

in 1980, yet the U.S. infant-mortality rate was nearly one-fifth higher. The explanation also does not appear to be inadequate health care. At any given birth weight, he notes, American infants have a *higher* survival rate than do Japanese or Norwegian babies. The problem is that Americans, white as well as black, have a high incidence of risky, low-weight births.

Some argue that biology may be a factor, since the proportion of low-birth-weight babies born to blacks is roughly twice as high as for whites. But Eberstadt blames irresponsible parental attitudes and behavior. A 1982 survey by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) found that low birth weight has a much lower correlation with poverty than with heavy smoking by pregnant women. Ba-

bies born to mothers who smoked 15 or more cigarettes a day had an incidence of low birth weight three times greater than those born to nonsmokers.

Bearing a child out of wedlock is another symptom of irresponsibility, Eberstadt notes, and it too significantly reduces an American child's chances of survival. A college-educated woman who bore an illegitimate child in 1982, for example, was more likely to lose her baby within a year than was even a grade-school dropout who was married.

If the parents' attitudes and behavior are important in determining infants' chances of surviving, Eberstadt concludes, then the prospects for bringing down the infant-mortality rate through government action may not be very good.

The Liberation Of 'White Trash'

"Poor Whites in the Occupied South, 1861-1865" by Stephen V. Ash, in *The Journal of Southern History* (Feb. 1991), Rice Univ., P.O. Box 1892, Houston, Texas 77251.

Although American historians have lavished attention on the freeing of the slaves during the Civil War, they have virtually ignored the fact that the North's conquest also "began the liberation" of the South's poor whites, writes Ash, an historian at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

The antebellum South's impoverished whites were mostly agricultural folk—tenant farmers, overseers for large planters, hired hands on yeoman farms, and squatters "who eked out a bare existence on the unclaimed lands of the piney woods, the sand hills, the swamps, or the mountains." Their patrician betters looked down on them as "poor white trash," devoid of honor and little better than slaves. In the eyes of the Union soldiers who marched into Dixie, however, the poor whites seemed, at first glance, to be oppressed wretches eagerly awaiting deliverance.

Many poor whites did welcome the northern soldiers as liberators. The number of whites who fled to the Yankees may well have equaled or exceeded the number who sought sanctuary behind Rebel lines. A Yankee general leading his troops through hill country in Tennessee in 1863

wrote that poor white men who had been hiding from Confederate conscription "rushed into the road and joined our column, expressing the greatest delight at our coming." Some poor whites enlisted in Union armies.

For most of the impoverished, simple survival was the main concern, but many nevertheless became determined to seize the opportunity afforded by invasion and occupation to better their lot. "Some settled temporarily in refugee camps and then went north to work," Ash writes. "Others found employment on plantations recently deserted by slaves. But many had a more ambitious goal: securing land of their own. Without federal assistance or encouragement, poor whites in considerable numbers began occupying abandoned land in and near Union lines."

Like the newly emancipated slaves, the poor whites "defied their oppressors . . . and voted with their feet for liberty and opportunity." For a moment, Ash says, "white society in the South seemed to stand on the brink of vast upheaval." But the moment passed and poor whites' militancy ebbed. The Confederate surrender at

Telling Histories

More professional historians are at work today than ever before, observes Harvard historian Simon Schama in the *New York Times Magazine* (Sept. 8, 1991), and yet American youths do not seem to be learning much about the past. Historians, he argues, must rediscover their muse.

The tension between popular historians and the arbiters of professional decorum is itself ancient history. Many of the most enduring historians—Voltaire, Gibbon, Macaulay, Carlyle and Trevelyan—wrote not just outside the academy but in self-conscious defiance of it . . .

For all these writers, history was not a remote and funereal place. It was a world that spoke loudly and urgently to our own concerns. How can their sense of the dramatic immediacy [of the past] be revived? In the first place, history needs to be liberated from its captivity in the school curriculum, where it is held hostage by that great amorphous, utilitarian discipline called social studies. History needs to declare itself unapologetically for what it is: the study of the past in all its splendid messiness. It should revel in the past-

ness of the past, the strange music of its diction . . .

G. M. Trevelyan put it best: "The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, on this familiar spot of ground walked other men and women as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions but now all gone, vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall be gone like ghosts at cockcrow." . . .

History is an indispensable form of human self-knowledge . . . History's mission . . . is to

illuminate the human condition from the witness of memory. Yet the truths likely to be yielded by such histories will always be closer to those disclosed in great novels or poems than the abstract general laws sought by social scientists.

To this end, the . . . pressing task [is to restore] history to the forms by which it can catch the public imagination. That form, as Ken Burns's stunning PBS series on the Civil War demonstrated, ought to be narrative; not to discard argument and analysis, but to lend it proper dramatic and poetic power.



Appomattox Court House in April 1865, meant, ironically, a resurgence of southern aristocrats' authority in Union-occu-

piated regions. They soon did their best to put the poor whites, as well as the newly freed slaves, back in their places.

Seduction or Date Rape?

In the space of a few years, "date rape" has emerged as a major national concern, discussed in campus seminars and on TV talk shows. This, says Podhoretz, *Commentary's* editor-in-chief, is a great victory for a feminist campaign to redefine seduction as

"Rape in Feminist Eyes" by Norman Podhoretz, in *Commentary* (Oct. 1991), 165 E. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

rape and thus to brand nearly all men as rapists.

For millennia, he points out, there was no question about the definition of rape. It occurred when a man used violence or the threat of it to force a woman into sex.