the exemption, a similar family today struggles with a 24 percent federal tax burden (including payroll taxes).

At the state level, ''no-fault'' divorce laws have helped push up the divorce rate dramatically in recent decades. In 1950 some 300,000 American children suffered the pain of a marriage breakup. By the 1970s, however, over a million children each year saw their parents split up, and the annual number has stayed above one million ever since. This easy-out approach to marriage has been very damaging for children. Several major studies indicate that the children of divorced parents experience significantly more problems in later life, such as elevated rates of unemployment, premarital sex, school dropouts, depression and suicide.

No Religion. Almost as damaging to the real social safety net of family and religion is the almost fanatical insistence by judges and many lawmakers that a ''wall of separation'' must be maintained between religious practice and government activity. This means hard-working and tax-paying parents in a public housing project, struggling to send their son to a school teaching religious values, cannot use a government grant or voucher to help defray the cost. And it means that faith-based solutions to property and other social problems are generally denied inclusion in taxpayer-funded programs, even though they routinely outperform other programs. To obtain government support, these successful approaches have to remove any religious emphasis, in most instances the very basic of their success.

But even organizations that do not apply for government assistance are routinely constrained or harassed by government. Robert Woodson complains bitterly of highly successful faith-based shelters for teenage ex-gang members being threatened with closure because they are not state-approved ''group homes,'' or because the organizer (typically a former gang member) is not a credentialed social worker. And consider the case of Freddie Garcia's Victory Fellowship. Himself a former drug addict, some years ago Garcia opened a church-based center for hard-core heroin addicts in San Antonio, Texas. The program has since spread to 60 churches in Texas and New Mexico and has a 60 percent success rate (compared with single-digit successes in typical government programs). But the Texas Drug and Alcohol Commission has told Garcia to stop promoting his center as a ''drug rehabilitation'' program because it does not comply with state standards.

HOW TO STRENGTHEN THE REAL SAFETY NET

If thoughtful politicians at all levels of government really want to strengthen the social safety net there are several things they and policy experts must do:

(1) Talk about what kind of safety net actually works. There is not going to be a decisive shift in the debate over the safety net until ordinary Americans, as well as most lawmakers, actually understand how important intact families and religious values are to social stability and improvement. Fortunately that process of education has been gaining traction. A decade or so ago there was little public understanding outside the conservative movement of the crucial importance of intact families to a child's life. When Vice President Dan Quayle had the temerity in 1988 to suggest that the media should not paint a rosy picture of single motherhood, he was widely denounced as a Neanderthal. But since then the sheer weight of the evidence has persuaded all but the most diehard liberals that single-parent households are bad for children. Even the left-learning Atlantic magazine felt forced in 1993 to carry a cover story entitled ''Dan Quayle was Right.''

More work still has to be done to inform Americans of the relationship between religious activity and the social economic condition of families. Fortunately the evidence is beginning to be discussed in the media and among scholars. For instance, a recent Heritage survey of this scholarly work was summarized, uncritically, in The Washington Post (not normally a good platform for such ideas), and the beneficial impact of religious practice to the lives of low-income families is being discussed and accepted by politicians across the political spectrum. But much more needs to be done. For example, the General Accounting Office is the government's accounting arm, which evaluates and reports on the effectiveness of programs for members of Congress. But the GAO has never been asked to carry out a systematic comparison of faith-based and government-funded secular drug rehabilitation programs. Fortunately, surveys of this kind are now under way.

(2) Have government focus on family finances, not elaborate programs. The history of government attempts to create a system of social services for those in serious need has been a costly failure. These programs are inflexible, bureaucratic and, as discussed earlier, have eligibility criteria that create the debilitating dependence and social collapse they are intended to alleviate. The more profound the problems are of an individual or family, the less able to deal with them is the government safety net and the more decisive is the private safety net of family and religion.

What government can do is to let low-income Americans keep more of their own money. Thus policymakers should concentrate on such things as overhauling the tax system to make sure that families with children are not overburdened. A tax credit or improved exemption for families with children would go a long way to strengthen the stability of these families. Meanwhile, Congress needs to enact sweeping reform of the welfare system to end programs that hinder rather than help the poor.

(3) Reform divorce laws and encourage adoption. At the state level, government should begin to roll back many of the ill-conceived ''reforms'' of divorce laws enacted in recent decades, focusing especially on situations where children are involved. At the very least, to discourage easy-out divorce, couples who have children and are seeking a divorce should be required to undertake extensive counseling and complete a longer waiting period before a divorce is granted. Moreover, in the granting of a divorce and the distribution of property, the interests of the children and the parent with custody would be the overriding factor in court decisions.

Besides the need to make sure children are less often the victims of family breakup, action is also needed to make it easier for children without homes to be adopted by loving families. Several studies indicate that adopted children do as well or actually better in life than children brought up with both of their biological parents, and they do far better than children in single-headed households. Yet in most states there are still enormous barriers placed between couples who want to adopt and children wishing to be adopted.

One problem is that many social workers apparently are simply ignorant of the evidence showing the benefits of adoption over institutionalization, and therefore err on the side of not releasing a child to a couple. A related problem, particularly in placing black children with black couples, is that social workers mistakenly place a much higher importance on the financial resources of the adopting couple than on more important factors. Thus a police sergeant and his teacher wife of fifteen years, who are regular churchgoers, might be deemed inappropriate parents because they have only a modest income and live in the ''wrong'' part of town. And a further, more insidious, problem is that the huge government payments made to foster care institutions to house children create an equally huge incentive for these institutions to oppose adoption. Increasing the rate of adoption in America would do far more to provide a safety net for the children than any amount of new federal spending.

(4) Make it easier for faith-based organizations to tackle problems. Many of the barriers against faith-based approaches are unlikely to be removed until the U.S. Supreme Court issues more sensible rulings on the matter. Still, many bureaucratic hurdles at the state level can be streamlined or eliminated. Furthermore, the federal government could help boost private support for faith-based approaches through the tax system, without any hint of violating the Constitution. For example, Representatives J.C. Watts (R–OK) and Jim Talent (R–MO) have authored legislation that would provide Americans with a 75 per cent tax credit for contributions to private charities that deliver services to the poor. This credit would encourage more financial support to those private organizations, including church-based groups, that have proved their effectiveness to ordinary Americans, rather than merely complied with the minutiae of federal contract rules.

CONCLUSION

Equating the social safety net with a set of government programs, and measuring compassion with one's support for these programs, is a profound mistake perpetuated by the media and by liberals in Congress. The real safety net is the system of social institutions that has stood the test of time. Scholarly studies underscore the effectiveness of these institutions, in particular the institutions of family and church. Unfortunately, the unintended effect of attempts to create a government safety net has been to weaken these institutions. It is time to recognize and strengthen them.

□ 1145

SPECIAL ORDERS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. COLLINS). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 1997, and under a previous order of the House, the following Members will be recognized for 5 minutes each.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Missouri (Mr. GEPHARDT) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. GEPHARDT addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Kentucky (Mr. LEWIS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. LEWIS of Kentucky addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)