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SEX IN CRISIS

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of Big Pharma and the moralists of the Christian Right. Dagmar Herzog's account
of Sexual Revolution is crisply written, often disturbing, and utterly persuasive."
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Sex in Crisis

THE NEW SEXUAL REVOLUTION
AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

DAGMAR HERZOG

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and the Future of American Politics

DAGMAR HERZOG
Chapter 4
SAVED FROM SEX

In the wake of George W. Bush’s accession to the presidency in 2001, federal funding for abstinence programs rose exponentially. According to a 2006 report in the Wall Street Journal, $111 million was spent between 1998 and 2000, and $779 million was spent since 2001.1 This spending has profoundly re-shaped program content. In 2003 the government spent $120 million for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, with $37.5 million more in state matching funds; at that point, a poll showed, 30 percent of public high school instructors were teaching abstinence only.2 In 2006 the government spent $200 million to advance the cause of premarital abstinence domestically, and abstinence-until-marriage was being taught in 50 percent of public high schools and the majority of private schools. Numerous church-affiliated organizations have received federal money to promote abstinence; indeed, abstinence projects can be a major cash source for the religious organizations that sponsor them.3 By 2006, more than $1 billion had been spent on abstinence promotion.4
Over the years the advice directed to adolescents and young adults about abstinence has gotten ever more explicit, and ever more restrictive. In the 1980s and early 1990s, it was routine for evangelical Christians to create their own compromises for preserving technical virginity while nonetheless having great premarital pleasures. Passionate French kissing, heavy petting, mutual masturbation, and oral sex were generally understood to be fine in the eyes of God and the community alike.

By the beginning of the new century, however, the abstinence advocacy websites and how-not-to advice books had become far more precise and specific. Oral sex was no longer okay. Mutual genital fondling was also now off-limits. Doug Herman, a popular abstinence-until-marriage speaker at public high schools across the United States, put it like this: “If the sun don’t touch it, nobody else better either.” The Silver Ring Thing, an abstinence organization with a global reach (along with a major merchandising outfit), declared: “Your private areas are not to be used or touched by a member of the opposite sex... No oral, anal, no fondling.” In 2002 right-wing pundit Oliver North len: his weight to the cause when he reserved special venom for those advocates of comprehensive sex education who were promoting “far-out theories” in their stress on “the pleasures of sex” and “mutual masturbation.”

Even French kissing was now said to induce an urge to go all the way. So it was not quite okay anymore either. Focus on the Family founder James Dobson instructed fathers to tell their sons “not to take anything that doesn’t belong to them—especially the moral purity of a woman. Also, tell your boys that sex is progressive in nature. Kissing and fondling will lead inevitably to greater familiarity... Tell them not to start the engine if they don’t intend to let it run.”

Some of the reasoning behind this new antise.xual revolution is justified by citations of religious doctrine. According to abstinence proponents, the Bible condemns premarital sex. Abstinence programmers quote 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable.” There is also a prevalent view in religious abstinence circles that God chooses our future mate and it is foolish and unwise to mess around before marriage looking for the possibility of lifetime companionship. As the female Christian rock group BarlowGirl explains:

We believe that God has one perfect man already chosen for us; therefore we have no need to worry ourselves in searching for him. When the time is right we know God will bring us together. In the meantime we are not hiding in a closet avoiding all males. We are still living our lives, just without the pressure of having to have a boyfriend.

Abstinent singles are now advised to pray on behalf of their future mates long before they ever know who those people will be. As Christian sex experts Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus urge young women: “On Monday pray for God to teach him how to love. On Tuesday, pray for joy to characterize his life. Continue on through the other fruits of peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

A great deal of the abstinence argument, however, is a mix of assertive invocations of God’s will and threats that sexual desire within marriage will die unless premarital abstinence is observed. Dillow and Pintus assure their readers through a multitude of examples and stories that only those women who
have been premaritally abstinent will be truly, deeply, and consistently desired by their husbands in the long years after marriage. Another Christian sex advice–writer phrases the point this way: "Don't ruin what's waiting for you by acting prematurely and turning what is supposed to be so good and holy into something sinful and shameful." In a 2007 rally in New Jersey, an organizer for True Love Waits, a Southern Baptist group self-designated "the largest group of celibates in America," led the crowd in chanting, "Sex is great! Sex is great!" before continuing with the message to wait until marriage, while another spokesperson for the group boasted to the crowd that she was confident the sex she would have on her wedding night would be amazing. The website www.LoveMatters.com announces that "Sex is Awesome! . . . But sex before marriage has emotional consequences that can bring lifelong pain." And there is this more gruesome formulation from former missionary Heather Jamison: "Sins such as coveting grieve our Father, but physical immorality mocks Him. Jesus bought my body with a price—His death on the cross. When I wrongfully gave my body [before marriage] to Brian, I gave something that was not mine." Citing the biblical idea that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, Jamison adds: "Sins against the body are different from other sins—they are committed against God's very temple, and they are committed against our very selves. They are acts of degradation and desertion against our own bodies."

Jamison asserts that those who have engaged in premarital sex are highly likely to have "awful" sex after marriage—possibly even for up to a decade. By contrast, couples who dutifully abstain beforehand "report a deep level of intimacy in combination with great sex." Along related lines, as one woman quoted by Dillow and Pintus puts it, "I wish, so wish that on my honey-

moon night I could have given my husband this beautiful body without fingerprints all over it." So this line of argument is not simply about the ideal of purity for its own sake. Among the smorgasbord of reasons abstinence advocates offer to amplify the point that premarital encounters wreck postmarital lives is the argument that whenever a woman has sex with her husband, if she has had any former lovers—even people with whom she only engaged in such activities as "intense kissing, arousals, and petting"—the former lovers will "intrude" in fantasy, and thus make sexual satisfaction with a spouse that much more difficult to achieve.

And then there is abstinence advocate Lisa Bevere, who advises young girls what she herself learned from her private chats with the Holy Spirit: "He said to me, '. . . Tell them they can go as far with their boyfriends as they are comfortable doing in front of their fathers.'"

**Abstinence Advocates** go out of their way to say that it is hard to refrain from sex. They work to give the whole enterprise of abstinence an allure of deep significance and heroic struggle. It is a strategy that has proven remarkably effective: millions of young Americans have taken abstinence pledges in the last decade and a half (whether or not they've kept them), and tens of millions have absorbed arguments about the evils of premarital sex. But the aim of the movement is far broader than that.

Abstinence is the new rallying cry of the self-styled sexually sophisticated American. No sex is good sex. Marriage is the dividing line. Before marriage, sex will be very bad. After marriage, sex will be very good. An abstinence vow connects you to the promised land of bliss—have no sex before marriage and you will have outstanding sex after marriage.
This movement aims to make fresh and new in human beings all that which has been worn or tainted and used. It also makes clear that all of us who are unmarried are really still virgins, even those of us who are not virgins. As an abstinence advocate tells a crowd of young people at an Indiana rock concert organized by True Love Waits: "It’s never too late to be a virgin. No matter what you’ve done, you can have a secondary virginity, it’s there for you to reclaim." 21

Nor is secondary virginity recommended solely by evangelicals. Secular abstinence proponents make similar points. An official Florida Department of Health website tells us:

It’s never too late to make healthy choices. You can still decide to stop sexual activity now even if you have already had sex, or if you have engaged in other forms of sexual arousal or gratification. Many people realize they weren’t ready for sex and choose secondary virginity. Take back control. Secondary virginity means that you care enough about yourself and your future to save sex for the right person and the right time—marriage. Deciding to start over is the hardest part. Your decision to choose abstinence shows to others that you value yourself. 22

The abstinence movement preaches that love means being able to say you’re sorry for your mistakes—sorry for engaging in sex before marriage—and then being forgiven by God, by your church, by your friends, and by your future spouse. Love means making a vow to God and to yourself to respect yourself and love yourself and hold yourself back from making those mistakes again. Never again will you have sex before your wedding night. Never again will you permit yourself to be manipulated by your own base desires or the unscrupulous desires of others. But if you do, all can be forgiven.

As the influential South Dakota abstinence cheerleader Leslee Unruh (a prime mover behind the 2006 law criminalizing all abortions in that state, a law subsequently overturned by voter referendum) has said about the many young women who have sex and then return to her for counseling: "I don’t care if she starts over seven times, or twenty times. I’m going to believe in her each time she comes back." 23

There are plenty of reasons why young people can find these messages appealing. Perhaps they don’t want to be pressured, or they’re not interested yet—or not anymore. They may not be ready for the potential emotional intensities of a relationship that includes sex—or, on the flip side, they may wish for romance but are finding only offers of intercourse. The individual’s right to say no—anytime, anywhere (a right for which the feminist movement fought long and hard from the 1970s through to the 1990s)—and the moral imperative of consent in sexual relations has been repurposed into a one-size-fits-all program that says everyone should say no before marriage. It has left no room for people, especially girls, to negotiate practices, to say, "No, not that, but yes, this," making female sexual agency once again seem dirty and suspect.

The abstinence movement also succeeds because it is a self-help and self-improvement movement that holds out the promise of perfection. The movement doesn’t care that it’s completely contradictory. While it declares that even mutual genital fondling and tongue-kissing are unremittingly evil and sure to lead to disease, depression, and death, it keeps its potential market base as large as possible by making sure that you recognize that there are no real consequences for messing up. The only thing you have to do is join the chorus of voices making sure everyone else feels ashamed about the sex they may be having.
Then again, making other people feel crappy and confused about sex is not exactly a trivial or trifling thing.

There is a suggestive testimonial included in an abstinence primer about a young girl named “Alicia,” whose romance with “Rick” involved happy kissing and fondling, but then went all the way to intercourse.

Then one night we had sex. It was worse than I could even imagine. I felt dirty and very separated from God. I hated myself for doing something I’ve grown up believing was so wrong. I had the guiltiest feeling I ever had.

Rick walked me to my car and asked me what was wrong. I burst into tears. I told him I hated it. I never wanted to do it again. Then Rick told me that he loved me, and the weirdest thing was that I couldn’t tell him I loved him back. I had no feelings for him anymore. We sat in front of his house for a long time. We both cried. We knew what we did together was wrong.

One reaction to this experience might have been: sex takes practice. If it wasn’t pleasurable, maybe the couple needed to slow things down the next time. Or try different ways of touching. Or maybe Rick is just a jerk, even though the story does not give that impression. Or maybe he was the one who was anxious about performance and needed more sensitivity from her. The possibilities for understanding what to make of this first encounter are almost infinite.

But that’s certainly not the intended message here. Rather, Alicia dutifully renounces not only coitus but everything else as well:

Now I know that “too far” doesn’t mean only intercourse, but also the stages leading up to it. Too far is when you crave the physical more than the spiritual. Too far is when sexual thoughts take over your relationship. Too far is when you don’t want to stop. . . . For me, kissing should be the limit. I’ve decided not to go any further than this until I’m married. With God’s help, I can be pure from this day on.

Abstinence testimonials insist that all pleasure derived from sexual contact is horribly awful and deserving of remorseful feelings. Here’s one young man’s story in all its perplexing glory:

I messed up big time my junior year of high school. I started having regular sex with my girlfriend. I was a Christian, therefore the momentary pleasure was there, but the relationship was a miserable one. I am still scared from the instances that took place. . . . I will never completely forget what happened during my junior year in high school. But I worship an awesome and forgiving God. I know I shall reap what I sow, and that is the most important thing to know. I can’t tell you how ashamed I am, all because of a few months of pleasure. The biggest statement I would like to make is the fact that I would give anything to take it back and to have my virginity still to this day.

Somehow here it is the Christian faith that (“therefore”) is the cause of the pleasure, and somehow God is forgiving, and yet this boy will nonetheless “reap” what he sows. Logic is not the point; the reader is meant to take away the sense of intense emotion and the combination of authoritative real experience of sex coupled with assurances that sex is awful.

It is precisely the frequent imperfection of actual experiences of sex that the abstinence recommenders use in order to push for secondary virginity. As one pro-secondary virginity organization phrased it in 2007: “If you slipped but now realize that you
don’t want to go down that road, again, at this point in your life then hello . . . abstinence is for you! It may even be a bit easier for you to abstain because you already know that the talk is so much more than the act.” Here the clear implication is that actual sexual contact with another body turned out to be far less pleasurable than the individual had hoped—or had been taught by a hypersexualized culture to expect.

What also emerges in this discussion is an urgent and powerful longing for sex to be good, to be special—and to make its participants feel special themselves. Here’s one final testimonial:

I started having sex at 14, it was normal in my class, but I got pregnant and had Mickey. Then I decided to take back my virginity. My boyfriend said if I wasn’t doing it with him I must be doing it with someone else, so we split up. It was only ten months until our wedding but he wouldn’t wait. Even though I’m a mum I feel like I’m a virgin, I never think about sex. I’m going to wait until I get married. I want sex to be special next time.28

It’s this waiting, abstinence advocates insist, that is always worth it.

The arguments are not just religious. Even secondary virginity, we are told, is a matter of physiology. Sex before marriage alters the body in destructive ways. As abstinence enthusiast Unruh has said, couples who do not engage in premarital intercourse will be able to count on simultaneous orgasms after marriage: “The hormonal symphony between the two, you can have it right away.” And for those who don’t wait until marriage? They can expect an entirely different outcome, says Unruh. “The secretions from one person are different from the next person,” she says, and when people have sex before marriage, they inevitably “mess up their bodily processes.” As for those who have had sex before marriage but have chosen to reclaim their secondary virginity, Unruh holds out hope. They too will enjoy superb marital sex because over time secondary virgins can restore their bodily processes and regain their hormonal equilibrium.29

Meanwhile, in the abstinence literature, sexual violence and abuse are never handled as themes separate from the constant injunction to premarital chastity. The potential dangers of violence and abuse, including incest, appear in the texts only as yet another excellent reason to avoid premarital sexual contact. Initially, it can seem difficult to determine what purpose these often grotesque and terrifying stories of violence and abuse—tales that range from date rape to sexual torture of children—could possibly have within the abstinence advice literature, especially because the stories are frequently so disturbing and outrageous. They are simply too awful to be titillating. But the message they convey is unmistakable: consent is not a moral value worthy of discussion, much less a value worthy of defense.

It is, in the end, not inadvertent coincidence but rather quite deliberate that, in Gift-Wrapped by God, Dillow and Pintus include a lesbian love story along with a story of Satanic child abuse in their catalog of nonmarital horrors. No matter, apparently, that Bible study leader “Darcy” was utterly devoted to the (also Bible-studying) woman with whom she had the four-year love affair, while the evil done to “Natalie” was “not far removed from the horrors of the many Nazi concentration camps of Adolf Hitler’s regime. Natalie’s Auschwitz was within her soul.” The ending of both stories is pretty much the same. Both women get rescued by God. Darcy prostrates herself before her minister, cuts off all contact with her female lover, and finds her reward with the love of a “godly man.”
The Lord continues to fill me up with HIMSELF! And now He has blessed me with Paul. How grateful I am that the walls between my sexuality and my spirituality have crumbled. I am a whole woman, and I am excited to become Paul’s wife. God is gracious. I have no words to thank him.

Natalie, for her part, eventually falls in love with “Joe,” himself “severely sexually abused as a child”—which had caused him to make all those “unhealthy choices of sexual relationships with both men and women.” Dillow and Pintus, in short, are happy to play on homophobia—even as they also adopt the most up-to-date homophobic theories that see sexual abuse as a cause of homosexual desire rather than its outcome.

In advice books and on the Internet, in Christian schools and in mainstream public high school sex education curricula, in public presentations by religious and secular abstinence gurus, and in teenagers’ peer-driven abstinence organizations, the message about premarital sex is that it is not just immoral but also demeaning.

Already in the 1960s and 1970s, there were conservative parental protests against overly explicit sex education in public schools. Once Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, right-wing activists succeeded in passing the Adolescent Family Life Act. This act made possible federal funding of programs across the country that encouraged adolescent sexual abstinence and, although largely forgotten now, also helped pregnant teens develop parenting skills. Still, the abstinence campaign did not really gain popular or political traction until more recently.

The mid-1980s were not an accidental birth date for this politically effective movement. Those years coincided with increased public awareness that HIV/AIDS was not a “gay disease” and could afflict the heterosexual population. Public health policy and medical experts, government officials, and reproductive and sex rights activists began to demand widespread and aggressive condom campaigns on television, on billboards, and in schools. They insisted that the condom not be seen as an awkward inhibition of pleasure or a sign of distrust, but rather as an erotic sex toy or a sign of respect, even love. However, some conservative activists and experts began to argue that there was no such thing as safe sex and that Americans should “just say no.”

An early champion of the right-wing position was former pastor Ken Abraham, a prolific inspirational writer and frequent collaborator with high-profile figures. In 1985 Abraham published Don’t Bite the Apple Till You Check for Worms, a how-not-to guide for the young and curious that included tips on “Becoming Maximum Marriage Material.” Abraham cleverly noted that the letters VD could mean “Very Dangerous.” His message? “Premarital Sex: Hot It’s Not.”

But a book does not make a movement. To really mobilize people around an issue, it helps to create situations where they make public commitments to their cause. In this case, it also helped to recast the abstinent as neither repressed nor marginal or devoid of passion. Instead, they were cast as trendsetters and—as Newsweek announced in a cover story in 1994—as the new “cool.” No sex until marriage? How hip is that?

It might have appeared a stretch of anyone’s imagination that the mantra “no sex until marriage” could be a hit with American teens. As one—apparently naive—British journalist put it, teen sex is, after all, “the only perpetually renewable resource known to mankind.” Yet those who proffered the successful branding of the abstinent teen as a new wave in style and fashion took the long view.
The abstinence pledge burst onto the scene in the early 1990s, the brainchild of the Christian Sex Education Project (founded in 1987). Together with True Love Waits, the Christian Sex Education Project hyped the abstinence pledge with commitment cards. Here the young person signed a statement that read:

Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship.\^\textsuperscript{13}

Soon there were T-shirts and buttons that declaimed: PET YOUR DOG, NOT YOUR DATE. But these were still treated as curiosities for general public amusement; also, the majority of Americans assumed that teens would seek sex. Abstinence still had an air of defensiveness about it.

Since 2000, the situation has changed considerably. Prominent athletes and beauty queens (including A. C. Green, Lakita Garth, and Erika Harold) have joined the abstinence cause.\^\textsuperscript{35} There is an entire subset of the Christian rock youth culture scene devoted to representing abstinence as the choice for the countercultural anti-authoritarian.\^\textsuperscript{37} And the flood of merchandise available to meet the new market niche allows young people to strut around with stuff that makes clear they are not strutting their stuff. At Unruh's Abstinence Clearinghouse Online Store, based in Sioux Falls, one can purchase the popular I'M WORTH WAITING FOR (removable) tattoo. One can buy “Suckers,” cherry-flavored lollipops with a heart in them: “A fun way to get the message to teens: Don't Be a Sucker! Save Sex for Marriage.” And there is stop sign—emblazoned “No Trespassing Underwear” (boxers and bikinis), part of a “Keep It Underwear” line of clothing that announces: “Saving sex until marriage is not only safe and smart, it’s cool, too! Keep It Underwear aims to approach the serious subject of abstinence in a light-hearted way by letting teens show their statement of choice—even if it’s just to themselves!”\^\textsuperscript{18} More recently, there is Yvette Thomas's “WaitWear” line of T-shirts and underwear. Under the slogan “Where Purity, Passion and Power Meet Phashion!” Thomas, a never-married mother of three, a practicing evangelical Christian, and an abstinence advocate, offers such items as a boy’s brief in hot pink emblazoned NO VOWS NO SEX, and in red I'M SAVING IT!, along with T-shirts stating TRAFFIC CONTROL—WAIT FOR MARRIAGE, as well as VIRGINITY LANE—EXIT WHEN MARRIED (this last one replete with two arrows positioned over the nipples and pointing downward to the private parts).\^\textsuperscript{39} A Catholic organization offers T-shirts with a more discreet message: ABSTINENCE MAKES THE HEART GROW Fonder.\^\textsuperscript{40}

Humor and gentle admonition are only two strategies in the arsenal of these antisecondary revolutionaries. Bids to stimulate condescension, fear, and loathing are also in play.

Girls and women who desire sex before marriage are to be pitied by the righteous. They will be utterly shattered by despair and abjection, forever envious of their more perfect virginal sisters. If they do engage in premarital sex, it is because they have a lousy body concept, or because they believe that they cannot get someone to love them any other way. They will always “feel cheap and dirty . . . like damaged goods.”\^\textsuperscript{41} They will always have “that sick, used feeling of having given a precious part of myself—my soul—to so many and for nothing.”\^\textsuperscript{42} That is, unless they get back on the road to righteousness and forsake sex immediately and pray to God for healing.

An extraordinary amount of creative energy goes into communicating disdain and contempt, especially for girls who are
sexually active before marriage. In the brave new world of the present, desire alone cannot make sex acceptable. Abstinence-advocating organizations and advice-writers veer sharply back and forth between the concession that females' sexual desires can be as strong as males' and an insistence that young women who seek sex outside of marriage are simply doing it because they are pathetically desperate for attention. They demonstrate their lack of self-esteem by desiring sex. Because sex is “worth the wait.”

On the most fundamental level, sexual activity, on the one hand, and, on the other, self-respect and success in school and sports and later life are presented as mutually exclusive.

And then there is the ick factor. Take this public school abstinence classroom exercise:

Boys and girls are invited to chew cheese-flavored snacks and then sip some water, after which they are to spit the resulting “bodily fluids” into a cup. After a game in which the fluids are combined with those of other students, ultimately all cups are poured into a pitcher labeled “multiple partners” sitting adjacent to a pitcher of fresh water labeled “pure fluids.” In the final segment, each boy and girl is asked to fill a cup labeled either “future husband” or “future wife” with the contents from one of the pitchers.45

The Georgia-based abstinence organization that came up with this exercise has received more than half a million dollars in government funding.

In 2002, when Newsweek reprised its cover story on “The New Virginity: Why More Teens Are Choosing Not to Have Sex,” it was apparent what drove the attractive teens profiled to steer clear of their own and other people’s erogenous zones. A sixteen-year-old from Colorado who had seen a Christian slide show on abstinence in the eighth grade observed that it was picture after picture of sexually transmitted diseases: “It’s just one of the grossest things you’ve ever seen. I didn’t want to touch a girl, like, forever.” His seventeen-year-old girlfriend agreed: “If that doesn’t scare kids out of sex, nothing will.” As Newsweek noted, these kids are “sure that whoever they marry will be disease-free.”44

Fear of disease has been a powerful tool in the efforts to secularize the evangelical abstinence message. School programs as well as a large variety of local federally funded program offerings can avoid being accused of violating the constitutionally guaranteed separation of church and state, and the message can be made palatable to anyone who might feel put off by the Religious Right.

There is in fact a laserlike intensity to the focus on the potential deadliness of sex. Not only do abstinence advocates argue that “there is no condom that can protect you from a broken heart and a shattered dream.”45 They also say that, in the age of HIV, “the only safe sex is no sex,” and “the wrong sexual encounter can mean a death sentence.”46 Relying on condoms during intercourse is the equivalent of playing Russian roulette with a revolver.47 Even if there’s just one bullet, the odds are high that you’ll soon be dead.

Once upon a time, condom advocates made the point that HIV is a blood disease, not an STD. The real issue, if you wished to stay healthy, was not how many partners you had, but what practices you engaged in and whether there was latex between you and the pathogen. When a sex rights activist in the mid-1980s criticized the calls for monogamy that constituted the conservative response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, she noted
that by the same sloppy logic—the fact that something can be transmitted sexually means it must be an STD—the common cold is also a sexually transmitted disease. Gone are the days when a sex rights advocate could speak in public schools to young people about how to make safe sex hot or speak to them about how to negotiate practices and keep mutual touching both pleasurable and safe. School systems that dare to offer such programming now get hauled into court by irate parents.

Now abstinence advocates use the fear of disease to frighten kids away from sex entirely, rather than encouraging them to learn how best to take precautions. They seldom urge teens to get tested for disease before they make out and fondle one another. And they never suggest that teens talk with potential partners about possible practices or educate teens on how to transition into sexual activity knowledgeably and safely once they do start. Such ideas, so the argument runs, would only promote teen sex.

Adolescents who turn to abstinence advocacy websites find many excellent reasons to be afraid. They can find the statement that "65 million Americans are living with an incurable STD" and that "1 out of 4 sexually active teens will get an STD this year." They can read this: "It is estimated that 20 percent of all Americans age 12 and older are infected with genital herpes." Or this: "In one single act of unprotected sex with an infected partner, a teenage woman has a 1 percent risk of acquiring HIV, a 30 percent risk of getting genital herpes, and a 50 percent chance of contracting gonorrhea."

Teens can also go to a website on "Safe Sex and the Facts" and read this horror story:

At age 16 John had sex with Andrea. Just one time. He enjoyed the experience but felt guilty and decided the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and pregnancy were just too great.

He did not have sex again until nine years later when he married Cindy, who was a virgin. Three months after their wedding Cindy began having painful symptoms. Unknowingly, John, who had never had any symptoms of disease, had brought two STDs into his marriage.

There is a lot one can ask about John. For instance, if John had been taught about condoms, might John have used a condom? Could he have gotten himself tested before he had sex with the woman he chose to marry? Did Cindy find her problems treatable? Apparently this does not matter to the story's point either. Instead, the moral is that thirty years of the sexual revolution is paying an ugly dividend, and those most at risk are teenagers. This is true partially because teenagers are more sexually active than ever before, but also because teenage girls are more susceptible to STDs than males or adult females. . . . (We need) to discuss the severity of the problem as well as what must be done if we are to save a majority of the next generation from the shame, infertility, and sometimes death, that may result from STDs.

Again, the story line does not end here. The website also includes statistics intended to stand a reader's hair on end: "It is estimated that 1 in 5 Americans between the ages of 15 and 55 are currently infected with one or more viral STDs, and 12 million Americans are newly infected each year. That's nearly 5% of the entire population of the U.S. Of these new infections, 63% involve people less than 25 years old." And then there's this: "The bottom line is that condoms cannot be trusted."

A major move used by every abstinence advocacy group is to insist that it is offering "the truth," "the facts," "the science," and
the information” that Americans need to keep themselves safe. Abstinence advocates present themselves as the real scientific experts. Whether it is the doctors who have joined together in an organization like Physicians for Life or who advise right-wing lobbyist groups like Concerned Women for America, what counts as science, as well as social scientific “expertise,” is more and more in the eye of the beholder. Routinely, abstinence advocates lump together different diseases to make the overall picture more frightening, exaggerate the ease of contracting various diseases and the harms they cause while minimizing the possibilities of treatment and cure, and misrepresent the effectiveness of condoms for preventing transmission of disease.

Moreover, the websites misrepresent their opponents—whether those opponents are liberal or radical activists or whether they are established medical professionals or social science analysts—by either twisting their words to support conservative and pro-abstinence positions or directly accusing these opponents of spreading lies or misleading facts.

It is indicative that one of the earliest abstinence organizations—it has been around since the mid-1980s—calls itself Project Reality. The organization aims no less than to revise what counts as reality—and indeed what counts as truth. When Lbbv Macke, the director of Project Reality, has gone on the offensive against “abstinence-plus” programs (programs that assert that abstinence is the best strategy but that include information on condoms and contraceptives owing to the perception that some adolescents do engage in sexual encounters), she has sought to have these programs “examined and defunded” on the grounds, among other things, that “many so called ‘abstinence-plus’ programs actually encourage sexual activity among youth by assignments such as condom relay races, condom shopping trips and fantasizing about sexual activity and condom use.” She has also labeled research that illustrates the effectiveness of such programs as itself “erroneous and misleading.”

When academic sex researchers release their reports these days, they can pretty much count on having their findings turned into something unrecognizable by the abstinence movement. Take the oft-cited studies based on the research of scholars at Yale (Hannah Brückner) and Columbia (Peter Bearman) that were published in the American Journal of Sociology in 2001 and the Journal of Adolescent Health in 2005. These studies found that adolescents who took abstinence pledges ended up having sex on average eighteen months later than those who had not taken the pledge. They also found that when these teens did finally have sex, they were one-third less likely to use protection, thus making themselves vulnerable both to disease and to unwanted pregnancy. And only 12 percent of the virginity pledgers kept their promise. As sexuality researcher Marty Klein pointed out in analyzing the findings, “That means abstinence fails 88 percent of the time—six times as often as condoms fail in typical use, six times as often as the method that abstinence advocates say is unreliable.”

In the hands of abstinence organizations, however, this research comes out looking rather different. Gravity Teen, one of the most influential secular abstinence groups, has discussed the Yale-Columbia findings under the headline: “Do Teens Really Stick by Their Abstinence Pledges?” The answer Gravity Teen gives is: “Seems so!” The group sums up the findings this way:

A major study released in a recent issue of the American Journal of Sociology found that teens who took an abstinence pledge were 34% less likely to engage in premarital sex, and were far older when they did begin to have intercourse. Among black females, for example, the median age of sexual debut for those
who took the virginity pledge was 18.6, compared with 16.3 for those who did not take the pledge.\textsuperscript{35}

In a similar vein, Physicians for Life merely rearranges the words of Brückner and Bearman to make them sound like defenders of abstinence programming. Under the heading “True Love Waits Pledges Shown Highly Effective, Other Studies,” they write:

Teenagers who pledge to remain sexually abstinent until marriage are 34 percent less likely to have sex than those who do not take virginity vows, according to a study to be published in the American Journal of Sociology. “Pledging decreases the risk of intercourse substantially and independently,” authors Peter S. Bearman and Hannah Brückner wrote.

The Physicians for Life essay also includes this subhead, “Since the beginning of True Love Waits in 1993, we have believed pledges do make a difference,” and continues: “Bearman is professor of sociology and director of the Institute for Social and Economic Theory and Research at Columbia University, and Brückner is assistant professor of sociology at Yale University.”\textsuperscript{36} It is easy to conclude that the words in this subhead were written by Bearman and Brückner, but the person quoted is Chris Turner, a media relations manager for True Love Waits.

Along related lines, the Abstinence Clearinghouse has refuted a 2006 study published in the \textit{Journal of Public Health} and entitled “Virginity Pledges by Adolescents May Bias Their Reports of Premarital Sex—Most Adolescents Disavowed Their Pledge Within a Year.” The research drew on a nationally representative sample of teens who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. More than twenty thousand adolescents were interviewed in 1995, and more than fourteen thousand were reinterviewed in 1996. Among the key findings were these:

More than 1 in 10 students who reported being sexually active in 1995 said that they were virgins in 1996. Students who reported they were sexually active in the second survey were more than three times as likely as their peers to deny they had taken a pledge of virginity. . . . On the other hand, 28 percent of nonvirgins who later took a virginity pledge retracted their sexual histories during the 1996 survey. . . . Sexually active teens who later took virginity pledges were four times as likely to deny previous reports of sexual activity than were those who had not taken virginity pledges.

The analysis by Janet Rosenbaum, a graduate student in health policy and statistics at Harvard University, had two central points:

1. Adolescents’ revisions of their sexual histories had everything to do with whether or not they were taking on or rejecting a born-again Christian identity.
2. Self-reports are an unreliable research source.

As Rosenbaum also stated: “Studies of virginity pledges must focus on outcomes where we know we can get good information, such as medical STD tests.”\textsuperscript{37}

In the current climate of shaming around premarital sex, self-reporting—even on anonymous surveys—is remarkably unreliable. The Abstinence Clearinghouse, however, was quick to rebut: “Since the survey studied in this paper was conducted ten years ago, new and reliable data has been collected. Teens who make a virginity pledge report greater amounts of sexual abstinence and
for longer periods of time. Also, teens who did not make a virginity pledge are twice as likely to experience an unmarried teen pregnancy."²⁸ Exactly what these "new and reliable data" consist of remains unnamed.

Comparable confusion is evident on the many websites that purport to offer "just the facts" about sexually transmitted diseases. Statements found on abstinence advocacy websites refer to "the risk of deadly STD transmission," as if STDs were invariably deadly. They casually mention "the danger of contraceptives," although they never explain what those dangers might be. Do these refer to the potential risk of thrombosis from the birth control pill? Do they refer to the minuscule chance of damage to fertility caused by IUDs? Do they refer to the "danger" that adolescents and young adults might possibly find that sex can be safe—an activity that can be pleasurable and enjoyable and empowering? It's all left intentionally unclear and frightening.

It has thus become more difficult for adolescents to find accurate and sufficiently detailed information to educate themselves and protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and disease if they do choose to have intimate contacts. (How long do sperm stay alive? Can one acquire HIV through cuts in the hand?) It is likewise increasingly difficult to alert the public through the mass media about the abstinence advocates' rewriting of reality without having one's own arguments ridiculed, dismissed, or selectively distorted.

The resulting sense of helplessness is palpable in comments by scientists, like this one from a specialist on viruses and cancers in reference to the anti-HPV (human papilloma virus) vaccine: "I never thought that now, in the twenty-first century, we could have a debate about what to do with a vaccine that prevents cancer." He added:

Politics plays a role in all these decisions, and so does belief. I have no problems with that. But this is religious zealotry masked as politics, and it runs against everything that I as a scientist believe in, that I have devoted my life to. We are talking about basic public health now. What moral precepts allow us to think that the risk of death is a price worth paying to encourage abstinence as the only approach to sex?²⁹

Keep in mind that there are several dozens of strains of HPV; only two of those strains can lead to cervical cancer and only another two can cause genital warts (which can be removed). All four of these dangerous strains are now preventable with this new vaccine. However, government-appointed experts as well as abstinence organization leaders have openly argued that the medical community should be hesitant about promoting a vaccine for HPV because it might "encourage promiscuity," or even just encourage monogamous teen sexual activity. A physician who is a member of the federal government's Centers for Disease Control's Immunization Committee and who formerly worked for Focus on the Family has gone even further, suggesting that if a vaccine were ever developed to prevent HIV transmission, perhaps it should not be made immediately available either. "We would have to look at that closely," he has said. "With any vaccine for HIV, disinhibition [that is, lack of fear about having sex] . . . would certainly be a factor, and it is something we would have to pay attention to with a great deal of care."²⁰

And here is where the focus shifts from physical to mental health, a far fuzzier but no less emotionally effective focus. Important recent examples are the studies that purport to conclude
that premarital sexual activity causes chemical changes in the teenage brain and can spur serious depressive tendencies.

Silver Ring Thing has worked to publicize "information" like this: "New studies show that clinical depression in adolescent boys and girls is related to sexual activity and drinking." Both the Abstinence Clearinghouse and the Care Center have stated:

With every act of sexual activity the persons involved release oxytocin, a hormone in the brain, which creates permanent bonds in the brain, linking the two people together. Because the couple has bonded, there is heartache when a breakup occurs. For teens who have not been educated in their sex education classes about this bonding effect, and to [sic] lack the maturity to deal with the sudden loss of intimacy and the very real pain and distress, this can lead to depression and suicide.

The Abstinence Clearinghouse has also provided a sample letter that citizens can use whenever there is a battle in their local school district over whether to provide adolescents with comprehensive sex education. It "can be copied, personalized and sent to your school administrators in support of abstinence education." "Dear Superintendent," the letter begins. "For more than forty years, contraception sex education programs have been teaching children in public classrooms that sexual activity is acceptable behavior for adolescents and that it can be virtually risk-free." This is unacceptable, the letter goes on to warn, not least because "sexually transmitted disease (STD) rates are skyrocketing among our nation's youth" and "half of all sexually active teens will have at least one STD before age 25." Further, the Abstinence Clearinghouse letter contends, "a 2004 Centers for Disease Control (CDC)-funded report showed that for girls, the link between teen sex and depression and suicide was so great that the researchers concluded 'any involvement in teen sex was indicative of the need for mental health screening'" (!) and that "a follow-up report shows that for male and female teens, the depression follows sexual activity, demonstrating a causal relationship." Wrapping up, the letter declares that condoms are not effective against many STDs and that virgins invariably do better in their professional and personal lives (including financially) than nonvirgins.

What would have been deemed hallucinatory notions ten years ago are now treated with gravitas. The Department of Health and Human Services in 2006 issued guidelines for grant applications for sex education programming that stated that curricula must include teaching about "the potential psychological side effects (e.g., depression and suicide) associated with adolescent sexual activity" and that "non-marital sex in teen years may reduce the probability of a stable, happy marriage as an adult."

Whatever wall there may have been in past decades between church-based abstinence advocates and state-backed public health policies disappeared during President Bush's second term. Abstinence advocates and their counterparts in government can be one and the same person.

A notable case in point was Dr. Eric Keroack, appointed in 2006 as deputy assistant secretary overseeing family planning and reproductive health matters at the Department of Health and Human Services. Dr. Keroack was concerned about women who have multiple sexual partners because, according to him, "people who have misused their sexual faculty and become bonded to multiple persons will diminish the power of oxytocin to maintain a permanent bond with an individual." Dr. Keroack also contended that "premarital sex is really modern germ warfare." It was not his lack of credentials or common
sense that finally forced Dr. Keroack from office in 2007, but rather a financial scandal. In October 2007, Bush’s newest nominee for Keroack’s post was Susan Orr, formerly of the right-wing Christian lobbying group Family Research Council, who believed that contraceptives were part of a “culture of death.”

The Bush administration announced in 2006 that it was formally “clarifying” for the states that they should feel free also to use federal abstinence-promotion monies (that’s a pot of $50 million annually) to discourage all nonmarital sex among Americans between the ages of nineteen and twenty-nine. Wade Horn, assistant secretary for children and families at the Department of Health and Human Services—the same man who in 2002 brought us the program to encourage more marriages among the very poor in the United States—claimed the clarification was spurred by recent news that more American women in their twenties were deciding to have babies out of wedlock. The new guidelines explicitly encouraged states to “identify groups” of people “most likely to bear children out of wedlock” and then target those groups with “the truth that abstinence is the only 100 percent effective way of avoiding unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.” Horn said, “The message is ‘It’s better to wait until you’re married to bear or father children,’” and “the only 100% effective way of getting there is abstinence.”

Never mind that a recent study by the Guttmacher Institute—based on interviews with more than thirty-eight thousand people—revealed that 95 percent of Americans, including those born as far back as the 1940s, have had premarital sex. Horn was undeterred. Warding off critics, he assured MSNBC, “The Bush administration does not believe the government should be regu-

lating or stigmatizing the behavior of adults.” He just thought it would be good to encourage people to delay sex. “The longer one delays, the fewer lifetime sex partners they have, and the less the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.”

Although Wade Horn had only discreetly gestured to the “groups” of people “most likely to bear children out of wedlock,” this comment bore traces of a much longer history of assumptions about race and extramarital reproductivity in America. Abstinence education originally had an enormous amount to do with race. From the very beginning, Bill Clinton’s welfare reform of 1996 was packaged as a way to push unwed mothers, especially women of color, to find ways to go back to wage-paying work. Throughout the effort to get the welfare reform bill, called the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, passed through Congress, the most prevalent images circulated in the mainstream media were of women of color, draining taxpayer money to support their illegitimate babies while refusing to work for pay. Only after the act passed did major news magazines report the truth that the majority of women on welfare were white. Ultimately, it was neither a coincidence nor clever deal-making tactics that caused the abstinence education addendum tacked on to the bill to pass without protest.

As Cris Mayo, education policy professor at the University of Illinois, has pointed out in a thoughtful analysis of the welfare reform bill, within a few years after the debacle over African-American surgeon general Joycelyn Elders’s recommendation that masturbation was an acceptable topic for high school sex education classes (a public outcry forced her to step down),
"abstinence education became a centerpiece in the war against welfare." While the welfare reform bill's abstinence addendum expressly said that federal funds should be given to support abstinence education "with a focus on those groups which are most likely to bear children out of wedlock," Mayo observes that "included in drafts of the act are an array of statistics pointing to the link between single motherhood and poverty, the rising rate of illegitimacy among black Americans, rates of criminal activity among young black men raised by single mothers, and the rate of criminal activity in neighborhoods with a greater incidence of single parent households." In short, Mayo notes, "Rather than focusing concern on the relationship between poverty per se and criminal activity, these statements link single motherhood, and also female sexual activity, with criminality and social decay." 71

After 9/11, race was for a while less frequently discussed in the United States. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 brought images of African American "welfare mothers" back on to American TV screens (and once again subjected them to the condescending scrutiny of middle-class and white Americans), but on the whole our national attention was redirected to the war in Iraq and the wider global war on terror. Muslims at home and abroad were presented as posing a greater danger to our well-being than impoverished African Americans ever could.

Nonetheless, having a historical memory about the long-standing intersections of racial and sexual politics in U.S. culture is indispensable for understanding the roots of the ideological confusion of the present. Among other things, conservative religious leaders now pretend that the Religious Right was born in reaction to the legalization of abortion in Roe v. Wade in 1973. In fact, the Religious Right was born in reaction to the Internal Revenue Service's effort in 1975 to revoke the tax-exempt status of the Christian conservative Bob Jones University, owing to its racially discriminatory policies: the school first denied admission to African Americans and then forbade interracial dating. Moreover, evangelical leaders were initially not at all united in hostility to Roe v. Wade. 72 So too abstinence advocates have tried to erase from public memory the abstinence movement's racist roots. Unwed mothers, especially when they were women of color, functioned—like homosexuals—as yet another "other" to the married heterosexual model the Religious Right was determined to promote.

The attack on African American women, whether sincerely felt or simply strategically utilized, was yet another move in the wider effort to make the abstinence movement palatable to the majority of Americans who were initially put off by the sanctimonious busybody and conservative religious approach of the early abstinence advocates. That young women might find the messages of self-respect and goal achievement proffered by the abstinence movement appealing for their own reasons—and perhaps especially appealing in light of the relentless assault on female self-esteem and body image in American culture—does not change the fact that an emphasis on abstinence as the road to achievement erases all the ways in which an informed and empowered female sexual agency can be compatible with achievement of other life goals.

The current war over sex in this country is not just a culture war. It is an emotional war, one that sets up battle lines inside individuals. It is a war that works to put women in their place, as well as to confuse and disorient men. It is a war whose
shock troops bank on the inevitable imperfections of sex and the equally inevitable feelings of vulnerability that sex can induce just as it can induce feelings of pleasure.

In the current climate of anxiety about the death of lust and romance, the abstinence movement succeeds not least because it plays on—and foments further—profound fears of not being deeply desired. Indicatively, evangelical sex and marriage advisers Dillow and Pintus are all about eroticizing the crucial wedding night event—replete with black lace or white satin lingerie and tales of the “sweet ache,” “mounting passion,” and “liquid warmth” suffusing the bride’s body as the groom undresses his beautifully pure gift from God and makes sensuous love to her—as the starting point for lifelong mutual bliss.  

The most striking aspect of the abstinence movement is how it blames all the emotional ambivalences and complexities of marital (as of any) sex, all the inevitable moments of alienation, longing, confusion, or incomplete satisfaction, on premarital experiences. The idea that premarital intimacies—with other people or with a subsequent spouse—might be a resource that enhances or strengthens individuals, both in their sense of self-ownership and in their capacities for enduring and passionate relationality, is never remotely considered.

It is remarkable how recent the talk about the value of abstinence is; as of the mid- to late-1990s, it was still a notion advanced only by a few. Yet no less remarkable is how pervasively this notion of the value of abstinence has taken hold since the turn of the millennium. This is evident not least in the way critics of the abstinence movement have conceded the terms of debate. Almost all attempts to defend comprehensive sex education, for instance, now begin from the premise that abstinence is surely a worthy ideal, but that it would be good to supplement the advocacy of abstinence with information about condoms and contraceptives.

A similar compromise position has emerged since combating the global HIV/AIDS pandemic became a priority for the U.S. government in 2003. What had been an internal U.S. conversation became an international discussion. But with the U.S. government setting the parameters for that discussion—also by setting the funding guidelines and overseeing the distribution of billions of dollars across more than twenty of the world’s poorest nations—nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), health workers, and politicians, both in the countries most affected and in other donor nations, have all been obligated to engage the debate over HIV prevention worldwide on terms initially set by the Religious Right in the United States.