

Chapter Title: THE PURE AMERICAN BODY

Book Title: Preparing for War

Book Subtitle: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism--and What Comes Next

Book Author(s): BRADLEY ONISHI

Published by: Augsburg Fortress, Broadleaf Books. (2023)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2phpsfh.9>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Augsburg Fortress, Broadleaf Books are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Preparing for War*

Chapter 6

THE PURE AMERICAN BODY

THERE WAS A LOT riding on that kiss. More than usual for the first intimate moment of a high school romance. We knew it, too. Our relationship depended on it. Our families' futures depended on it. More than anything, the fate of our nation depended on it.

One of the benefits of being a zealous teenage convert to evangelicalism is that your parents stop worrying about what's happening behind your closed bedroom door when your girlfriend comes over. After dozens of Bible studies, prayer groups, and Christian concerts, they kind of just turn off the normal teenage-radar and let you do your thing. So when Alexis and I went up to my room at eleven that Friday night—me a high school senior, her a freshman in college—no one in my family even blinked. We'd been dating for almost three years by then and had done little more than hold hands and hug goodbye. Like me, she was a convert who took her faith to the extreme. We were an even match when it came to our devotion to God, to evangelism, and to cultivating a life marked by godly virtues such as patience, integrity, and, most of all, purity.

Though we planned to marry soon after I graduated high school, we decided that it would be best to have our first kiss intentionally, in a planned and disciplined way rather than a spur-of-the-moment temptation that could lead us down a lustful path.

According to the historian Sara Moslener, in April of 1993 the first True Love Waits Pledges were taken at a Southern Baptist conference at a local church in Texas. This was the Southern Baptist Convention's test pilot of the program. It soon spread to other local churches throughout the denomination. The first rally was in 1994 in Washington, DC. At the gathering, evangelical luminaries delivered message after message to the teenagers in attendance that the most important part of their personal walk with God was remaining sexually "pure" before marriage. At the end of the rally, there was an altar call—a standard feature of evangelical meetings, going back to the Second Great Awakening. But this one was different. The call was to pledge oneself to a life of purity. Those who answered the call signed cards that were later delivered to the National Mall in Washington, DC.

My *Straight White American Jesus* podcast cohost Dan Miller pledged his purity on a True Love Waits card at his church in Colorado. For him, it was a promise to keep his mind and body free of sexual sin and to be part of a generation who would turn American culture around. His card was delivered to the National Mall in 1994. There was a clear message behind sending hundreds of thousands of cards to the nation's capital: the pledge to develop and maintain pure teenage bodies was a pledge not only to obey God's commands but to build national strength and integrity. Somehow, there was a connection between nation-building and the sexual abstinence of teenagers in Milwaukee and Tucson and Baton Rouge. By the time the cards were delivered in July 1994, more than two hundred thousand teenagers like Dan had pledged their commitment to be part of a new generation of young people willing to stand up for God, rage against the cultural tides, and say no to sexual licentiousness.

When I converted soon thereafter, the currents of purity culture, as manifest in the True Love Waits movement, were sweeping through evangelical churches. On the surface, the message was straightforward. It went something like this: Since the 1960s, we have lived in a culture that celebrates sexual freedom in destructive ways. By obeying God and committing yourself to abstinence before marriage, you are a countercultural rebel who is going to have a loving, intimate, and healthy sex life once you enter the bonds of marriage.

The emphasis, as usual in evangelicalism, was on individual piety. We were warned that sex outside of God's plan would destroy us spiritually and physically. The inflictions would be swift and ferocious—depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, not to mention AIDS and syphilis. And unlike other sins, which God washed away as soon as we confessed, sexual sins would wreak permanent damage on ourselves and our marriage.

“See this piece of tape?” one of our youth leaders would say in front of the crowd at Bible study. “What happens when I put it on Jesse’s arm?” He would put the tape on Jesse and then rip it off, leading to a yelp from the poor volunteer and roaring laughter from the crowd. “Now, when I put the same piece of tape on Ben, it has lost its grip.” The sequence would continue down a line of volunteers on stage until the tape was mangled and thrown into the trash. “This is what your sexuality is like. If you keep attaching yourself physically to people, eventually you will be used up and thrown away.”

These lessons made me afraid. Unlike other sins, which would be forgiven and washed away by Christ, it seemed that sexual sin had lasting effects even after you repented. I had already experimented with sex before my conversion. In order to be right with God and ready for marriage, I decided that antisex militancy was the only path that would work. Alexis and I decided early on in our dating relationship that we wouldn’t kiss until marriage. In our minds, kissing would lead to more kissing, which would lead to temptations we didn’t want to have to face.

But as time went on, it became clear that there was more to the purity message than not giving in to bodily lust. Keeping our bodies pure was the way to renewing the purity of other bodies. Both Alexis and I had divorced families—“broken homes,” as they were known in evangelical circles. Few, if any, of our relatives were born-again Christians like we were. If we wanted to turn the generational ship around in order to create a family tree of God-fearing people, the first step was maintaining our relationship’s purity as the foundation for a pious genealogical legacy. The family is the vessel of godly instruction and formation, we learned. If the tree’s roots were rotten, how could we expect our children and their children to ever love God and find eternal salvation?

As young people, we knew that the stakes of individual purity extended even beyond the fate of our families to the fate of our nation. If we wanted to restore America’s glory, it would take a generation of godly families rooted in the pledge to purity. It would require seeing a connection between the purity of our teenaged bodies and purity of our body politic. As those massive mailings of purity pledge cards to the National Mall from that first rally suggest, True Love Waits was more than a movement to get kids to stop fooling around at Inspiration Point or prevent teen pregnancy. The organizers sent a clear message to our generation: sexual purity is the road to national renewal. It’s the frontline of the culture wars. And you are the soldiers.

VICE PRESIDENTS AND SINGLE MOTHERS

According to evangelical leaders during the eighties and early nineties, in order to see the rot creeping into American culture, all you had to do was turn on the television. While family-oriented programs like *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* still dominated the airwaves, these years also saw new representations of gender roles, sexual identities, and family types on the small screen. *Three’s Company* portrayed a supposedly gay man living with two women in the

same apartment, and *My Two Dads* challenged conventional notions about healthy families and parental guidance. But the program that caused the most controversy was the ratings bonanza *Murphy Brown*, a show about a woman who decided to raise a child on her own while managing a successful career.

In 1992, then vice president Dan Quayle criticized *Murphy Brown* in a speech about family values: “Ultimately however, marriage is a moral issue that requires cultural consensus, and the use of social sanctions. Bearing babies irresponsibly is, simply, wrong. Failing to support children one has fathered is wrong. We must be unequivocal about this. It doesn’t help matters when prime time 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.’”

Quayle links what he takes to be the decay of American culture to the breakdown of the nuclear family. He suggests that if single mothers who refuse partners and raise children without a male figure in the household are allowed to proceed without sanction, then the country will decline. By sounding this alarm, the vice president was tapping into a cultural current of the decay of White sexual ethics. In 1993, the libertarian author Charles Murray caused controversy when he published “The Coming White Underclass.” Murray begins the essay with a racist caricature of the Black American family characterized by out-of-wedlock children living in fatherless homes. He then paints with broad strokes to create a picture of Black life in urban areas as akin to “*Lord of the Flies* writ large,” where “the values of unsocialized male adolescents” are “physical violence, immediate gratification and predatory sex. That is the culture now taking over the black inner city.” In Murray’s mind there is a direct line between out-of-wedlock childbirth and social chaos. Even more frightening for Murray were the statistics that revealed that White Americans were having children out of wedlock at increasing rates. In Murray’s

analysis, there is a one-to-one correlation between the destitution of Black life and the percentage of children born out of wedlock. If the number of “illegitimate” White children reached the same level, he suggested, it would create a White underclass similar to that of Black America. His concerns about marriage, sexual ethics, and the nuclear family were rooted in racist tropes about Black people and Black families.

Dan Quayle was nowhere near as controversial as Murray, but his thinking followed similar pathways. For Quayle, the route to national renewal was the nuclear family. Americans must return to the family values, which, for Christian nationalists, are the locus keeping the country connected to God: “So I think the time has come to renew our public commitment to our Judeo-Christian values—in our churches and synagogues, our civic organizations and our schools. We are, as our children recite each morning, ‘one nation under God.’ . . . If we lived more thoroughly by these values, we would live in a better society.”

The writers of *Murphy Brown* didn’t take the criticism lying down. In the opening episode of the following season, the main character, who is a newscaster, says into the fictional camera: “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. Or we could blame me.”

Murphy Brown was singled out because the character represented multiple aberrations from the family structure and sexual ethics that Christian nationalists view as essential to American prosperity. She is a professional who prioritizes her career. She is a single woman who has autonomy over her sex life. She is a single mother who is intentionally raising her child without a male partner. To top it off, in the show *Murphy Brown* is a role model to others—a newscaster whose life and work are showcased on national television.

The show’s writers astutely identified the issue that Quayle and his ilk had with the character and the show. In Christian nationalists’

minds, there is a direct connection between “impure” sexual practices and “broken” family structures and the fate of the nation. They condemn the likes of Murphy Brown because they see in her character a representation of the sexual and familial waywardness they blame for destroying the nation from within. The fate of the nation depends, for the Christian nationalist, on sexual purity and proper familial structure. Without those, their story goes, we will be a nation of fatherless boys lacking proper masculine virtues and a society overrun by violence, aggression, and chaos.

FROM SEXUAL PURITY TO NATIONAL PURITY

The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 signaled the political influence of the New Religious Right. Although Falwell, Weyrich, and other leaders eventually became frustrated with Reagan, electoral politics has never been the same. GOP candidates on the local, state, and national levels now cater—and some would say capitulate—to this bloc of voters to win elections and gain power. Political scientists debate whether the millions of conservative Christian votes actually swayed the 1980 election. But both the New Religious Right’s leaders and the American public came to a clear conclusion: conservative White Christians are the new bedrock of the GOP. Any candidate who doesn’t take them seriously will go the way of the Georgia peanut farmer who left the White House with his Bible between his legs. If they were willing to turn on one of their own, what do you think they’ll do to *you*?

Yet as these stories go, success isn’t always as fulfilling as one expects. Even if the New Religious Right was able to take national electoral politics by storm, throughout the eighties they got the sense that the war was far from over. Even if American politics seemed to be back on track, they concluded that American culture continued to suffer from the effects of the sexual revolution and the changing dynamics of family and childrearing it had engendered: Single

mothers. The normalization of divorce. The acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals in mainstream society. The AIDS crisis, which they saw as God's wrath on the gay community. New sex-ed programs teaching teenagers about contraception. Not to mention the prevalence of abortion in the wake of *Roe v. Wade*.

If the seventies witnessed the use of the family by White Christian nationalists seeking to maintain power in the wake of the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, the women's rights movement, and the queer rights movement, then the eighties and nineties witnessed the dissemination of the rhetoric of "family values" as the pathway to national renewal. Under this new strategy, the family wasn't simply a symbol that White Protestants and Catholics used to defend themselves against charges of racism and misogyny. The family, and by extension the movement for sexual purity, became a weapon, deployed in a multitude of situations to shore up the nation's values and, in turn, protect it from the attacks and influence of godless communism and secular humanism coming from the Soviet Union and China.

FOCUSING ON THE FAMILY

The idea of family values didn't start in Southern California, but it was centered there for a long time. Without a doubt, James Dobson was the most influential harbinger of the family values discourse throughout the eighties and nineties. Trained as a child psychologist at the University of Southern California, Dobson founded Focus on the Family in 1977 in Arcadia, California, about thirty minutes from where I grew up in Yorba Linda. Since its founding, Focus on the Family has been a parachurch organization that provides training materials and other resources for parents and spouses to cultivate a godly household and family structure. In line with Murray's and Quayle's concerns about fatherless families and illegitimate children, Dobson's attention focused initially on raising boys to become godly

men. Eventually, this expanded into a comprehensive program for cultivating the entire family according to biblical values. By the turn of the millennium, Focus on the Family radio shows were broadcast on more than five thousand stations around the world and had an audience of approximately 200 million listeners. When I was a teenager, its presence felt ubiquitous within evangelical culture. A Focus on the Family segment on raising boys or developing the traits of a godly family seemed to be on the local Christian radio station every time we got in the car and tuned in.

But the influence of Focus on the Family went beyond radio to conferences, books, pamphlets, Sunday school curricula for parents and teens, and video series. While pastors had the attention of their parishioners on one or maybe two days a week, Focus on the Family threaded through their lives every day, sometimes every few hours. Focus on the Family built what scholar of religion Susan Ridgley calls “a cohesive conservative vision” that mixed evangelical theology with psychological approaches to family life and a healthy dose of American nationalist themes. This meant that even though James Dobson was not a minister, throughout the eighties and nineties he became, in essence, one of the most influential pastors in the United States.

For Dobson, the first building block for a godly family was the marriage relationship, which he viewed as the locus of the divine-human relationship. In other words, for Dobson marriage reflects the connection between God and human beings, so it must be structured and enacted accordingly. For Dobson this meant a complementarian model, wherein the husband is the authoritative head of household and the wife his submissive complement. Here is how scholar Sara Moslener describes his approach:

Focus on the Family became known for its advocacy of a domestic ideology that reflected a desire to return to family life and gender roles that closely resembled the ideals of

nineteenth-century white, middle-class America. For Dobson, these ideals were more than a historical legacy: they amounted to an act of obedience to the order of creation established by God in the book of Genesis. Dobson translated his biblical lessons into an accessible formulation clearly demarcating gendered behaviors and relations. Men and women, he asserted, were created with different but complementary traits that, together, fulfilled God's design for human relationships.

According to Dobson, complementarianism was a barrier against the corrosive influences of feminism and the "gay lifestyle," as many White evangelicals call it. This ideology categorically excludes any deviation from the standard of a heteronormative couple entering into a lifelong relationship with the intent of reproduction. There was no way to make feminist or queer theologies work with what Dobson argued was the bedrock of biblical teaching—the heterosexual nuclear family. There are clear roles in marriage: men are the leaders, the CEOs of the family; women are their submissive partners. Complementarianism is now a litmus test doctrine in many evangelical churches and denominations. Even if the rules aren't always explicitly stated, there are lines one can't cross and, if you are a woman, doors you can't enter. As a woman in a typical White evangelical church, you can't be a pastor or an elder. And if you are a man who doesn't subscribe to this ideology, you have little chance of being a leader in certain communities.

Around the time Dobson's particular brand of family values was gaining influence in the 1980s, a group of evangelical families began what is often referred to as the Quiverfull movement. The name Quiverfull comes from Psalm 127, where children are portrayed as a delightful heritage from God. Quiverfull families see all forms of birth control as contrary to God's sovereignty over reproduction. With no birth control measures in place, women are expected to sacrifice themselves—and their bodies—to any pregnancy with which

God blesses them. The Quiverfull movement was made famous by the TLC show *19 Kids and Counting*. Although the family it focuses on, the Duggars, didn't claim to be Quiverfull, their lifestyle and family structure exemplified the Quiverfull approach: a heterosexual couple, a patriarchal authority structure, a woman limited to the roles of wife and mother, and a family of well over a dozen children.

In line with Dobson's ideology, the Quiverfull movement sees childbirth as a form of fighting the culture wars; it is, in its crudest form, a way of creating more child foot soldiers on one side of the battlefield. Vyckie Garrison was raised in a Quiverfull movement. Since leaving, she has been writing about her experiences. "You also have to remember the sense of purpose that accompanies the Christian Patriarchy and Quiverfull movement," she writes. "We were raised to fight the enemy, be that Satan or the environmentalist, socialists, and feminists, to come against them in spiritual warfare and at the polls. . . . Put simply, their goal is to take over the country, instituting godly laws ruling according to Christ's dictates." According to Garrison, one of the reasons movements like Quiverfull are attractive to evangelical families is that one doesn't have to be a theologian or a pastor to be a lieutenant in the war to take back the country for God. As long as you can have children, and keep having children, you can contribute to the cause in significant ways.

FAMILIES WITH GOOD GENES ONLY

Focus on the Family and proponents of Quiverfull claim that their approaches to family and marriage are taken straight from scripture. However, at least in Dobson's case, even if he touted the scriptural basis of his theology of marriage, it was actually undergirded by a sinister legacy, one inherited from the eugenicist movement. Eugenics is the study of human genetics with the intent of learning how to increase the occurrence of "positive" genetic characteristics and decrease the occurrence of "negative" ones. Eugenics has been used

throughout modern history as a faux-scientific basis for defining certain racial groups as bearing positive traits while labeling others as the bearers of negative characteristics. It has been used, among other things, to justify the racist views that Black and Indigenous people are less intelligent than other races.

As the scholar and author Audrey Clare Farley demonstrates, before Dobson founded Focus on the Family, he trained with the eugenicist Paul Popenoe, whose work, along with that of other eugenicists, inspired Hitler and the sterilization program he implemented in Nazi Germany. Popenoe's fear was that White people, whom he viewed as superior to all others, would be replaced by other races who were outbreeding them. In 1930, he founded the American Institute of Family Relations in Los Angeles in order to formulate strategies for encouraging White couples to remain married and produce more children. By 1960, it was one of the biggest marriage counseling centers in the country.

Popenoe and his cohorts discouraged women from pursuing higher education or professional lives, and they gave stern advice against interracial marriage. In essence, Popenoe was articulating a vision of a racially pure society in order to ensure the dominance of the White heterosexual family in opposition to families of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, as well as queer individuals and families. He mixed the quack science of eugenics with White supremacy and a regressive understanding of gender and sexuality in order to instruct White people—especially White women—that marriage and reproduction were of utmost importance to “saving” American civilization.

Dobson worked for Popenoe in the late 1970s, and Popenoe wrote the foreword to Dobson's first book. Here is how Audrey Clare Farley described their relationship to me in a 2021 interview: “As his assistant, he [Dobson] authored all kinds of publications, which were basically Popenoe's ideas for a public audience—about male, female differences and strict gender norms, the dangers of

evil feminism and how it's going to lead to society's decay." Thus, in the years immediately before Dobson became a household name in White evangelical circles, he was a research assistant and public voice for one of the most influential eugenicists of the twentieth century.

And just like Poponoe, Clare Farley told me, Dobson "viewed homosexuality and feminism as grave threats to the family. He would dismiss domestic abuse. . . . He would sometimes accuse women of faking it, just to get attention, that sort of thing. Even where he believed abuse was real, he never really thought of it as a good reason for divorce. Everybody had to stay in their marriage."

Dobson discouraged his audiences from interracial marriage and warned against the prevalence of "welfare queens"—a thinly veiled reference to Black women living in poverty who, in his mind, were single mothers destroying society by living off the government and raising their children without fathers. Like many evangelical leaders of the mid- and late twentieth century, Dobson subtly discouraged interracial marriage by claiming that such relationships failed on the "grounds of compatibility."

Like Popenoe, Dobson wanted pure families and a pure society. Unlike Popenoe, who was a devout atheist, Dobson used the authority of religion and the power of sacred texts to give these ideas divine sanction. Thus, it's not surprising that Dobson's teachings were imbued with nationalist concerns. What was at stake were not only the development of godly families but the redemption of a nation given over to all sorts of "impurities": from feminism to homosexuality and mixed-race families. Viewed through the lens of the eugenicist legacy, it is clear that race played a role in Dobson's vision of "family values." The family is for him the locus of the divine-human relationship, and the proper family is patriarchal and founded on White cultural norms.

Dobson inherited his understanding of gender and its ties to civilization from another twentieth-century White conservative named

George Gilder, a staunch antifeminist and the founder of the Discovery Institute. For Gilder, men are sexually destructive beings who, without the soothing presence of a wife, will tear down society through their aggression and violence. “Men are naturally designed to be not just aggressive, but destructive,” scholar Sara Moslener, paraphrasing Gilder’s argument, told me in a 2020 interview. According to Gilder and Dobson, men are inherently powerful and authoritative, but they require sexual satisfaction and stability in order to harness their energies positively. Women are weaker, more passive, and without inherent authority. In marriage, women trade sex for stability, and men forgo societal destruction for sexual satisfaction. Gilder maintained that “marriage is the social institution whereby those destructive instincts are contained,” Moslener said. “So it’s a containment theory.” For Gilder, marriage is a transactional relationship upon which society depends in order to avoid internal strife and instability.

Dobson molded this pseudoscientific theory into a theological frame, taking cues from Gilder and arguing that men and women are designed by God to engage in a complementary heterosexual relationship. Like Gilder, he saw marriage as important not only for personal fulfillment (man) and safety (woman) but also because harnessing the energies of men through wedlock is the only way to cultivate a functioning society. Any deviation from this model, by dint of queer sexualities, polyamorous relationships, or an abundance of unmarried people, would spell doom in the mind of Dobson for American—and, for that matter, any—society.

“In short, the biblical foundation of marriage and family is seen as a relic by liberal politicians and our popular culture,” Dobson wrote in 2020. “And yet, the very future of this nation rests on the strength of our marriages and families. If our country is to survive and pull itself out of the current mire, we must learn and draw our strength from the cornerstone on which it was built—the family.”

There is only one step from the basic tenets of purity culture to a racialized and nationalistic view of marriage, sex, and the family.

“Our culture, like ancient cultures that ultimately were destroyed in large part due to their own moral depravity, has been severely weakened,” Dobson writes. “A stable family unit committed to the truth and precepts of the Bible was once the foundation and backbone of our nation. That model is now the exception, not the rule.”

In Dobson’s view, maintaining sexual purity and forming heterosexual nuclear families are a matter of staying true to God’s design. It is what’s good for us. But he goes a step further: our bodies are not our own. When you sin sexually, you misuse what is God’s, since your body belongs to God. Not only does this anger the Creator; it threatens to destroy our country.

It is teachings like this that convinced Alexis and me that sexual impurity would have a permanent imprint not only on our relationship but also on our families’ legacies and our nation. Dobson described the United States of the eighties and nineties as embroiled in a “civil war of values.” In his mind, even if the political tides had turned when Ronald Reagan was elected, the threats coming from the ascendance of communities of color and LGBTQ communities were threatening to destroy the nation from within. It is a small jump from a racialized, patriarchal view of marriage as the bedrock of civilization to seeing children as the soldiers in the cultural civil war. “Children are the prize winners of the second great civil war,” Dobson writes. “They will determine the future of the nation.”

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM: THE ORIGINAL PURITY CULTURE

The singular obsession of purity culture is, of course, the body. As a teenager, I was taught that disciplining my mind and flesh were of the utmost importance to remaining pure. Any sexual thought was considered “adultery in your heart,” meaning that a lustful glance, a sexual urge, or even an extended hug could be on par with cheating on one’s future spouse. Always the zealot, I ritually removed any sexually explicit images from our household, including bikini ads from surfing

magazines and the yearly swimsuit edition of *Sports Illustrated*. Girls in our youth group were taught to wear modest clothing in order to prevent leading boys and men into sexual temptation. We were all instructed to avoid being alone together, to exercise regularly in order to expend energy and ward off arousal, and to do everything possible to avoid touching ourselves or others in any sexual way.

When I think of my own experience with purity culture in the context of Dobson's theology and politics, it leads me to a simple yet startling conclusion: *Christian nationalism is America's original purity culture*. It is the vehicle for constructing a "pure" nation and society. In its essence, purity culture is a projection of all the gendered, racial, and societal fears that White Christian nationalists harbor onto the canvas of teenage flesh. The wager is that if we can discipline the virile teenage body into submission to a patriarchal, heteronormative, and often racialized mode of being, then those bodies will be the foundation of a rightly ordered national body. By tracing the roots of Dobson's family values to Popenoe's eugenicist project and Gilder's patriarchal views of sex, marriage, and civilization, we can see that purity culture was cultivated in a decades-long culture war waged by White Christian men against people of color, women, and queer folks.

This is the argument my podcast cohost Daniel Miller makes in *Queer Democracy: Desire, Dysphoria, and the Body Politic*. Throughout the book, Miller shows that for millennia, the body has been a metaphor for how people groups and nations have envisioned their collective character and virtue. In other words, most countries and communities imagine their collective self as looking a certain way—as having a certain type of body. The nation-as-body metaphor is centuries old. Christian nationalists envision the American social body as straight, White, Christian, native born (and thus English speaking), and patriarchal. When White Christian nationalists imagine the "real American," they think of John Wayne or Donald Trump or Nancy Reagan, a woman who abides by patriarchal norms.

They do not imagine Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, much less a trans teenager of color or a queer immigrant. Their model American looks a certain way and has a certain body. Its phenotype, sexuality, gender, and religious practice are rolled into a singular vision of the American anatomy.

“American Christian nationalism therefore expresses a desire for a return to a mythologized social and political order,” Miller writes. In other words, White Christian nationalists want to reimpose on the nation a hierarchy in which “real Americans occupy positions of social and political authority while all other, merely nominal, Americans properly occupy subordinate places within it.” It’s not that people of color and immigrants aren’t allowed here. It’s just that they need to know their place in the American *corpus*. To extend the body metaphor here: they are subordinate members who take orders from the central nervous system, frontal cortex, and other executive organs and parts. If they try to topple this order and become a central part of the American physique—or worse, become the commander in chief of its armed forces like Obama did when he was elected president—the White Christian nationalist will view the American body as out of whack. It will “feel” like something is wrong—as if there is a sickness plaguing the nation.

Within the White Christian nationalist imagination, pluralism and multiculturalism, and the expansion of representation and civil rights to minoritized groups, writes Miller, “[represent] the American social body’s monstrous and grotesque transmogrification.” For White Christian nationalists, gains made by historically excluded constituencies don’t represent the expansion of freedom but the ruining of the American body. Their goal becomes reshaping society into the model they feel is right. “Christian nationalism therefore represents a socially dysphoric effort to preserve or reinstate real Americans’ position atop the American-national hierarchy,” Miller argues.

Viewing themselves as the “real Americans,” then, White Christian nationalists feel entitled to occupy the top of the social and

political hierarchies throughout the country. They see it as “natural” that White Christians would maintain power up and down the political and social systems. This corresponds to the ways Dobson and his predecessors envisioned the “natural” family as a heterosexual, patriarchal unit designed by God. Purity culture, inspired by Dobson and the “family values” movements, maps directly onto Christian nationalists’ understanding of the natural order of the American social body as a straight, White, Christian male who holds dominion over all aspects of the nation. “The historical privileging of those recognized as embodying the idealized prototype of the ‘real’ American is presented as a natural occurrence, giving the American national body its ‘natural’ shape,” Miller writes. In that sense, he says, “contemporary departures from its normative contours can only be ‘unnatural’ and, therefore, pathological.”

What happens when historically excluded groups such as BIPOC communities, LGBTQ individuals, and feminists begin to change the shape of the American social body by working toward greater civil rights and legal protections? Christian nationalists experience this as the pollution of the American body—the introduction of impurities into the national DNA in a way that will lead to its destruction. This is why Miller calls Christian nationalism a “socially dysphoric reaction to the queerness of the American social body.” Any deviation from the straight, White, male Christian makeup of the national body image is felt and seen as social body dysphoria. In other words, it feels like the soul of the nation isn’t lining up with its body. It also explains why White Christian nationalists often feel as if something is “wrong” before they can put words to their discomfort.

Seen through this lens, the purity culture movement that shaped my teenage years can be understood as an attempt to regulate the national social anatomy through the regulation of White teenage bodies. Our sexual purity was the road back to a pure America—the right America. Dobson consistently links the fate of the nation to the sexual regulation of teenagers because, in his mind, the next generation must be molded into the proper social

form in order for he and other Christian nationalists to win “the civil war of values.”

IT WAS ONLY A KISS

Thus far we have followed a thread that runs throughout the development of the New Religious Right. Following it reveals how White Christians from the 1860s to the 1960s and beyond have used “family values” to defend segregationist and homophobic policies, doctrines, and practices. This works according to a clear pattern.

White men such as Weyrich, Viguerie, Falwell, and others who believe that society should be ordered according to a racialized and gendered structure fear that they are losing their country. They want a United States where White Christian men control the social and political hierarchies and all others (women, immigrants, and people of color) know their place. The civil rights movement, sexual revolution, women’s liberation movements, and queer rights movements threatened this order.

When accused of racism, misogyny, and other forms of prejudice, they turned to the family as the shield for their actions and beliefs. The family, they argue, has a God-given structure. God formed it to be led by a man, to be composed of a married man and wife, and for the parents—especially the father—to have control over their children’s bodies, education, and moral formation. Thus, issues ranging from school desegregation to women’s rights to abortion to queer rights can fall under the umbrella of threats to “family values.”

When confronted about their exclusionary worldview, White Christian nationalists generate outrage by wondering why the “old-fashioned Christian family” is under attack in the contemporary United States. They transpose the charge of racism or misogyny into a frame of victimization whereby their faith, family, and freedom are infringed on by radical new ideas and revolutionary politics.

The traditional family is the perfect vehicle for this transposition, because it is difficult rhetorically to dismantle White Christian

nationalism's exclusionary politics without having to skirt around, under, or over the barrier of family. At times their critics play right into the White Christian nationalist strategy, without even knowing it, by opening themselves up to being "antifamily" and "anti-Christian."

Once again, the example of Jimmy Carter highlights how this works. Jimmy Carter was the wrong kind of Christian and not enough of an American nationalist. Ironically, the military officer turned American president didn't emanate the nationalism required for the New Religious Right to support him. By appointing people of color and women to the federal judiciary, by opening the door for the recognition of queer families, and by supporting the Equal Rights Amendment Carter was, according to White Christian nationalists, allowing improper elements to penetrate the sacred structure of the American family and the American nation.

In this chapter, we have added another piece to this puzzle. The drive for "family values" is a drive to purify the nation. The purity culture to which I committed myself in the nineties, promising to remain abstinent until marriage, is an outgrowth of the family values discourse, and the family values discourse is an outgrowth of White Christian nationalism. According to the history we have traced, the ideal family for the White Christian nationalist is not mixed with other races, is composed of a man who works and provides and a woman who knows her place in the home as subordinate to her husband. The children are under the control of their parents. The father is the voice of God in the household. Finally, the United States is revered alongside the kingdom of God as deserving devotion and loyalty. White Christian nationalists are always Christian and American. Neither identity is separable from the other. They depend on each other. They inform one another. They prop each other up. They use each other in order to envision and create the "right kind" of national body.

In 2016, James Dobson went back on previous comments in which he expressed concern about Trump's character and publicly

endorsed Donald Trump. “I am endorsing Donald J. Trump not only because of my apprehensions about Hillary Clinton and the damage she would inflict on this great country,” Dobson said. “I am also supporting Mr. Trump because I believe he is the most capable candidate to lead the United States of America in this complicated hour.” For some, Dobson’s endorsement of the thrice-married television star was surprising. After all, Trump is famous for his liaisons with models and sex workers; he appeared in media for *Playboy* magazine; and by the time Dobson’s announcement came, the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape, in which Trump explains how he grabs women “by the pussy,” had already reached public ears.

Yet if we view Trump as the paragon of the national body White Christian nationalists envision rather than as an individual example of godly sexual ethics, Dobson’s endorsement makes more sense. He wants a pure nation—a national social body that is modeled after a White, landowning, native-born man who is ready and willing to expel, abuse, and make war against intruders, outsiders, and anyone who threatens the proper order of the country. For Dobson, sadly, Trump fits this vision.

None of this story changes what I experienced kissing Alexis for the first time. When Alexis and I put our lips together that summer evening, the exhilaration of the moment was overridden by heaviness. It felt as if there were waves of pressure lapping into my back as I leaned over to bring my lips to hers. My body was weighed down by the need to contain my desire—pause it before it leaped forward and out of my control. On top of halting my teenage hormones, I felt as if our future—our family’s future, our nation’s future—were hanging over us, haunting that first moment of intimacy. There was no teenage levity. No living in the moment. Instead, we were two young people trying their best to save the whole world through a kiss—and only a kiss.

