

Margaret Carlson

Mike Foster
Spanks

Positive
Story

Till Depositions Do Us Part

IT'S A STARRY NIGHT AT BRENNAN'S IN THE FRENCH QUARTER. A 10-carat diamond has been nestled in the Bananas Foster by a handsome swain under the influence of one too many romantic comedies. As his lovely maiden scoops up the ring, he asks, "Will you marry me?" Her face lights up with joy. But a moment later a slight frown crosses her pretty brow. Looking deep into his eyes, she inquires, "Do you mean *really, really* marry you?"

Welcome to marriage Louisiana-style. Last week the state legislature passed a stricter form of holy matrimony called covenant marriage. It differs from its lesser counterpart in that, for the most part, only impediments of biblical proportion—adultery, abandonment, abuse, imprisonment for a felony—can dissolve it.

Theoretically, covenant marriage is optional. But the law requires a prospective couple to select either the old, relatively easy-to-get-out-of form of wedded bliss or the new, no-way-out version, which is why our dreamy couple have barely touched their dessert. Who at such a moment of exquisite hopefulness is going to opt for Marriage Lite? Not any starry-eyed 19-year-old I know—nor, for that matter, many 40-year-olds bewitched by the reverie of hope triumphing over experience. Not since prenuptial agreements became fashionable among moguls acquiring trophy wives has there been a more likely killer of happily-ever-after than having to signal your preference in divorce.

So, let's pop the real question: Will choosing Marriage Plus reduce divorce, as its supporters hope? Virtuecrats, conservative

Republicans who preach no-cost family values, communitarians like Amitai Etzioni, and some feminists who suspect they suffer more from breakups than men do—all believe it will.

To begin with, one way of preventing divorce is to stop bad marriages before they start. The best part of Louisiana's law requires serious premarital counseling. So many of us, under the sway of Mad-Love Disease, haven't got a clue about what we're entering into. A marriage license should be at least as

hard to obtain as a driver's license. Requiring the marital equivalent of being able to parallel park might knock a little sense into heads more concerned with registering at Bloomingdale's than deciding whether the kids will be baptized.

But whatever good comes from sobering up the parties is likely to be offset by returning to the bad old days of difficult divorce. An effort to repeal no-fault divorce failed in Iowa and Michigan when people realized it would be a boon to lawyers without necessarily saving marriages or protecting women from Donald Trumps

trading in old models for newer ones. How many cooing couples who select covenant marriage realize that should their union turn into an icy hell, they have signed on to a financially draining, emotionally exhausting divorce process in which they must find grievous fault or separate for at least two years? A woman of a certain age might have to watch her childbearing years tick away as she plays out the Louisiana divorce clock.

Governor Mike Foster, himself divorced and remarried, plans to sign the bill. You have to wonder whether he would have chosen Marriage Plus if given the chance.



TAX DOLLARS

LOST IN CYBERSPACE? Forty-two government agencies shelled out about \$349 million to maintain 4,515 Websites and bulletin boards for fiscal years 1994-96. The biggest spenders (in millions of dollars):

DEPT. OF DEFENSE	\$147.8
NASA	\$30.8
DEPT. OF COMMERCE	\$27.2
EPA	\$23.8
DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE	\$15.5

Source: General Accounting Office

LOCAL HERO



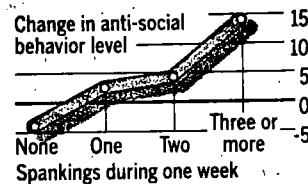
RICHARD LEVINE FOR TIME

HELEN RAMEY, 78, LOS ANGELES: founded the Remedial Reading and Learning Center

Don't tell Helen Ramey that inner-city youth are beyond help—unless you want to get her angry. "You can save the children," she stresses. "You just have to be there for them." In 1969, in her church's basement, Ramey started tutoring children who could not

read or write. Since then, her program has moved into its own building, where each year volunteers work one-on-one with more than 600 at-risk youngsters aged 8 to 18

DATA POINT



SPARE THE ROD The more spankings kids endure, the more often they lie, bully, destroy and disobey, according to a study of six-to-nine-year-olds by University of New Hampshire professor Murray Straus.