 1940 and 1960 also reduced the divorce

Figure 2 The honeymooners kiss as they descend into their backyard bomb shelter for two weeks of "unbroken togetherness." (Courtesy of Bill Sanders, photographer.)

rate after a postwar peak. Marriages forged in the late 1940s were particularly stable. Even those couples who eventually divorced remained together long enough to prevent the divorce rate from rising until the mid-1960s (See Tables 3, 4, and 5). Although the United States maintained its dubious distinction of having the highest divorce rate in the world, the temporary decline in divorce did not occur to the same extent in Europe. Contrary to fears of observers at the time, the roles of breadwinner and homemaker were not abandoned; they were embraced.[2]

Why did postwar Americans turn to marriage and parenthood

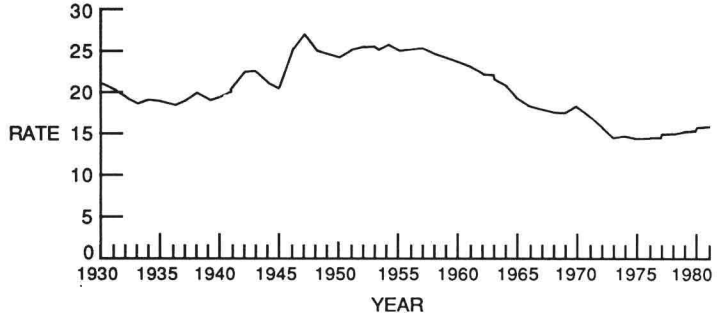
TABLE 1
Median Age at First Marriage, Male and Female



SOURCES: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), Part 1, p. 19; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1981* (Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics, 1985) vol. III, Table 1-9, p. 1-11.

with such enthusiasm and commitment? Scholars and observers frequently point to the family boom as the inevitable result of a return to peace and prosperity.[3] They argue that depression-weary Americans were eager to put the disruptions and hardships of war behind them and enjoy the abundance at home. There is, of course, some truth in this claim, but prosperity followed other wars in our history, notably World War I, with no similar increase in marriage and childbearing. Peace and affluence alone are inadequate to ex-

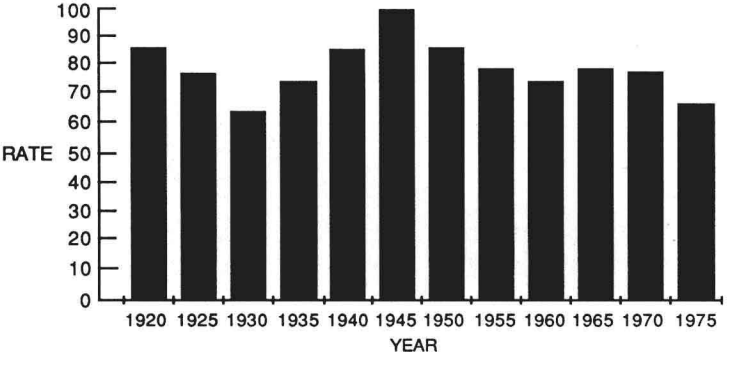
TABLE 2
Birth Rate



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1981* (Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics, 1985), vol. 1, Table 1-1, p. 1-7.

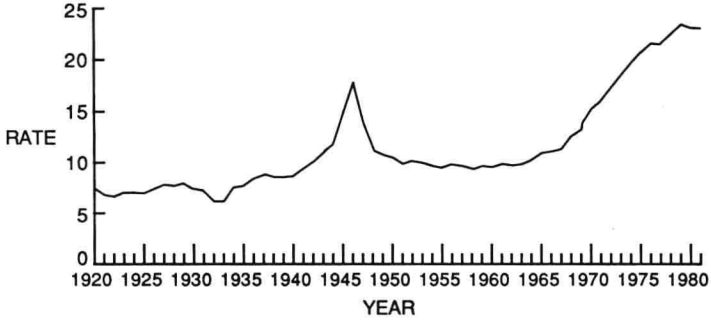
plain the many complexities of the postwar domestic explosion. The demographic trends went far beyond what was expected from a return to peace. Indeed, nothing on the surface of postwar America explains the rush of young Americans into marriage, parenthood, and traditional gender roles.

TABLE 3
Marriage Rate per 1,000 Unmarried Females



SOURCES: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), Part I, p. 64; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, *Vital Statistics of the United States*, 1981, (Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics, 1985), Vol. III, Table 1-3, p. 1-6.

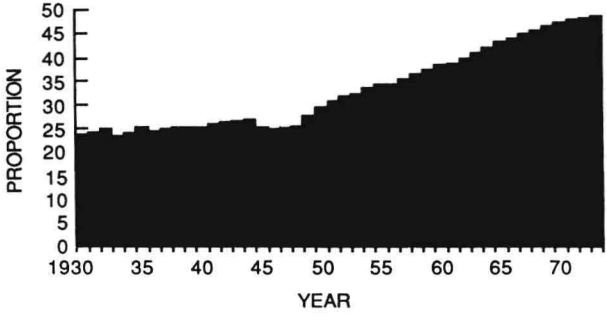
TABLE 4
Divorce Rate per 1,000 Married Females



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1981,* (Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics, 1985), Table 2-1, p. 2-5.

It might have been otherwise. The Great Depression of the 1930s brought about widespread challenges to traditional gender roles that could have led to a restructured home. The war intensified these challenges and pointed the way toward radical alterations in the institutions of work and family life. Wartime brought thousands of women into the paid labor force when men left to enter the armed forces. After the war, expanding job and educational opportunities, as well as the increasing availability of birth control de-

TABLE 5
Percentage of Marriages Projected to End in Divorce



SOURCE: *National Estimates of Marriage Dissolution and Survivorship:* U.S. Series 3, No. 19 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Human Services), p. 5.

vices, might well have led young people to delay marriage or not marry at all, and to have fewer children if they did marry. Indeed, many scholars and observers at the time feared that these changes seriously threatened the continuation of the American family. Yet, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that postwar American society experienced a surge in family life and a reaffirmation of domesticity that rested on distinct roles for women and men.[4]

The demographic explosion in the American family represented a temporary disruption of long-term trends. It lasted only until the baby-boom children came of age. The parents, having grown up during the depression and the war, had begun their families during years of prosperity. Their children, however, grew up amid affluence during the cold war; they reached adulthood during the 1960s and 1970s, creating the counterculture and a new women's liberation movement. In vast numbers, they rejected the political assumptions of the cold war, along with the domestic and sexual codes of their parents. This generation brought the twentieth-century birthrate to an all-time low and the divorce rate to an unprecedented high.[5]

Observers often point to the 1950s as the last gasp of time-honored family life before the sixties generation made a major break from the past. But the comparison is shortsighted. In many ways, the youths of the sixties resembled their grandparents, who came of age in the first decades of the twentieth century. Like many of their baby-boom grandchildren, the grandparents had challenged the sexual norms of their day, pushed the divorce rate up and the birthrate down, and created a unique youth culture, complete with music, dancing, movies, and other new forms of urban amusements. They also behaved in similar ways politically, developing a powerful feminist movement, strong grass-roots activism on behalf of social justice, and a proliferation of radical movements to challenge the status quo. It is the generation in between—with its strong domestic ideology, pervasive consensus politics, and peculiar demographic behavior—that stands out as different.[6]

It is important to note that observers normally explain the political activism and the demographic behavior of the baby-boom generation as the effects of affluence and the result of expanding opportunities for women in education and employment. Yet the same conditions existed twenty years earlier at the peak of the domestic revival. The circumstances were similar, but the responses were different. What accounted for the endorsement of "traditional"