

JAMES DANFORTH QUAYLE, III, "MURPHY BROWN SPEECH"  
(19 MAY 1992)

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**Abstract:** In his "Murphy Brown Speech," Quayle assessed the 1992 Los Angeles riots and discussed the Bush administration's plans for addressing social and economic inequalities. His brief critique of a fictional television single-mother, however, overshadowed his message and became the focus of intense criticism from the media. After the controversy died down, Quayle's assertions inspired a debate over the family, welfare policies, economic opportunity, and the role of government in social policy that continues today.

**Key Words:** Dan Quayle, Murphy Brown, family values, welfare, poverty

In late April 1992, Americans witnessed the worst domestic rioting since the turbulent days of the late 1960s.<sup>1</sup> In protest of the verdict in the Rodney King case, in which four white police officers were acquitted of beating a black motorist, hundreds of Blacks took to the streets of Los Angeles, setting fires to buildings and forcing the issues of race and inequality into the national spotlight. In a televised statement delivered forty-eight hours after the riots began, President George H. W. Bush called for the restoration of law and order, but he also promised to address the social and economic concerns of the rioters. His "measured, moderate" approach was not enough to prevent support for the president from dropping "sharply" after the riots.<sup>2</sup> The riots added to the problems of an administration already hurt in the polls by a stagnant economy.

In May, Vice-President Dan Quayle became the Bush administration's point man on the riots. Adopting the tone of a "right-wing media commentator," Quayle offered an assessment of the riots, emphasizing the "poverty of values" in America's inner cities and the decline of traditional families.<sup>3</sup> Quayle's analysis, however, was greatly overshadowed by one line in his speech—his criticism of a fictional television character, Murphy Brown, for portraying single motherhood as "just another lifestyle choice" (38).<sup>4</sup> Prompting a "feeding frenzy" of media coverage, the comment drew attention to the speech, as Quayle arguably intended. Unfortunately, for Quayle, much of that media attention was negative, reinforcing his image as an incompetent politician.

In spite of the initial controversy, Quayle's "Murphy Brown Speech" served to inaugurate the Bush campaign's new emphasis on economic empowerment and family values. Over the next few years, "family values" would become a distinctively Republican issue, helping Bush little in the 1992 election, but eventually becoming a winning issue for many Republicans. Throughout the 1990s, polls generally showed that

the majority of Americans viewed Republicans as better equipped to protect "family values" than their Democratic rivals.<sup>5</sup>

Quayle's "Murphy Brown Speech" reveals how a vice-president tried to seize the political initiative to advance his own political agenda. While the speech may have been ridiculed at the time, it nevertheless inspired a debate over the family, welfare policies, economic opportunity, and the role of government in social policy, which continues to this day. Many remember Dan Quayle's "Murphy Brown Speech" as a political "gaffe" that reinforced his reputation as a political lightweight. In the long run, however, many concluded that Quayle had been "right" about the problems of "family values" in America.

### *Quayle's Biography*

James Danforth Quayle, III was born on February 4, 1947, in Indianapolis, Indiana to James and Corinne Quayle. After spending much of his youth in Paradise Valley, Arizona, Quayle moved to Huntington, Indiana, the current site of his vice-presidential library and museum. In 1969, he graduated from DePauw University and enlisted in the Indiana National Guard. The following year, Quayle enrolled in the Indiana University School of Law at Indianapolis. In 1972, he married Marilyn Tucker, a fellow law student. Two years later, Quayle completed his law degree and the couple moved to Huntington, Indiana. There Quayle worked as associate publisher of his family's newspaper, the *Huntington Herald-Press*, and practiced law with his wife.<sup>6</sup>

Quayle's career in public service began while he was in law school. In 1971, he worked as an investigator for the Consumer Protection Division of the Indiana Attorney General's Office and later that same year became an administrative assistant to Governor Edgar Whitcomb. From 1973-1974, he served as the Director of the Inheritance Tax Division of the Indiana Department of Revenue.<sup>7</sup> In 1976, Quayle ran for the United States Congress on what he identified as a "somewhat populist campaign" that was anti-busing, anti-welfare, and anti-big government.<sup>8</sup> Despite being a "candidate without credentials," the twenty-nine year old Republican candidate defeated the sixteen-year incumbent in a "huge upset victory" and went on to serve two terms in the House of Representatives.<sup>9</sup>

Quayle's career as a representative, Richard Fenno suggests, disclosed a "basic clue to his later behavior—his conservatism."<sup>10</sup> Fenno, who traces the development of Quayle's political career in *The Making of a Senator*, notes that Quayle's voting record in the House "reflected strong conservatism and an equally strong Republican party loyalty."<sup>11</sup> Quayle advocated conservative values and accepted financial contributions and support from New Right organizations; still, the young politician was careful to distinguish himself from the far right of the party.<sup>12</sup> According to Fenno, at the time, Quayle described himself as "somewhere between a moderate and a conservative" and as "a moderating influence on the far right groups."<sup>13</sup> Quayle's voting record, however, cast doubt on his claim.

Quayle's conservatism became more apparent in his 1980 U.S. Senate race. Campaigning primarily as an "agent of an orthodox conservative philosophy," the young candidate promoted views that were "indistinguishable from those of his party's

standard bearer, Ronald Reagan" and strategically negotiated his relationship with the New Right.<sup>14</sup> Fenno, who worked closely with Quayle at the time, observed that Quayle remained an "arms length" away from the movement and promoted a "sympathetic but general" message to Christian groups.<sup>15</sup> Quayle's attempts to present himself as a solid, but not-extremist conservative seemed to have appealed to both moderate and conservative voters. In another surprise victory, Quayle defeated the three-term incumbent and went on to serve two terms in the U.S. Senate where he established himself as a "fiscal and social conservative and a hard-liner on national defense."<sup>16</sup>

Quayle's success is explained in part on his ability to make himself "acceptable to many independents and moderates" while "building on his base among conventional and Christian-right conservatives." Such attributes, James M. Perry and Jeffrey H. Birnbaum speculate in the August 17, 1988, *Wall Street Journal*, helped him gain the attention of presidential hopeful, Vice-President George H.W. Bush.<sup>17</sup> During the 1988 national election, Bush asked Quayle to join him on the ticket as his vice-presidential candidate. Quayle accepted his offer and in November 1988, the Bush-Quayle ticket won the election. In January the following year, at the age of 41, James Danforth Quayle, III took the oath of office as the 44<sup>th</sup> vice-president of the United States.

Though Quayle has seen great success as a political candidate, he has been a controversial figure throughout his political career. Fenno recounts two Indiana colleagues' descriptions of Quayle's reputation as a member of Congress. One commented: "He has not, it's fair to say, had a very prodigious legislative record. . . . The most positive thing you can say is that this was his game plan—not to tackle controversy." The other colleague was even more critical: "He's personable, he's handsome, he's fun to be around, and he's about a quarter of an inch deep."<sup>18</sup> Quayle's image as a political lightweight stuck with him through his vice-presidency. Craig Smith writes that from the moment of Quayle's selection as the vice-presidential nominee in 1988, he was "lambasted by the press, by peers, by the public, and—perhaps most damaging of all—by late night show hosts and comedians."<sup>19</sup> The media's portrayals created a "seemingly indelible image" of Quayle as an "incompetent, dazed youth thrown in among the grown-ups."<sup>20</sup> Despite his attempts to cultivate a positive political image, Quayle was never able to attract favorable media coverage.

### *Contextualizing the "Murphy Brown Speech"*

Vice-President Quayle delivered his "Address to the Commonwealth Club of California" on May 19, 1992. In his memoir, *Standing Firm*, Quayle writes that he originally planned to speak about U.S.-Japanese trade relations. The Los Angeles riots in late April prompted a change in plans, however. Convinced that the riots reflected a fundamental "poverty of values" in America, rather than neglect from the Republican Party, Quayle and his staff decided instead to compose a speech about civil rights, family values, and the administration's long-term plan to spark "urban-renewal."<sup>21</sup>

The riots in south central Los Angeles broke out on April 29, 1992, in response to the acquittal of four white police officers charged with assaulting African American motorist Rodney King. The assault on King, which had been caught on video and

broadcast on all major networks, prompted a national uproar over police brutality and the treatment of Blacks by police around the country. Linda Burstyn, a spokeswoman for the American Civil Liberties Union, stated in the March 7, 1991, *Chicago Tribune*, "People all over the country are furious. It has been a phenomenal outpouring of rage."<sup>22</sup> Less than two hours after the jury delivered their verdict, rioters in south central Los Angeles had set much of the area on fire.<sup>23</sup>

The L.A. riots broke out in the midst of the 1992 presidential campaign, forcing the Bush administration to contend with a number of issues. According to Jeremy D. Mayer, the riots immediately made race a salient issue in the campaign for the White House. Mayer writes, "for a president who had been depicted as uncaring and out of touch with domestic issues, this was a rare opportunity to demonstrate concern and involvement."<sup>24</sup> Yet the White House remained divided over the proper response to the verdict. He writes that immediately after the verdict, Bush made an "unqualified endorsement" of the jury's decision, stating: "The court system has worked. What's needed now is calm, respect for the law." The next day, Mayer reports, Bush "sternly condemned the riots" but remained unclear in his response to the King assault. On May, 1, 1992, in his "eighth pronouncement in forty-eight hours," the President "labeled King's beating 'revolting' and suggested that the verdict 'was not the end.'"<sup>25</sup> The White House's confusion over how to respond, Mayer observes, "became obvious to the public."<sup>26</sup>

The Bush campaign was struggling with other issues as well. The riots, Mayer contends, also forced Bush to "prove that he cared" about those living in the inner city.<sup>27</sup> Contesting accusations that the past two Republican administrations had "turned their backs on the cities," Bush argued that a decline in moral fiber and values was behind the riots.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, press secretary Marlin Fitzwater argued that liberal social policies of the 1960s brought on the conditions for the riots. He explained: "Those who would try to come up with social programs that redistribute the wealth or that deal with the direct handouts, or create programs of the '60s and '70s, we believe are wrong."<sup>29</sup> Consistent with the Bush campaigns' proposals, the administration called for reform in the welfare, justice, and education systems and placed an emphasis on family values. As Dan Blaz reported in the *Washington Post* in May, Bush emphasized "efforts to strengthen the family, the importance of providing opportunity and empowerment to inner-city residents, the limits of government and the need for greater personal responsibility on the part of all citizens, urban and suburban."<sup>30</sup> Despite Bush's efforts to garner support for his administration and its policies, Smith suggests that he was "identified with a crisis in confidence in the nation's direction."<sup>31</sup>

Vice-President Quayle took the lead in the administration's efforts to justify its policies on poverty and race in urban America. During an appearance on *Face the Nation*, Quayle assured Americans that Bush would make a new push for urban-renewal programs. Quayle explained that the president had had an urban agenda on Capitol Hill for three years which called for home ownership programs and tax breaks for the poor. He noted, however, that their new emphasis sought to further promote empowerment through self-improvement opportunities. Quayle was careful not to suggest that the administration had been coerced by the rioters into adopting new policies. "The

philosophy of the Bush administration has been, and I believe will continue to be, law enforcement, opportunity and values," he said.<sup>32</sup> As he recalled in his autobiography: "I was uncomfortable talking about 'programs' of any kind, for fear of giving the riots a certain legitimacy. But if we had to talk about programs to combat urban poverty—and politically we had no choice—then I wanted to talk about new ones to empower the individual, not ones that would further bloat the already failed welfare bureaucracies."<sup>33</sup> Despite the administration's efforts to respond to the perceived urban crisis, Bush's approval rating continued to drop.<sup>34</sup> Just months before the presidential election, the Bush administration appeared to be losing the confidence of the nation. Quayle's scheduled address to the Commonwealth Club was seen as an opportunity to regain the initiative and to repair some of the damage.

### *Interpreting the "Murphy Brown Speech"*

Traditionally, American vice-presidents "have had relatively little autonomy, and thus, relatively little power," Denise M. Bostdorff has written.<sup>35</sup> Forced to remain subordinate to the president, vice-presidents typically are "controlled completely by the scene" and dominated by the situation around them.<sup>36</sup> In his biography, Quayle suggests that the 1992 presidential campaign was one such instance. He writes, "For the first time, I felt powerless. I knew in my heart and in my mind that the campaign was seriously off track . . . ." Though Quayle originally adhered to the campaign team's recommendations, he suggests in his autobiography that the L.A. riots prompted him to adopt his own strategy to revitalize the struggling campaign.<sup>37</sup> Quayle's "Address to the Commonwealth Club of California," better known as the "Murphy Brown Speech," demonstrates how a vice-president tried to seize the initiative to advance his own political agenda. Building upon the campaign's family values theme, Quayle tried to show how the Republican Party had the solution to much of the nation's social and economic problems: a renewed emphasis in family values. The response to his speech, however, reveals how prevailing media frames can distort the message a politician hopes to convey.

Quayle began his speech by condemning the riots and the rioters. "Who is to blame for the riots?" he asked. "The rioters are to blame. Who is to blame for the killings? The killers are to blame" (10). Refusing to grant legitimacy to the rioters' anger over the King verdict, Quayle stated, "No matter how much you may disagree with the verdict, the riots were wrong" (10). Quayle's insistence that "there is simply no excuse for the mayhem" (10) revealed the Bush administration's intolerance for "lawless social anarchy" (12). However, Quayle's acknowledgement that "after condemning the riots, we do need to try to understand the underlying situation," suggested that the Bush administration also recognized that the rioters' may have had some legitimate grievances (11).

At a time when the Bush White House and campaign team seemed "ideologically and strategically adrift," Quayle adopted a "time-honored Republican strategy": pit himself and his party against those who allegedly scorn traditional conceptions of family, religion, and patriotism.<sup>38</sup> Initially working outside the supervision of the

President, Quayle laid the foundation for a more aggressive "family values" campaign in his Commonwealth Club address. Though he built his message upon the president's assertion that the "major cause of the problems of the cities is the dissolution of the family," Quayle more stridently highlighted the alleged connection between family values and economic and social success.<sup>39</sup> Insisting that a "poverty of values" (23) was a predominant cause for the lawlessness in the L.A. riots, Quayle discounted the rioters' claims that social and economic injustices confined them to a life of poverty. Instead, Quayle stated that the rioters' behavior was "directly related to the breakdown of the family structure, personal responsibility, and social order" (12). Claiming that the "narcotic of welfare" perpetuated these problems, Quayle offered a solution to help alleviate the nation's poverty problems (23).

Quayle's plan for "transforming underclass culture" included maintaining law and order on the streets and creating a different incentive system for the poor (25). According to Quayle, the government needed to promote safety and "freedom from fear," and it needed to get "control of the streets" (27). Assuming that Americans "all agree the government's first obligation is to maintain order (26)," he repeatedly assured the nation that he and the President were "for law and order" (28) and identified anti-poverty programs as one way to assure safety and security. The crux of effective anti-poverty programs, Quayle insisted, was empowering individuals to break the cycle of poverty. Adopting a more "staunchly conservative stance" than the president had taken, Quayle insisted that a renewed commitment to "our Judeo-Christian values" (40) would give the poor hope that they could seize the opportunities available to them, which in turn would lead to stronger families and communities.<sup>40</sup> He asked all Americans to join the effort and "talk again" about family values (40). Advancing his own political agenda, he invited a response. "So, let the national debate roar on," he stated. "I, for one, will join it. The President will lead it, the American public will participate in it, and as a result, we will become an even stronger nation" (44). Openly claiming family values as a Republican issue, Quayle had found a cause that he believed would galvanize conservative support and appeal to middle America.

Quayle's solution to the "poverty of values" was to give the poor an economic stake in their communities (23). He claimed that Bush's "empowerment agenda" (43) would help the poor "move from permanent dependence to dignified independence" (41) by giving them the strength to help themselves. However, critics complained that in describing how his plan would restore family values, Quayle implicitly reinforced negative class and racial stereotypes. For example, Quayle used the term "underclass" to describe a group whose members remained dependent on welfare for "long stretches of time" and whose young men were "often drawn into lives of crime" (18). Claiming that the underclass defied the "rules of American society" (18) and suffered from a "welfare ethos (12)," Quayle perpetuated a cultural myth that, in his critics' view, cast the poor as victims of their "own decimated family structure and failed morals."<sup>41</sup> Adding that these problems were "particularly acute for African Americans (18)," Quayle perpetuated racialized images of poverty and, according to his critics, reinforced the negative stereotype of "blacks as lazy."<sup>42</sup>

Quayle, however, did not place all the blame on the poor themselves. In the most notorious line of the speech, he pointed to the cultural elite's role in perpetuating the breakdown of American values by singling out a famous TV character: "It doesn't help matters when primetime TV has Murphy Brown, a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid professional woman, mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another lifestyle choice" (38). Although Quayle later claimed that he included the reference because he was "bothered by all the cute glamour" surrounding Murphy Brown's pregnancy,<sup>43</sup> Dana Cloud has speculated that he deliberately attacked Brown "in order to insure media attention to an otherwise obscure speech."<sup>44</sup> William L. Benoit and K. Kerby Anderson also have documented the comment's success in attracting media attention to his speech, noting how quickly journalists "leaped on Quayle's attempt to blame a fictional character for society's ills."<sup>45</sup> Yet whatever Quayle's motives, the speech quickly became known as "The Murphy Brown Speech," focusing attention on the vice-president's criticisms of Hollywood and "leaving the debates about race and class behind."<sup>46</sup> The following day's headline in *USA Today* summed up the nation's somewhat distorted understanding of Quayle's purpose and message in his address to the Commonwealth Club: "Quayle: Murphy No Role Model."<sup>47</sup> Despite Quayle's attempts to draw attention to the larger social issues he discussed, the media portrayed the speech as an attack on Hollywood.

Over the next few days, Quayle continued to come under fire. Some news outlets, like *USA Today*, accused Quayle of invoking racial politics as a means to "shift responsibility from government and its programs to individual morality."<sup>48</sup> Others portrayed the speech as Quayle's latest political blunder. Focusing on the White House's hesitation to endorse Quayle's critique of Brown, the *Boston Globe* highlighted the President's attempts to distance himself from Quayle's attack. On May 21, 1992, Walter Robinson reported that Bush's spokesman, Marlin Fitzwater, told reporters that the White House "applauded the fictional character's decision not to have an abortion." Fitzwater was quoted as saying, "The fact is she is demonstrating prolife values which we think are good." However, he then added: "We're not very comfortable getting involved in criticizing her show."<sup>49</sup> Even the White House, it seemed, viewed the speech as a blunder. By emphasizing that fact, the *Globe* cast still more doubt on Quayle's credibility and minimized the significance of his message.

Over the next six weeks, Quayle continued to lash out against the "cultural elites" who, he claimed, "respect neither tradition nor standards."<sup>50</sup> In a sequel to his "Murphy Brown Speech," delivered to the Southern Baptists Convention in June, Quayle illustrated how the cultural elites had broken from traditional middle-class ideals. He said: "They believe that moral truths are relative and all 'lifestyles' are equal. They seem to think the family is an arbitrary arrangement of people who decide to live under the same roof, that fathers are dispensable and that parents need not be married or even of opposite sexes. They are wrong."<sup>51</sup> These attacks attracted still more media attention, with the press soon comparing Quayle's "attack dog tactics" to Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew's criticism of the "liberal media" during the Nixon administration.<sup>52</sup> As Andrew Rosenthal of the *New York Times* concluded: "Although Quayle rejects such comparisons

and his language is more measured than Agnew's, Quayle is clearly trying as Agnew did to draw a line in society to help his party win the election."<sup>53</sup>

In one of the few scholarly investigations of Quayle's "Murphy Brown Speech," Smith elaborated on these supposed parallels between Agnew's 1969 speech and Quayle's 1992 family values campaign. Masking his political goals in epideictic language, according to Smith, Quayle attempted to draw attention away from the Bush administration's failure to respond effectively to the riots and re-order the agenda in the presidential campaign. Like Agnew before him, Quayle made an effort to put the media on the defensive by labeling them a cultural elite whose values differed from those of the "average American."<sup>54</sup> Trying to use his unpopularity among journalists to his advantage, Quayle portrayed himself as a courageous champion of Judeo-Christian values, and he accused the media of intolerance toward those who believed in family values, personal responsibility, and hard work. Unlike Agnew's speech, however, Quayle's address did not seem to intimidate the media. Instead, Smith concludes, Quayle's speech only seemed to invite more "skepticism and scorn."<sup>55</sup>

In another scholarly analysis of the "Murphy Brown Speech," Benoit and Anderson examined how the show's response further obscured the important issues at stake. Benoit and Anderson argue that the producers of the *Murphy Brown Show* did a "generally good job of responding" to Quayle's criticisms in an episode of the show entitled "Murphy's Revenge."<sup>56</sup> In this episode, the producers challenged Quayle's charge that the show glamorized single motherhood. The story line instead emphasized Brown's difficulties raising her child. The tired and overwhelmed mother's failed attempts to even shower or sleep, according to Benoit and Anderson, were "recurrent, humorous, and non-glamorous themes."<sup>57</sup> During the show, Murphy Brown and her co-workers also directly responded to Quayle's charges, using humor to ridicule his views. For example, in a soliloquy, Brown pointed out the absurdity of Quayle's "life-style choice" statement:

What was that crack about "just another life-style choice"? I agonized over that decision. I didn't know if I could raise a kid by myself. I worried about what it would do to him. I worried about what it would do to me. I didn't just wake up one morning and say, "Oh, gee, I can't get in for a facial, I might as well have a baby."<sup>58</sup>

Brown's co-workers also attacked the vice-president. For instance, Frank says: "This is the same guy who gave a speech at the United Negro College Fund and said 'What a waste it is to lose one's mind.' And then he spent the rest of his term showing the country exactly what he meant."<sup>59</sup> Introducing Quayle's past public blunders into the show's plot, the producers did not merely respond to his accusations but sought to undermine his credibility.

"Murphy's Revenge" alluded to the important social issues raised by Quayle's speech, but in the end it treated the conflict more as a personal dispute between Quayle and Brown. In the episode's conclusion, Brown offered her response to Quayle:



These are difficult times for our country, and in searching for the causes of our social ills we could choose to blame the media, or the Congress, or an administration that's been in power for twelve years [pause] or we could blame me. And while I will admit that my inability to balance a checkbook may have had something to do with the collapse of the savings and loan industry, I doubt that my status as a single mother has contributed all that much to the breakdown of western civilization.<sup>60</sup>

Like the media coverage of Quayle's speech, "Murphy's Revenge" ridiculed Quayle more than it responded to his arguments. As Benoit and Anderson have commented, it justified Brown's personal decision, while "reinforcing negative stereotypes about the vice-president."<sup>61</sup> In this sense, Quayle's reference to Brown backfired. "Unfortunately," as Benoit and Anderson conclude, Quayle's "transparent attempt to attract attention by attacking a popular fictional character shifted the rhetorical focus away from the larger social problems to a particular situation comedy."<sup>62</sup>

At first glance, the largely negative reaction to his "Murphy Brown Speech" undoubtedly only further undermined Quayle's credibility. As Smith has suggested, the speech might have been more effective had it been delivered by a more respected source and been "isolated from political agendas."<sup>63</sup> Other scholars likewise have emphasized how the speech only seemed to reinforce negative images of Quayle as a political "lightweight." Reflecting on the response of the press, for example, Benoit and Anderson call Quayle's reference to Murphy Brown, an "ill-conceived publicity stunt" that "backfired."<sup>64</sup> The reference only distracted attention from the serious issues at stake and caused a public relations nightmare for the White House. Yet, in some ways, the "Murphy Brown Speech" might be judged a rhetorical success. Strengthening Quayle's reputation among cultural conservatives, it helped make family values a Republican issue, and in the long run it contributed to an important debate over social and economic justice.

### *The Legacy of the "Murphy Brown Speech"*

Despite the media's fixation on the Murphy Brown comment, Quayle's speech helped to reaffirm the Bush administration's commitment to law and order and a new approach to urban policy. Consistent with the Republican's agenda of economic empowerment, Quayle discussed Bush's plans for giving the impoverished a stake in their communities. He highlighted Bush's "Weed and Seed" crime prevention program, his "Home Ownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere" (HOPE) program, and his "America 2000" education program. Arguing that these programs would give the impoverished an opportunity to get ahead in life, Quayle insisted that Bush's plans would lead to stronger families and a safer society. Drawing attention away from Bush's indecisive responses to the riots, Quayle's speech, according to Smith, shuffled the priority of issues and gave conservatives an issue they could embrace and rally behind.<sup>65</sup>

Quayle's speech also helped spark a nationwide debate over single-parent homes, welfare families, economic opportunity, and the government's role in family affairs. After the initial media frenzy died down, a number of academics, citizens, and politicians began debating the question: Was Dan Quayle Right?

Although Quayle's comments were ridiculed by some, Michael Morgan and Susan Leggett note that "they struck a responsive chord with many who believed that something had gone seriously wrong with the contemporary American family."<sup>66</sup> In one of the most famous responses, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, a prominent family sociologist, offered social scientific research to support her claim that Quayle was, indeed, "right." According to Whitehead, an accumulating body of research indicated that children from intact families did better than children from single-parent homes or stepfamilies. Yet politics have distracted attention from this research. Whitehead writes: "Every time the issue of family structure has been raised, the response has been first controversy, then retreat, and finally silence."<sup>67</sup> Identifying the Murphy Brown controversy as just the most recent example of this phenomenon, Whitehead insisted that Americans needed to discuss the issues raised in Quayle's speech and seriously address the negative consequences of single-parent homes on children and society.

With the help of Whitehead and others, "family values" became a major theme in the debate over poverty in America. Wade Horn, former president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, for example, applauded Quayle for galvanizing others to "come to the defense, if not of him, at least of his larger point he was trying to make — that fathers matter to the well-being of children and that society experiments with father absence at its peril."<sup>68</sup> Horn, a child psychologist and pro-marriage advocate, called Quayle's speech the "defining moment" in the "fatherhood movement"— an effort that began in the mid-1990s and continues to address family issues today. According to journalist Bill Berkowitz, Quayle's comments also helped legitimize the promotion of marriage as part of welfare reform, both in the 1990s and in contemporary efforts to reauthorize welfare funding. Berkowitz called Quayle's speech the "first volley in the contemporary 'marriage wars,'" noting its successful promotion of marriage as an anti-poverty solution.<sup>69</sup>

Dana Cloud has taken a different view of the "family values" debate, claiming that conservatives have "scapegoated private families—especially those headed by single parents, racial minorities, and the poor—for structural social problems."<sup>70</sup> In her analysis of the 1992 presidential campaign, Cloud identified three common themes within the Bush-Quayle and Clinton-Gore campaign rhetoric. She found that both assumed African Americans now had equal opportunities to get ahead, constructed a "good black"—"bad black" dichotomy, and vilified angry or unsuccessful Blacks.<sup>71</sup> Linking these themes to those introduced in the "Murphy Brown Speech," Cloud credits Quayle with helping "to set up an impending (and now realized) bipartisan assault on welfare, affirmative action, and other social programs."<sup>72</sup>

Ten years after his "Murphy Brown Speech," Quayle celebrated the long-term effects of his remarks in an interview on CNN. Citing initiatives like the National Fatherhood Institute and the Million Man March as proof of wide-spread interest in the fatherhood cause, Quayle stated, "we have made a lot of progress on the issue."<sup>73</sup>

Though Quayle's "Murphy Brown Speech" may have faded from the public eye, the issues it raised continue to provoke controversy and debate. It is, in short, an important voice in the ongoing debate over social and economic justice in America.

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### Notes

1 Jeremy D. Mayer, *Running on Race: Racial Politics in Presidential Campaigns 1960-2000* (New York: Random House, 2002), 239.

2 The May 2, 1992, *USA Today* reported that support for Bush "dropped sharply" following the riots. "Poll: Clinton and Bush Neck and Neck," *USA Today*, May 5, 1992, Final Edition, 5A.

3 Jerry Roberts, "Quayle Blames Riots on Decline of Family Values," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 20, 1992, A1.

4 Here and elsewhere passages in the "Murphy Brown Speech" are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the text of the speech that accompanies this essay.

5 According to the August 20, 1999, *New York Times*, political strategists found that the public "once again sees Republicans as the party of values . . ." Alison Mitchell, "Democrats Again Face Voter Doubts Over Party's Values," *New York Times*, August 20, 1999, A18.

6 "Biography," *Dan Quayle Web Page*, <http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/biography.html> (accessed 22 June 2006).

7 "Biography," *Dan Quayle Web Page*.

8 David S. Broder and Bob Woodward, *The Man Who Would Be President: Dan Quayle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 43.

9 Mark Helmke, "Fates Favor Quayle's Mercurial Career," *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, January 9, 1978; Richard Fenno, Jr., *The Making of a Senator: Dan Quayle* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989), 5.

10 Fenno, *The Making of a Senator: Dan Quayle*, 7.

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