

Home and Nation: The Family Politics of Theodore Roosevelt

I do not wish to see this country a country of selfish prosperity where those who enjoy the material prosperity think only of the selfish gratification of their own desires, and are content to import from abroad not only their art, not only their literature, but even their babies.

—Theodore Roosevelt, 1911

With regard to the family, Theodore Roosevelt can be called the first “modern” American president. He grappled openly with a range of new social and cultural issues surrounding the home, and was the first president to describe in philosophical terms the importance of family life to national life. He was the first to document and analyze an emerging crisis among American families and the first to understand the vast import of feminism, and to embrace it—albeit on his own terms. Roosevelt was also the first president to understand the powerful challenges to family life lurking within the new biological sciences.

How might we explain this interest? To begin with, Theodore Roosevelt had an amazing intellect, which embraced a vast range of subjects. He may have been the greatest mind ever to inhabit the White House (with the ritual “possible exception” of Jefferson). He was a voracious reader, reading at least one book a day, even during his Presidency (from 1901 to 1909) and over five hundred a year. “Reading with me is a disease,” he reported. Roosevelt was a prolific writer as well, and; produced an amazing body of writing between his graduation from Harvard in 1880 and the middle year of his presidency (1905) alone. The contemporaneous Elkhorn Edition of *The Works of*

Theodore Roosevelt, which already numbered 23 volumes by 1905, covered history, natural history, political philosophy, biography, and essays. Critics considered two of his works, *The Naval War of 1812* and the four-volume *Winning of the West*, as definitive on their subjects. Roosevelt’s published book reviews numbered over one thousand. His memory amazed all those who met him.¹

Roosevelt was also a student of numbers, particularly census numbers. He pored over U.S. Census reports from 1890, 1900, and 1910, commenting frequently on the strong evidence of mounting family decay. There was much to worry about. Between 1890 and 1910, the number of divorced Americans rose threefold. Among 35- to 44-year-olds, the increase was even greater. The U.S. birthrate fell by over 30 percent between 1880 and 1920, with the decline particularly sharp in Roosevelt’s native Northeast. Indeed, when combined with high immigration, the low fertility there caused the proportion of “native stock” to fall from 67 percent in 1880 to only 56 percent by 1910. In the nation as a whole, the number of children under five years of age per 1000 women between the ages 20 and 44 had tumbled from 1,295 in 1820 to 631 by 1910, figures reflecting a dramatic retreat from child-bearing. Among New England women in the latter year, the figure was only 482.²

Finally, Theodore Roosevelt was a conscious nation builder, working to intellectually construct an American identity, a type of nationalism suitable to a country leaving its frontier phase and moving out into the world. He toyed, at times, with a concept of America as an “ethnic nation,” much like those found in Western Europe. On other occasions, he defined *Americanism* as a set of philosophical or political ideals, to which persons of any ethnicity might adhere. Yet neither resolution seemed satisfactory to him. Roosevelt’s focus on family questions actually represented a bold attempt to craft a third form of American identity, one built around social and biological imperatives.

BURDEN OF THE “R” WORD

Oddly, little recent attention has been paid to Roosevelt’s treatment of the family. His biographers, including Edmund Morris, largely ignore it. And while writers on the ideological Left do sometimes draw a quote or two from Roosevelt, it is inevitably to brand him (and, implicitly, subsequent family advocates) as racist.

The problem derives from Roosevelt's own language, in which he regularly used the word *race* and phrases such as *race suicide* in his commentaries on family matters. To read Roosevelt correctly, the reader must first understand what he meant by this terminology.

The twentieth century—from the “race politics” of the National Socialists in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s to the “race struggles” in America during the 1960s—has endowed the word *race* with a great ideological and moral burden. Yet a century ago, the term carried a very different set of meanings. It was, for example, commonly viewed as interchangeable with the words *nation* or *people*. *Race* conveyed the sense of a group with a common history, a common culture, and a yearning for a common destiny. Some saw it as designating a citizenry with “a certain homogeneity because of common laws, institutions, customs, or loyalty.” Others understood *race* as meaning the sharing of a common ancestor. While it is true that “scientific” conceptions of *race* were also extant (as a “genetically distinctive population within a species”), there were frequent literary uses as well. Oscar Wilde called imagination “the result of heredity. It is simply concentrated *race*-memory.” William James described how “*race* heritage forms in its totality a monstrously unwieldy mass of learning.” Citizenship, nationality, genetic similarity, a people, heritage, a common history—all these were conflated with the word *race*,³ without the negative connotations of superiority or oppression attached.

For example, Roosevelt frequently used the term, *race-suicide*. But to this phrase he attached a very specific meaning: “the gradual extinction of a people through a tendency to restrict voluntarily the rate of population growth.” His concerns were the causes and the demographic consequences of birth control; but the term *race-suicide*—loaded as it now is with mid-twentieth-century baggage—with which Roosevelt was never confronted—is now off-putting. To understand Roosevelt's comments on family, it seems that we almost need a translator.

Roosevelt did occasionally convey a desire to preserve the line of those with whom he shared genetic traits. But when doing so, he usually used a word other than *race*. For example, in his 1917 book on domestic American politics, *The Foes of Our Own Household*, Roosevelt quoted from a letter he had sent to a woman in poverty who had complained of her burden of six children and his opposition to birth control. “I do not want to see us Americans forced to import our

4 The “American Way”

babies from abroad,” he wrote. “I do not want to see the *stock* of people like yourself and my family die out.”⁴

But at the philosophical level, Roosevelt regularly opposed the social Darwinism of the scientific racists and their argument that natural selection and conflict improved “the race.” To the contrary, he maintained, “the rivalry of natural selection works against progress. Progress is made in spite of it.” Cooperation and acts of altruism marked those communities that truly moved forward, he said. Indeed, in opposition to “survival of the fittest,” Roosevelt posited maternal love as the true source of progress:

A more supreme instance of unselfishness than is afforded by motherhood cannot be imagined, and when [the author under review] implies...that there is no rational sanction for the unselfishness of motherhood, for the unselfishness of duty, or loyalty, he merely misuses the word rational.⁵

One finds further evidence of Roosevelt’s relatively liberal views on race in his frequent condemnation of peoples—including his own ethnic stock—who voluntarily failed to reproduce. In the same review dismissing social Darwinism, Roosevelt wrote: “When a people gets to the position even now occupied by the mass of the French and by sections of the New Englanders, where the death rate surpasses the birthrate, then that *race* [people] is not only fated to extinction but *it deserves* extinction.”⁶ He denounced the much ballyhooed “Puritan conscience” as “so atrophied, so diseased and warped” as to be unable to recognize its own self-destruction. Roosevelt instead threw in his lot with the “new” immigration of his time: “The New England of the future will belong, and ought to belong, to the descendents of the immigrants of . . . today, because the descendants of the Puritans have lacked the courage to live.”⁷ Looking elsewhere, he pointed to the absurdly low birthrate of Australia—“a continent which could support . . . tenfold the present population”—and predicted the doom of the “White Australia” policy. As he explained: “no race [people] can hold a territory save on condition of developing and populating it.”⁸ Any people who practiced “the base and selfish doctrine” of the two-child system deserved extinction in order to give “place to others with braver and more robust ideals.”⁹ Roosevelt even saw miscegenation or interracial marriage—the *bête noire* of the true racist—as one positive solution to fertility decline. If healthy men and women failed to marry

and bear children, he wrote, “the result must necessarily be race deterioration, unless the race is partly *saved* by the infusion into it of *blood of other races* that have not lost the virile virtues.”¹⁰

Roosevelt became on occasion even more explicit. While touring in South America, he praised the vitality of the people he met: “The families are large. The women, charming and attractive, are good and fertile mothers in *all* classes of society.” The South American peoples, he continued, “have far more to teach than to learn from the English-speaking countries” regarding their public obligations and family responsibility. Indeed, Roosevelt even predicted with accuracy the demographic future of California and the American Southwest: “The nineteenth century saw a prodigious growth of the English-speaking, relative to the Spanish speaking, population . . . The end of the twentieth century will see this completely reversed.”¹¹

Roosevelt also wove these views into his effort to understand and shape the American identity. In the process, he linked the ideals of the Founders to the familial obligations of the living. In his review of the book *Racial Decay* by Octavius Beale, Roosevelt wrote: “I, for one, would heartily throw in my fate with the men of *alien stock* who were true to *the old American principles* rather than with the men of the old American stock who were traitors to the old American principles.”¹² Before an audience of liberal Christian theologians in 1911, he was even more blunt about the bond between procreation and Americanism:

If you do not believe in your own stock enough to wish to see the stock kept up, then you *are not good Americans*, you are *not patriots*; and . . . I for one shall not mourn your extinction; and in such event I shall welcome the advent of a new race that will take your place, because you will have shown that you *are not fit to cumber* the ground.

Roosevelt called this “the most essential and the least pleasant truth that I have to tell you.”¹³

A VISION OF FAMILISM

Like many philosophers, Roosevelt built his social vision in reaction to the cultural, demographic, and political developments of his time (these will be discussed later). But Roosevelt also turned his analysis into a

positive philosophy of family life that is rich in content and argumentation.

To begin with, he repeatedly emphasized the centrality of the child-rich family to the very existence of the American nation: “it is in the life of the family, upon which in the last analysis the whole welfare of the Nation rests. . . . The nation is nothing but the aggregate of the families within its borders.”¹⁴ Elsewhere, he wrote that “[e]verything” in the American civilization and nation “rests upon the home.”¹⁵ He labeled the family relation “as the most fundamental, the most important of all relations.”¹⁶ A nation existed only as its “sons and daughters thought of life not as something concerned only with the selfish evanescence of the individual, but as a link in the great chain of creation and causation,” a chain forged by the “vital duties and the high happiness of family life.”¹⁷

Roosevelt viewed family as the essential wellspring of citizenship, and in it he saw signs of hope for America:

[I]n all the world there is no better and healthier home life, no finer factory of individual character, nothing more representative of *what is best and most characteristic in American life*, than that which exists in the higher type of family; and this higher type of family is to be found everywhere among us.¹⁸

He specifically praised the large families still evident in the American South and Middle West. In Roosevelt’s view, good American citizenship rested on “the building up of the kind of character which will make the man a good husband, a good father, a good son; which will make the woman a good daughter when she is young and a good wife and mother as she grows older.”¹⁹ Underscoring the common grounding of citizenship and Americanism upon a great chain of being, Roosevelt stressed that “no other success in life, not being President, or being wealthy, or going to college, or anything else, comes up to the success of the man and woman who can feel that they have done their duty and that their children and grandchildren rise up to call them blessed.”²⁰ Accordingly, the birth control issue became for him “the most serious of all problems, for it lies at the root of, *and indeed itself is, national life.*”²¹

At times Roosevelt subordinated all other public questions to the issue of family formation. It was “useless” to devote time and resources to education “if there are not going to be enough children to educate.”²²

“Reform” made no sense if there was no one to reform. He declared that “no piled-up wealth, no splendor of material growth, no brilliance of artistic development” would be of any value or meaning to the nation unless its men and women were “able and willing to bear, and to bring up as they should be brought up, healthy children, sound in mind, body, and character; and numerous enough” for the nation to grow.²³ Indeed, procreation was so fundamental to national life that Roosevelt gave a preference to illegitimacy or out-of-wedlock birth over sterility: “after all, such vice may be compatible with a nation’s continuing to live; and while there is life, even a life marred by wrong practices, there is chance of reform.”²⁴ Or as he stated elsewhere, “while there is life, there is hope, whereas nothing can be done with the dead.”²⁵

Indeed, Roosevelt elevated motherhood to the most important of human tasks. His language here was strong and specific. No nation, he insisted, “can exist at all” unless the average woman is “the homemaker, the good wife, and unless she is the mother of a sufficient number of healthy children” to keep the nation “going forward.” The “indispensable work for the community” was not that of careers, industry, or research; it was “the work of the wife and mother.”²⁶ The “woman’s work in the home” was “more important” than any man’s endeavors. “She does play a greater part.”²⁷

Roosevelt did, however, emphasize that motherhood should not be coerced: “The imposition on any woman of excessive childbearing is a brutal wrong.”²⁸ But all Americans have it as “their prime duty . . . to leave their seed after them to inherit the earth.”²⁹ He summoned all healthy women to bear at least four children, and hoped for even more. There were practical advantages to fertility as well; as he reported, “the health of the mother is best, and the infant mortality lowest, in families with at least six children.”³⁰ More commonly, Roosevelt praised the heroism of childbearing: “The birthpangs make all men the debtors of all women.” American sympathies and support were due, above all, “to the struggling wives among those whom Abraham Lincoln called *the plain people* . . . ; for the lives of these women are often led on the lonely heights of quiet, self-sacrificing heroism.”³¹ True heroes were those women who “walked through the valley of the shadow to bring into life the babies they love.”³² Like the bravest of soldiers, the good mother “has gladly gone down to the brink of the chasm of darkness to bring back the children in whose hands rests the future of the years.”³³

Roosevelt sought to elevate the place or status of fatherhood, as well. On the one hand, he defined the father’s task as one of bread-winning: “The primary task of the man is to earn his own livelihood and the livelihood of those dependent on him.” The man must also do his business well to support his family, so “that the nation may continue to exist.” But Roosevelt insisted that this task be seen in the wider context of building the good home: “The primary work of the average man and the average woman—and of all exceptional men and women whose lives are to be really full and happy—must be the great primal work of *home-making* and *home-keeping*.”³⁴ (Note here that the father was the true “home-maker” in Roosevelt’s usage.) Addressing both men and women, Roosevelt emphasized that no “career” could ever be more than a poor substitute “for *the career of married lovers* who bring into the world, and rear as they should be reared, children sufficiently numerous” to move the nation forward.³⁵

The good marriage, Roosevelt argued, was a full partnership, in which “each partner is honor bound to think of the rights of the other as well as of his or her own.”³⁶ The way for men to honor “this indispensable woman, the wife and the mother,” was to insist on her treatment as “the full equal of her husband.”³⁷ Regarding the rearing of offspring, “[t]here must be *common* parental care for children, by both father and mother.”³⁸ Roosevelt’s view of marital partnership, though, went beyond the vision of shared tasks and responsibilities. On the emotional and spiritual side, he said that a true marriage would be “a partnership of the soul, the spirit and the mind, no less than of the body.”³⁹ The “highest ideal of the family” could be obtained “only where the father and mother stand to each other as lovers and friends.”⁴⁰ On the practical and material side, Roosevelt believed in early marriage as a counter to temptations toward vice.⁴¹ More profoundly, he believed that the successful marriage, “the partnership of happiness,” must also be “a partnership of work.”⁴² Anticipating the future insights of microeconomists, Roosevelt understood that the strong family must be a true economic unit. “Our aim,” he wrote, “must be the healthy economic interdependence of the sexes.” Attempts to craft the “economic independence” of the sexes would create “a false identity of economic function” and result in national ruin.⁴³

While avoiding some of the excesses of so-called agrarian fundamentalism, Roosevelt still saw country life and farm life as intimately connected with healthy family life. Fertility was higher in the country-

side than in the cities, in some regions nearly twice as high. This meant that “nearly half the children of the United States are born and brought up on farms.” History taught that “the permanent greatness of any state” depended primarily on “the character of its country population.”⁴⁴ The small landowner, “the men who own their little homes, . . . the men who till farms, the men of the soil, have hitherto made the foundation of lasting national life in every state.” It had been the man born and raised in the country who had been “most apt to render the services which every nation most needs.” Among American statesmen, “it is extraordinary to see how large a proportion started as farm boys.” In sum, “the best crop” on American farms “is the crop of children; the best products of the farm are the men and women raised thereon.” Family life and farm life were deeply intertwined; renewing families depended in part on renewing rural community.⁴⁵

These views coalesced in Roosevelt’s mind so that he nearly equated American nationalism with adequate procreation. “I do not wish to see this country a country of selfish prosperity,” Roosevelt told the Protestant theologians, “where those who enjoy the material prosperity think only of the selfish gratification of their own desires, and are content to import from abroad not only their art, not only their literature, but even their babies.”⁴⁶ It was “utterly futile,” he wrote elsewhere, “to make believe that fussy activity for somebody else’s babies atones for failure of personal parenthood.” Instead, in “the name of the larger Americanism,” in “fealty to the highest American ideal,” he summoned women in particular to “dare to live nobly and bravely” by bearing more children. The American nation needed “the positive preaching of birth encouragement” so that it might live into the future.⁴⁷

FOES OF THE FAMILY

Such appeals came in the face of grave challenges to the family, forces or “foes” that Roosevelt sought to identify and understand. At the most fundamental level, he explained, stood the complex effects of industrialism. The “substitution in a time of profound peace of a factory-town population for an agricultural population” had a “far more calamitous” impact on the nation than any war. “Uncontrolled industrialism” tore through family life in many ways. Most directly, Roosevelt noted that the annual death toll in American industries outnumbered

“the deaths in the bloodiest battle of the Civil War.”⁴⁸ In broader terms, the “ruin of motherhood and childhood by the merciless exploitation of the labor of women and children” should be considered a capital crime. He believed that these “grave dangers” of industrialism should be countered by sheltering the home from its influences. Above all, “the service of the good mother” in the home was worth “infinitely” more to society “than any possible service the woman could render by any other, and necessarily inferior, form of industry.”⁴⁹

More specifically, Roosevelt condemned the practice of “willful sterility in marriage.” Birth control was “the capital sin” against civilization, a practice that meant national death.⁵⁰ It was a puzzle, he said, that birth control should be most widespread in the very places where “abounding vigor” was so strikingly displayed: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. In these lands, there was “no warrant whatever in economic conditions for a limitation of the birth rate”; and yet, fertility was in decline..

Roosevelt searched for the causes of this problem. Importantly, he refused to indict “the growth of independence among women” as a factor. The women of France, he reasoned, had gone the furthest in birth limitation, despite the fact that their legal status was inferior to that of American women. Rather, Roosevelt pointed beyond the broad effects of industrialism to the power of wrong ideas. He cited “the profound and lasting damage unwittingly done by Malthus” in his pessimism over population growth “and, to a less extent, by John Stuart Mill” in his open advocacy for birth limitation.⁵¹ He also blamed the “blatant sham reformers who, in the name of the new morality, preach the old, old vice and self-indulgence.” These “most foolish of all foolish people who advocate a profoundly immoral attitude toward life in the name of “reform” through “birth control” were in fact the real problem. Claiming to deal with pathologies, they themselves represented the true “pathological condition.”⁵²

Of course, Roosevelt acknowledged that some couples were denied “the supreme blessing of children.” These couples were due “respect and sympathy.”⁵³ And he admitted that there was a “submerged tenth” of society, the poorest of the poor, whose lives were constantly on the brink of disaster. Urging them to bear more children made little sense. But for the great majority, the 90 percent, “the real danger” was “not lest they have too many children, but lest they have too few.”⁵⁴ Among this group, the deliberate rejection of childbearing merited only

contempt. The behavior derived, he suggested, “from viciousness, coldness, shallow-heartedness, self-indulgence, or mere failure to appreciate aright the difference between the all-important and the unimportant.” While laying blame on both deliberately childless men and women, he offered a special comment on the latter: “The existence of women of this type forms one of the unpleasant and unwholesome features of modern life.”⁵⁵

Elsewhere, he pointed to “love of ease” and “striving after social position” as lying behind the birth control mentality.⁵⁶ The New England conscience now condoned “frightful and fundamental immorality,” which twisted sexual conduct “into improper channels.” Roosevelt rejected the counterargument often heard at the women’s colleges that a higher “quality” of children made up for a slackened quantity. “When quantity falls off, thanks to willful sterility,” he retorted, “the quality will go down too.” And so the American pioneers who wrote “the tremendous epic that tells of the conquest of a continent” saw their sons and daughters in “fear of all work and risk.” These descendents were willing “to let the blood of the pioneers die out” on the land because they shrank “from the most elemental duties of manhood and womanhood.”⁵⁷

A certain sort of feminism also stood as a foe of the family. But Roosevelt embraced feminism of another sort early on, a philosophical loyalty from which he never wavered.

As a young scholar at Harvard in 1880, Roosevelt wrote his senior thesis on the “Practicality of Giving Men and Women Equal Rights.” To the disgruntlement of his professors, who thought that the essay showed softness, the college senior argued:

A cripple or a consumptive in the eye of the law is equal to the strongest athlete or the deepest thinker, and the same justice should be shown to a woman whether she is or is not the equal of man. . . . As regards the laws relating to marriage there should be the most absolute equality preserved between the sexes.⁵⁸

Indeed, Roosevelt went on to suggest that wives should keep their own last names, and that the word “obey” in the wedding vows should be pledged equally by bride and groom. According to biographer Edmund Morris, Roosevelt would for the whole of his life “remain acutely aware of the needs and sensibilities of women.”

In fact, Roosevelt was what some historians would later call a *social feminist*, and others a *maternalist*. The formula here was quite simple, and repeated frequently in his work: “We believe in equality of right, not in identity of functions.” In this sense, Roosevelt welcomed recent changes in the legal status of women. He dismissed the outcry against “unwomanly” activities such as higher education as “nonsense”: “[t]he woman is entitled to just as much education as the man.” And he called it “common sense” to allow women to pursue careers in areas where they were capable: “There is a real need for a certain number of women doctors and women lawyers.”⁵⁹ Nothing should preclude women from following opportunities and leading lives of “full and varied interest, which of necessity means a life in which work worth doing is well done.” In science, he added, women had already proved themselves, and he heaped praise on Lauri Bassi, an eighteenth-century Italian physicist, as an example.⁶⁰

But the key to his position was the fact that Professor Bassi was also the mother of twelve children: “She never permitted her extraordinary scientific and literary work to conflict with her domestic duties.” So, despite the higher learning and the possibility of pursuing a career, the true and good woman would still be focused first on the home and children. As Roosevelt summarized in a 1912 essay: “I believe in woman’s rights. I believe even more earnestly in the performance of duty by both men and women.” Indeed, he reasoned, all rights depended on accepting an accompanying duty or responsibility, a view he elaborated in his review-essay on women in science. “Neither woman nor man can shirk duties under penalty of eventually losing rights, for the possession of the right should be conditioned upon the performance of the duty.” Since equality of rights did not mean identify of function, he concluded that in any “healthy community,” the “prime duty of the woman will ever be that of the wife and mother.”⁶¹

Consistent with this view, Roosevelt took a middle position on giving the vote to women: “I am rather tepidly in favor of woman’s suffrage.” Whenever forced to take sides, he supported it. He regularly suggested that the matter be decided by referenda among women themselves: if they chose to acquire the vote, then let them have it. However, Roosevelt also emphasized that the issue of woman’s voting was not “a thousandth or a millionth part as important as the question of keeping, and where necessary reviving among the women . . . the realization that their great work must be done in the home.”⁶²

While a fervent social feminist, Roosevelt was also a strident critic of the liberal or equity feminists of his day, who wanted full equality in functions as well as in rights. He blasted as fools those “professional feminists” and “so called woman’s rights women” who labeled wives and mothers at home as “parasite” women. A woman keeping a home is not a parasite on society, he rebutted. “She *is* society.” He mocked the president of a women’s college who had argued in a well-publicized speech that it was better to bear one child brought up in the proper way than to improperly rear several. This speaker was “not only unfit to be at the head of a female college, but is not fit to teach the lowest class of a kindergarten.” Roosevelt also pointed to “the most pitiable showing by the graduates of the women’s colleges”: the average product of Smith or Vassar bore only 0.86 children during her lifetime. “Do these colleges teach ‘domestic science,’” he asked? If so, “what is it that they teach? There is something radically wrong with the home training and the school training that produces such results.”⁶³ Advocates urging women to cease viewing their primary duties as those of wives and mothers were, he concluded, “not only foolish but *wicked*.”⁶⁴

Easy divorce stood as another family foe in Roosevelt’s analysis. He saw the effects of divorce made manifest in “sinister fashion” in the 1900 census. The statistics were “fairly appalling,” he told The National Congress of Mothers in 1905. To them he argued that “easy divorce is now, as it ever has been, a *bane* to any nation, a *curse* to society, a *menace* to the home, an *incitement* to married unhappiness, and to immorality.” Easy divorce stood as “an evil thing for men, and a still more hideous evil for women.” When the 1910 census showed still another leap in the divorce rate, Roosevelt reiterated the devilish nature of the problem: “Multiplication of divorces means that there is something rotten in the community, that there is some principle of evil at work.” He warned that unless the development was counteracted, “wide-spread disaster” would follow.⁶⁵

Science unguided by principle also threatened the family. Eugenics was the fashionable “new science” of the early twentieth century, promising as it did an improvement of the human species through controlled breeding. Roosevelt was not immune to its allure, but he repeatedly cautioned that it not be made an excuse for inhuman abuses. He admitted that “the great problem of civilization” was “to secure a relative increase of the valuable as compared with the less valuable” portion of the population. But he refused to accept arguments that “value”

could be determined along racial or ethnic lines. Moreover, he recoiled from the use of “negative” measures such as forced sterilization to prevent the “less valuable” from breeding. Roosevelt reasoned: “Except in a small number of cases, the state can exercise little active control against the perpetuation of the unfit.” Rather, the emphasis should be placed on “getting desirable people to breed.” And he cast the net of the “desirable” quite widely: “I am speaking of the ordinary, every day Americans, the decent men and women who do make good fathers and mothers, and who ought to have good-sized families.”⁶⁶

AN “AMERICAN” FAMILY POLICY

Roosevelt’s identification of the foes of the family, tied to his positive vision of the good home, guided his formulation of a comprehensive—and sometimes surprising—family policy. Although deploring birth control, he never called for its legal prohibition. Love and a sense of duty, not coercion, he thought, should be the weapons of choice in fighting its spread. Yet he did craft a sexual policy in other areas. For example, he considered prostitution terrible and degrading, a sign of moral disorder. As a response, he endorsed the idea already adopted in Great Britain of flogging male offenders, both pimps and clients alike.⁶⁷

Turning to rural policy, he urged that the U.S. Department of Agriculture be redirected so that it balanced economic goals with an equal attention to “agriculture for its social results.” This meant support “for the best kind of life on the farm for the sake of producing the best kind of men.” Progressive taxation should be used to break up the great landed estates, in order to turn tenant farmers into landowners. The state should mobilize investment capital for small farmers, and favor farm-produce cooperatives through law. Regarding rural women, the first priority should be to end their lives of drudgery. Extension programs should guide them into focusing on home-keeping, rather than on grueling field work. Rural schools should aim at turning the girls into “first class farmers’ wives.”⁶⁸

More broadly, Roosevelt argued that “[m]otherhood should be protected.” Mothers and children “should not be allowed to work in any way that interferes with home duties.” In line with the maternalist program of mothers’ pensions, Roosevelt also urged that widowed and deserted young mothers receive aid sufficient to keep them at home with their children. He was aware of the possible moral hazards of

such assistance, and cautioned that aid should not be given in ways that encouraged men to shirk their paternal duties. Indeed, Roosevelt thought the law should be especially severe in collecting child support from fathers who did not marry the mothers of their children. In addition, he praised the German welfare system, which provided health care to ordinary families, and thought it ought to be adopted in the United States.⁶⁹

Roosevelt also saw the unique social-policy potential of differential taxation. Unmarried men, he argued, ought to pay “a far heavier share of taxation than at present.”⁷⁰ Elsewhere, he urged that both income tax and inheritance tax rates “should be *immensely heavier* on the childless and on families with one or two children, while there should be an equally heavy discrimination in reverse, in favor of families with over three children.” More specifically, he argued that no reduction in tax rate should be the consequence of mere marriage. Rather, married taxpayers should receive an exemption of \$500 (current value equal to approximately \$10,000) for each of their first two children, and \$1,000 (current value approximately \$20,000) for each subsequent child.⁷¹

The concept of a “family wage” also appealed to Roosevelt. He believed that private employers should recognize their obligation to support the fathers they employed as heads of households, providing them with wages sufficient to sustain the home. Meanwhile, the state should always give preference to the parents of large families (in an interestingly gender-neutral way): “In all public offices in every grade the lowest salaries should be paid the man *or woman* with no children, or only one or two children, and a marked discrimination made in favor of the man *or woman* with a family of over three children.”⁷²

In retrospect, there is a serious weakness in Roosevelt’s family advocacy. He built his case for marriage and high fertility, as well his condemnation of birth control, on strictly secular grounds. He cast the creation of a family as a duty to the nation, not as a consequence of fidelity to God’s will for humankind. The inadequacy of this foundation, though, would only become apparent at a later time.

Indeed, Roosevelt’s ideas would be highly influential in shaping American social policy in the period from 1915 to 1960. Through the work of Roosevelt’s friend, Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell University, the USDA did shift its emphasis toward agriculture’s social consequences, seeking for the next twenty-five years to undergird the family farm.⁷³ Projects ranged from the Homemaker and 4-H Clubs created

by extension agents for the retraining of wives and children to the subsidization of Subsistence Homestead settlements in the 1930s. Federal tax policy in the 1940s came to reflect Roosevelt’s ideas about generous child exemptions, finally reaching the \$500 per child figure in 1948 (current value approximately \$7,500). Employment patterns after World War II favored family wages for fathers.⁷⁴ Numerous state and local governments also crafted wage policies that rewarded families with children, some of whose rules were to be found as recently as 1960. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that these measures played a role in turning around marriage, birth, and divorce rates in America. The U.S. marriage rate began to climb again in 1934; and the birth rate began rising a year later, eventually becoming the Baby Boom of 1945 to 1963. Even the divorce rate began falling in 1947, a decline that continued into the early 1960s.

The sense of nationhood that Roosevelt sought to build, resting on a vision of political ideals linked to social ideals centered on the child-rich family, seemed finally to have emerged during the early period of the Cold War. One suspects that at the height of this period of family renewal, circa 1957, the old Roughrider, even in his long sleep in a New York cemetery, might have smiled.