

FIRST PERSON  
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## Singled out in America

*The Valentine's Day season seems like the right time to point out the indignities that singles endure from coupleddom all year long*

**W**e have groups for the rights of prisoners, left-handers and fat people. Lobbyists to protect animals, smokers and fetuses. Whether you're pro-beef or think Elvis is alive, you too may be an eligible minority.

But there is no voice in representing one beleaguered lot. It's time for never-married, over thirty-fivers (NOTs) to unite.

We who are NOT have crossed the arbitrary age divide where never having married is a transgression. Can we talk about stigma and discrimination? NOTs are presumed to be selfish, immature, difficult, unstable, cold, gay, unattractive or strange. They pay more per person for income tax, hotel rooms, groceries and memberships to fitness clubs or museums. They get lousy tables at restaurants and harsher treatment by loan officers.

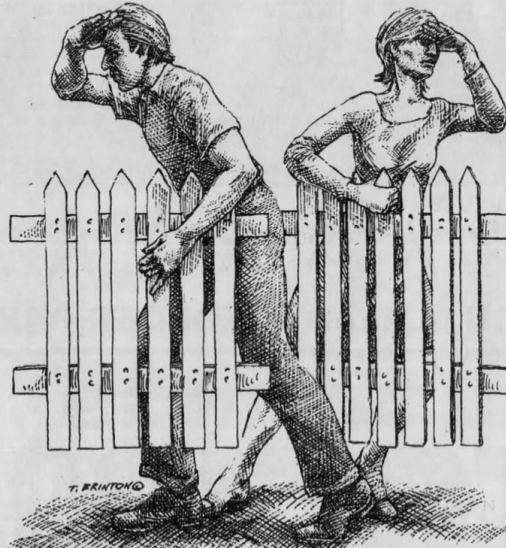
To be NOT is downright disturbing to the mated majority. Close to 90 percent of Americans wed at least once, most by their mid-20s. In the higher order of coupleddom, NOT life is incomplete and second best. Even the most polite of folk feel entitled to pry. Have a darn good excuse if you dare to be NOT.

Our national obsession with marital status spills over to politics. There hasn't been a NOT in the White House since James Buchanan in 1857. The absence of a wife only added to the public perception of loquaciousness in former NOT presidential hopeful Jerry Brown in 1992.

Singles contribute enormously to the economy and get back little. AIDS was largely ignored by policymakers until it spread beyond culpable singles. With all the rhetoric about family values (make that "family virtues"), politicians rarely mention one-and-onlies — except to disparage them if they're pregnant or on welfare.

Married or NOT, so-called family issues like education or violence on television should be important to everyone. But imagine the mocking a legislator would face for proposing a bureau for singles. Surely, there are as many lonely people victimized by the growing "singles industry" as there are infertile couples exploited when trying to adopt or get medical care. Yet adoption and in vitro fertilization services are monitored at the federal level; not so with dating services.

At bottom, the spouseless are disenfranchised and not taken seriously by the twosome mainstream. Although bachelorhood may be glamorized in the media, the lesson is that those who don't couple up in



Looking for a little respect.

the end are flawed, narcissistic or possible serial killers. Look at the most popular NOTs of prime time: the adolescent, self-absorbed Jerry Seinfeld and pal George.

The home alone have endured their illegitimate status since the call to be fruitful and multiply. Historically, land deeds, coveted privileges and family fortunes were often withheld until a young adult's nuptials.

And through the 1950s, bachelors were pegged as playboys, homosexuals or eccentrics, either afraid of responsibility or fixated on mother. Spinsters, as they were called, were objects of pity or "fallen women" if they lived alone.

Compact cars and studio apartments reflected the first cultural acceptance of singles in the '60s. In a major comparative study of American attitudes, 53 percent

surveyed in 1957 described the spouseless as "sick," "immoral," or "neurotic." By 1976, only 33 percent expressed negatives toward the never-married (that's "ever-single" for the politically correct).

Today? "It's still my son the doctor and my daughter who's not married," complains a friend (never mind her Ph.D.) about her mother's standard intro.

Indeed, the singled out are targets of anguished pleas to grow up by parents who believe maturity and matrimony are one and the same. But would Prince Charles be in the mess he is in today if all of England wasn't pressuring him to marry? Forget all the distraught divorcees running around. "At least they tried," is the NOT parent's response.

To be sure, singles tire of toasting everyone else's occasions while the major events in their lives are ignored or downplayed. Our culture has elaborate rituals to celebrate engagements, weddings, births and anniversaries, while NOTs get the message there are no comparable milestones or joys in their lives.

**B**ut the independent life has its rewards. Imagine having the last word on every purchase or vacation plan. Exclusive rights to the remote control. Changing partners (with impunity) when exasperation strikes. The absence of snoring, whining and someone else's clutter. Solitude. Career flexibility. Keeping the light on late. Drinking juice from the carton.

Central to society's prejudice toward singles is the notion that saying "I do" is an accomplishment in itself. Even sports commentators refer to silver medalists as "bridesmaids" to those winning gold in the Olympics.

Yet, between our appalling divorce rate and letters to Ann Landers, marital bliss may be a myth these days. NOTs are not necessarily less capable of love than others. They may simply be more honest or discriminating about their relationships.

If America really values its diversity, we should be commending singles, not condemning them. Look at the achievements of NOTs from Ralph Nader and Gloria Steinem, to Oprah Winfrey, Janet Reno and — all right — Jerry Seinfeld. Being single after all is a choice for some, not a consolation prize.

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