

The fatherhood movement essay



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Throughout the United States, more than one-third of children don't live with their biological fathers, and about 17 million of those children don't live with any father at all. Of those, roughly 40 percent haven't seen their fathers in the last year. The over 500 Father's Rights organizations are trying in a variety of ways to change these statistics because they believe that fathers are necessary to the intellectual, psychological and emotional well-being of all children. "Family values" groups encourage long lasting stable, marriages and tough divorce laws to increase the number of two-parent households. Some organizations focus on reasonable child support and visitation, as well as creative joint custody arrangements to combat fatherless ness after divorce. Still other sects within the movement encourage responsible fatherhood through counseling for "Deadbeat" or "Dead-broke" Dads, job training and placement to increase the likelihood of child support payments and educational seminars to teach men how to be emotionally supportive fathers. The unique coalition of conservative pro-marriage groups, white middle-class divorces and low-income fathers is an unusual alliance. But regardless of philosophical and tactical differences, the essential mission is the same- to improve the relationship between our nation's fathers and their children.

A Brief History

Throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries, wives and children were considered property of the husband. Divorce was very rare, but when it did occur, children would automatically become custody of the father. Even if a father died, his wife was not assured custody of the children unless his will explicitly stated so. In the Early 1900's, courts and state legislatures began

to support maternal rights, viewing the mother as the more nurturing parent. The “tender years” doctrine, implemented in many states, encouraged courts to place young children with mothers because mothers were seen as essential to emotional development. The maternal preference continued to increase throughout the 1950’s and 60’s. With the spread of no-fault divorce laws throughout the late 1970’s, and the increase of women’s participation in the work force, women were more able to obtain divorces from unhappy marriages. Maternal preference in custody battles gave women a huge advantage, and a vast majority of women obtained sole custody of children in the increasingly more prevalent divorce proceedings.

The 1980’s saw the emergence of a new and powerful fatherhood movement, focused on discrimination in divorce laws and unfair child support orders. In 1986, The National Convention for Men, an umbrella group for 36 organizations representing roughly 6,000 men, centered their attention on the issues of child support and custody rights. The men were outraged by the gender bias men suffer in courts, with 87 to 90 percent of divorce cases giving sole custody to the mother with or without visitation for the father. They emphasized that the feminist movement had changed parenting roles and equalized parental involvement, and demanded that custody laws be changed to reflect this. The president of the NCM, Peter Cyr, urged the men to fight against isolation and alienation from their children. In 51 percent of sole-custody arrangements, the children saw their father less than once a year, according to the Commission on Child and Family Welfare. The NCM supported joint custody, which was a key issue of fledgling Father’s

Rights movement and is still central plank of the father's rights platform today.

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, criticism of single mothers began to mount. The number of two parent families dropped over 11 percent from 1970 to 1980 and continued to drop into the 90's. Between 1969 and 1992, the percent of AFDC cases involving children born to unwed mothers grew by over 20 percentage points, with over 77% of "illegitimate" children becoming enmeshed in the welfare system before they were a year old. Pro-marriage father's groups began to cite empirical research which concluded that a lack of father influence can lead to a higher rate of juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy and general neglect, according to the Children's Rights Council. Activists reasoned that the break down of the family was leading to societal disarray, and that social policy should create incentives for marriage and decrease incentives for divorce.

Feminist groups defended single mothers; citing studies that proved that income was a greater indicator of juvenile delinquency than female-headed households. They also questioned the premise that fathers were an essential component of child development. They pointed to studies, such as the one recently released from Yeshiva University, which concludes "raising a healthy child hinges on the quality and reliability of the parents relationship with the child. If the relationship is strong, it doesn't matter whether the parenting is by the mother, the father, two moms, two dads..." They were concerned that government incentives for marriage would increase the likelihood of negative involvement by abusive or substance-using fathers. Feminist groups also challenge the premise that joint custody will serve the

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best interests of the child, saying that children are often torn between two fighting and emotional parents after divorce.

The early Father's Rights groups swelled with size and power until the early 1990's, when harsh criticism of dead-beat dad's was brought to public attention by President Clinton. The Child Support Recovery Act of 1992 allowed criminal prosecution of deadbeat parents, and created a Most Wanted Deadbeat Parents Website. States, such as Massachusetts and Illinois also began posting pictures and lists of parents behind in child support payments. The state of Washington began demanding that fathers acknowledge paternity before leaving the hospital. Since 1992, the popularity and success of this program has spread nation-wide. Clinton's welfare reform package, which was enacted in 1996, allows the Federal and state government to garnish wages directly from parents behind in payments. Since 1992, The Federal government has increased the amount of child support collected by 80%, and in 1999, Clinton vowed to increase spending for investigation and prosecution of dead-beat parents by \$46 million.

The attack on dead- beat Dads only fueled the fire of Father's Rights groups. In 1994, the First National Summit on Fatherhood in Dallas indicated the power, prestige and potential of the Father's Rights Movement. . This summit involved hundreds of community leaders, and attempted to build a national consensus on the need to quickly reduce the rate of father absence.

Numerous famous speakers including Al Gore, George Gallup and James Earl Jones presented during the conference, showing their support for the snowballing movement, and encouraging creative strategies for reducing

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fatherless families. The National Fatherhood Initiative, a marriage-oriented group, was created as a result of the conference, headed by Wade Horn (see case study: National Fatherhood Initiative.) The National Fatherhood Initiative has been largely successful in its goals, partly because of the Family Values momentum created by the 1994 Republican Revolution in the House of Representatives.

The Million-Man March of 1995 showed that the black community was ready and willing to embrace fatherhood as important and that black men were willing to take responsibility for their families. This was especially significant because it created a loose, but important inter-racial, mixed income coalition between liberals and conservatives. By 1997, Father's rights groups had convinced the House and the Senate to form bi-partisan congressional task forces on fatherhood and examine its role in Federal Policy. National newsmagazines such as TIME and Newsday have featured articles on this topic, and the Fatherhood lobby has gained immense credibility in Washington. Overall, the Father's Rights movement has made significant strides in the last two decades, and their success continues because of their passion for their children and the mounting popularity of the cause.

Case Studies

Through presentation of the following in- depth analysis of three Father's Rights groups, I hope to capture the diversity of people, philosophy and approaches found with the movement. I will address key legislation and policy initiatives as well as local programs that seek to re-affirm the importance and increase abundance of father involvement. The three groups

examined are large umbrella organizations for local grassroots efforts. They are representative of various types of local groups and work to implement their changes on a national level. In my presentation, I hope to give an objective analysis of each group's goals and accomplishments, as well as a commentary on the objections of opposing groups.

The first group I examine is the National Fatherhood Initiative. This is a conservative, pro-marriage group, which seeks to use public policy to alter social norms regarding pre-marital sex and out of wedlock pregnancy. Next is the American Fathers Coalition, which believes men are systematically discriminated against in the courts and laws, and legally isolated from their children. Because fathers are often denied custody or visitation rights, the AFC believes that men are discouraged from emotional involvement and therefore care little about being financially involved in their children's lives. Lastly, the Partnership for Fragile Families is a liberal organization that seeks to address the needs of young, low-income, minority fathers. They feel that fathers are often uninvolved financially and emotionally because they are unemployed or underemployed, not psychologically or emotionally ready to be fathers, or inexperienced because of a lack of parental role models when they were growing up.

It is important to note that these groups do not represent the views of every organization found in the Father's Rights Movement. These are mainstream groups which a majority of Father's Rights activists can appreciate and understand, but not all Father's Rights groups agree with the goals of these three. There are organizations that focus on highly specific issues like domestic violence against men, or false domestic and sexual abuse charges.

Certain groups, like Veto4Fathers, support a man's right to veto an abortion, while organizations like Choice for Men aims to allow fathers a legal right to "abort" their responsibilities for unwanted children. There are also highly reactionary groups like Fathers Manifest, which aims to ban public education and relinquish women's suffrage. For the sake of brevity, I will allow these groups to remain hovering on the fringe, because they are not representative of the movement as a whole.

Case Study:

The National Fatherhood Coalition

The National Fatherhood Coalition is a self-proclaimed, "non-partisan, non-profit, non-religiously affiliated organization." Created in 1994, after the First National Summit on Fatherhood, its mission is to stimulate a broad-based social movement to restore responsible fatherhood as a national priority. They are a politically acceptable group with a conservative, marriage-oriented agenda. They feel that fathers are essential to the upbringing of a child, and that the government should provide incentives to encourage fathers to stay involved with their children. The NFI stresses the importance of stable marriages, and tries to promote policy initiatives that discourage divorce and children born out of wedlock.

The President, Wade Horn, was previously leader for the Federal Commission on Children, Youth and Families and the Head of the Children's Bureau within the United States Department of Health and Human Services. He also serves on the board of Marriage-Savers, a Maryland group which promotes "Community Marriage Covenants." These covenants aim at increasing the life of a

marriage by making divorces more difficult to attain. He, as are the other three members of the Board of Directors, is highly educated and has devoted his professional life to studying and implementing policy that espouse “Family Values.” Respected in Washington, he influences policy through dependable research such as “Father Facts,” a publication of statistics relevant to fatherhood and marriage and numerous advisory councils.

One of NFI’s central activities is public outreach and education. They advertise in newsmagazines, create public service announcements and cable television spots, and generate editorials for many national newspapers and newsmagazines. Under the direction of the leaders at the First National Summit on Fatherhood, they have been building coalitions of local and national groups to share strategies and information, as well as to increase their political clout. They’ve also built partnerships with organizations like the United Way and the Boys and Girls Club.

The NFI also provides consultation for local and state government officials. The Council of Governor’s Policy Advisors published their informative pamphlet “Seven Things a State Can Do to Promote Responsible Fatherhood.” They have also worked with the Governors of Massachusetts, Colorado, Indiana and California to enact state- specific strategies to combat father absence. In Virginia, the NFI is working with the Virginia Department of Health to implement a statewide fatherhood promotion campaign as part of the Governor’s “citizen empowerment initiative”. The NFI developed a series of public service announcements, hosted local fatherhood forums throughout the state, and developed a resource center to assist grassroots

organizations and individual citizens implement local fatherhood promotion efforts.

Nationally, NFI has worked on key legislation such as the Fathers Count bill, sponsored by Rep. Nancy Johnson (R-CT) and Benjamin Cardin (D-MD). This bill allocates \$140 million to private groups for job and skills training for non-custodial fathers to decrease child support delinquency. The House passed this bill in 1999, which authorizes \$140 million over six years to help welfare fathers find jobs and fund religious and community groups that encourage marriage and teach parenting skills. These can be charitable organizations, which means that religious groups are eligible for funding. The Religious Right is strongly supportive of this ingredient, while liberal opponents feel it's wrong for the government to support moral crusades.

Although the bill was not able to pass the Senate, it has been resurrected in the 2000 session as the Child Support Distribution Act. The new bill increases the NFI influence on funding distribution by allowing a council of experts, one of which is Wade Horn, to decide whether or not community-based groups will receive grants. Liberal activists also strongly oppose this element of the bill because they fear that the interests of more powerful single fathers will be advanced over those of single mothers. Lastly, the new bill forgives child support owed to the state welfare system if fathers marry the mother of their children, or begin living with their children. This provides a serious monetary incentive to marry or fight for sole custody. The Child Support redistribution Act bill has also languished in the Senate, partly because of serious debate about the government infringing on moral issues of marriage and family. Also, many feminist groups, such as NOW, fear that the emphasis on

marriage will provide manipulative or abusive fathers a monetary incentive to remain in the lives of their children, ex-wives or girlfriends. Nonetheless, the NFI has proven itself a major political force on the Federal and State level in its young existence, and is not likely to stop exerting pressure on Congress any time soon.

Case Study: American Fathers Coalition/ American Coalition for Fathers and Children

The American Coalition for Fathers and Children is a non-profit organization that is attempting to “ create a family law system and legislative system that promotes equal rights for all parties affected by divorce, the break up of a family or establishment of paternity.” It was created as an off-shoot of the AFC, a lobbyist group that will be examined below. The ACFC seeks to balance lobbying with outreach and education, legal advice and support for fathers embroiled in legal battles and emotional support for “ parental alienation syndrome.” (Parental Alienation Syndrome is the “ systematic alienation of one parent by another parent.”)

The ACFC believes that “ the best parent is both parents” (a slogan common to other Father’s Rights Organization such as the Children’s Rights Council and Fathers and Families). The ACFC believes that joint custody and shared parenting are the best ways to handle divorce, and that both parents are fundamentally responsible for the emotional, psychological and financial needs of children. They also believe that the child support and custody systems need to be reformed to be more reasonable and better reflect the parenting contributions of both parents.

Created only in 1998, they have already made impressive strides and their goals are very ambitious. Because they try to encourage existing father's rights groups to incorporate under their umbrella, they already have 50 chapters nationwide. They have written a Chapter Development Guide to encourage fathers to start up a chapter in their community. They encourage grassroots efforts and input, but maintain centralized leadership within the organization. They have set up a nation-wide crisis line for support and communication amongst fathers going through divorce or separation. They have also made tool kits with legal advice and recommendation for each problem that Dads may face; paternity suits, obtaining sole or joint custody, enforcing visitation rights, civil rights violations, false abuse allegations or domestic violence.

The ACFC also plans to write textbooks that teach children about the biological moral necessity of two parent families. They believe that the political correctness infused in to elementary and high school curricula encourage the break down of the American family. Various civil liberties and advocacy groups oppose this initiative, feeling that it will allow discrimination against women and homosexuals to be taught in schools. Because of the strong criticism these textbooks will receive, it's unlikely they will ever find their way into a public school classroom, but it's quite possible that private schools or religiously affiliated charter schools will utilize the texts.

The American Fathers Coalition is the lobbying arm of the ACFC, founded by Stuart Little, a Federal lobbyist. The goal of the AFC is to “ promote positive father- inclusive policies.” The AFC feels that current Federal and State policy

discriminates against two-parent families, and that single mothers receive a disproportionate amount of social support.

Little, the senior lobbyist for the AFC has testified before Congress, state legislatures, Congressional Committees and White House Task Forces on the importance of eliminating the gender bias from legal proceedings and family-related laws. He's worked with the White House Domestic Policy Counsel, the Welfare Reform Task Force, the Administration for Children and Families and the Office of Child Support. His experience on Capitol Hill is second only to Wade Horn among fatherhood activists, but his influence and credibility pales in comparison. The legislation proposed by the AFC is much harsher on single mothers, particularly welfare recipients, and is much more politically controversial.

Although the AFC attempts to influence policy in such areas as domestic violence against men, elimination of no-fault divorces, and automatic presumption of joint custody, their most interesting policy initiative is their welfare reform proposal. They feel that the current welfare system is embedded with incentives for unwed pregnancy and discriminates against married couples. The 7-point proposal which follows, because of its highly controversial nature, has not been sponsored by a House or Senate member. In my analysis of this legislation, I try to explain both AFC's rationale for each ingredient of the proposal, as well as the rationale for opposing it.

1. First, any mother applying for AFDC money will automatically lose custody of her children to their father if he is able to financially support the children. Therefore, no single mother could be eligible for AFDC payment unless the

father had rejected custody or proven to be an unfit parent. Women would be able to devote themselves to job training or education while the father took responsibility for the children, and would be able to regain joint custody of the children once she was able to support herself. Opponents of this proposal fear that many women will turn to illegal or questionable means to make ends meet rather than lose their child to a father they don't feel is fit to raise their children. Also, there is a great danger that abusive, substance-addicted or otherwise unfit parents will receive sole custody simply because the custodial parent lacked the financial means or the emotional strength to bring formal charges against the other parent.

2. Women must responsible for paying back welfare assistance. Under the current system, child support for women on welfare goes directly to the state for repayment. This proposal would make women responsible for at least half of that payment, which she would have to pay back as soon as she left the rolls. Opponents believe that this would further push single women into poverty, as they will incur debts while on welfare that they will not be able to repay later.

3. Recipients must provide receipts for prove that the AFDC payments are going to the benefit of the child, and they can lose benefits if the spend money of non- government approved luxuries. The argument against this proposal is that welfare payments are so low that families are unable to afford luxuries, so there is little reason for an invasion of privacy and degradation of dignity.

4. States must establish the paternity of the child at birth. Once paternity is established, there will be a legal link between children and their fathers. Mothers must also disclose paternity in order to be eligible for welfare. Feminists groups such as NOW and the Coalition for the Prevention of Domestic Violence fear that this too will give abusive or unfit fathers a legal open door. This can be a threat to the psychological, emotional and physical well being of the mother and her children. Also, this may unfairly punish women who are unable to provide paternity information because they simply doesn't know it

5. States must presume joint custody in all divorce cases and for all “ illegitimate” children if paternity is known. Joint custody is a critical pillar of the father's rights movements, and many feminists and children's advocates feel it is a simplified solution to a complex, emotionally- charged problem.

6. Gives non- custodial parents whose children are on welfare preference at jobs and employment agencies. This “ affirmative action” is designed to increase the ability of men to pay child support, but many think it will result in discrimination against women and those without children.

7. Lastly, parents on welfare will be required to complete 40 hours of job training, work, community services and/or job searching per week. Upon leaving the welfare rolls, recipients will be responsible for repaying the cost of training programs or job placement fees. Also, the AFC's proposal will eliminate the bias against married families by requiring only one spouse to complete the 40 hours in a two-parent family. Opponents argue that single women will not be able to find quality childcare and transportation, but the

AFC refutes that, saying, " Most current working parents utilize some low-cost combination of family, friends and school to satisfy day care needs."

This implies that single mothers will be given no added benefit in consideration of childcare or transportation, and will accrue even greater financial burdens while on welfare than if she didn't accept benefits at all.

The AFC has been greatly criticized for this proposal, but they feel that it demands that women accept responsibility for their actions and eliminates the gender bias in public assistance.. While it's true that many of the policies endorsed by the AFC are unfair and even vindictive to women, the men proposing these solutions are hurt and angry because they have lost their children to a court system that unfairly gives them the burden of proof in custody cases. Like all victims of discrimination, the men in this group are frustrated- they've lost the most important things in thier lives- their children, and they're unsure what they can do about it. I'm certainly not suggesting that they should be given credibility on Capitol Hill because they have suffered a loss, but I think it's important to look at this group from that perspective.

Case Study: The National Center for Strategic Non- Profit Planning:
Partnership for Fragile Families

The National Center for Strategic Non- Profit Planning (NPCL) is a non- profit organization dedicated to helping community based organizations and public agencies to better serve young, low- income fathers and fragile families. (A fragile family is defined as a young, low- income, never married couple and their children.) This organization was developed in 1996, in response to the

welfare reform measures enacted that year. The NPCL believes that the new, improved welfare system drives apart fragile families. Young fathers are expected to pay back child support if they establish paternity, which at an 18% interest rate, can be an overwhelming burden for a man that is struggling to make and meet on his own. Also, the money never even reaches his children directly; it goes to the state's welfare system at repayment of benefits to his kids. Thus, while young fathers have little incentive to establish paternity, single mothers stand serious consequences if they don't. Single mothers can lose 25- 100 percent of AFDC benefits if they fail to report the paternity of their children, as well as provide contact information. The increased strain on these often tenuous relationships may cause fathers to disappear from the lives of their partner and children entirely.

Led by experienced non- profit administrator Jeffrey M. Johnson, the NPCL created the Partnerships for Fragile Families (PFF) initiative to try to combat this problem. They recognize that 61 percent of fathers whose children are on welfare have an income below the poverty level, and that 86 percent of these fathers have an income below the poverty level for a family of four. In fact, according to the Census Bureau, even if we reunited every single child in the United States with both biological parents — a move that would clearly not be healthy for children in many instances — two-thirds of the children who are poor today would still be poor, because their fathers and mothers do not earn enough to lift the family out of poverty. The PFF realizes that the marriage incentives that conservative father's rights groups support alone

will not end the cycle of poverty for the children involved, and tries to address the problems of families where marriage is not a feasible solution.

In 1996, the PFF launched a 3-year pilot program in 10 cities to partnerships between community-based organizations and child support enforcement agencies. The idea behind this initiative is to help “dead beat dads” alleviate the debts they owe to their children and the welfare system, rather than scare them into payment. Like conservative father’s rights groups, they recognize the need to make delinquent dads responsible and employable, but unlike conservative groups they focus on actually supplying training and support services, rather than giving fathers ultimatums and forcing them to fend for themselves.

The PFF holds workshops for community based groups to share knowledge on how best to help fragile families and young fathers. The PFF has developed “Fatherhood Development: A Curriculum for Young Fathers,” a suggestion manual to aide community groups in working with young fathers. It focuses on personal development; encouraging fathers to examine their values, stressing liberal definitions of man hood and encouraging self-sufficiency. They also strive to develop life skills like communication, dealing with stress and handling discrimination. Third, the Curriculum teaches responsible parenting. This involves discussions on fathers’ impact on their children, the daily needs of children, facts about children’s cognitive and emotional development and effective discipline techniques. The PFF curriculum also stresses anger management techniques, conflict resolution and techniques for dealing with tumultuous relationship between fathers and the mothers of their children. Lastly, the PFF Curriculum encourages young

men to focus on long-term careers and provides recommendations and assistance in getting training that will help them leave unfulfilling, minimum wage jobs. They try to improve the work attitudes of jaded youth, and use mock interviews to help young fathers get jobs.

On a national level, the PFF holds Peer Workshops for child support enforcement agencies and federal policy makers. It seeks to inform officials of the importance of treating “dead-beat” dads with respect, and helping them become better fathers, both emotionally and financially. They also focus on the systemic barriers which many young fathers face and encourage policy makers to implement creative strategies for overcoming these obstacles.

The PFF initiative and the NCPL do not have the political clout of the NFI, but they are being listened to largely because of the positive results of their programs. They are trying to reach fathers while they and their children are young and prevent irreparable damage to the fragile relationship of the family. Opponents to this group’s liberal strategy feel that money should not be wasted on fathers unwilling to financially contribute to their own children, but PFF argues that they are helping men who are simply unable to help their children. This organization, and the many community-based groups it represents, is the liberal front of the Father’s Rights Movement, and the strategies they employ have been largely successful in positively influencing the lives of children whose fathers they have helped. Unfortunately, these pilot programs are small, and a broader, more serious commitment must be made if real change is going to occur.

Conclusion: Prospectives for the Future

If the fatherhood movement is going to become a comprehensive coalition with widely known accomplishments, it will need to find a common ground between the left and the right components of the group. Will both can support a review of child support and custody laws that more fairly judges the best interest of the children, neither thinks that changes in custody laws alone will solve the “ crisis of fatherlessness in America,” as Wade Horn refers to it. The pro-marriage sector of the movement feels that we cannot make strides in father absence as well as reduce dependency on welfare, our government must encourage “ marriage, fidelity, love,

affection, nurturing and compassion.” But, these are difficult things to legislate. The left wing believes that we must help people learn and use compassion and nurturing towards their children and the mothers of those children. “ Fatherhood programs are learning how to help never- married and divorced or separated father remain involved in their children’s lives,” says Ron Mincy of the Ford Foundation. “ If a marriage is feasible, marriage promotion can be a part of a practitioner’s strategy for threat family. But for children born to divorced, separated, unmarried or dysfunctionally married parents, the practitioner should work only on ensuring that the relationship of the parent doesn’t become a barrier to the relationship between father and child.” Unfortunately, intensive programs that can be flexible enough to help each family are very costly, and without a guarantee that it will work, the right wing doesn’t want to make the commitment. I believe that this stalemate will divide the movement unhealthily. Both groups want to improve the quality and quantity of men’s involvement with their children, but they will need to work together to create real social change.

Secondly, this movement has an overwhelming reactionary fringe. The ATC is a mainstream, accepted group whose extremely conservative views represent a considerable portion of the movement. But there are hundred of groups, like Fathers Manifesto or Dads Against the Divorce Industry, who use feminist bashing, gay bashing and make up outlandish statistics to support their cause. Aside for the fact that they support the repeal of the 19th Amendment, the Father's Manifesto web site includes a non-sensical graph which proves that 0% of 12th grade girls know anything about math and/or physics! Although I understand that many of these men are angry and frustrated, they will achieve nothing by make ludicrous claims and discriminating against women and homosexuals. Groups like this serve as easy targets for people opposing the movement, and reflect badly on educated reformers who see a need for change. I think that in order to be successful as a movement, positive Father's Right's organizations should distance themselves from the fringe groups, and try to make a cohesive movement excluding the reactionary organizations.

Overall, I think that this movement focuses on a problem that many policy makers have ignored for too long. Our children do need fathers, and while I don't necessarily agree with the different ways these groups want to achieve their goals, I commend their efforts and think this is an important cause.