



After her book *Marriage, A History* was published in 2005, Coontz was playfully photographed for Evergreen's magazine in a kitchen, 1950s style. *Martin W. Kane/The Evergreen State College (TESC)*

STEPHANIE COONTZ

THE WAY WE NEVER WERE

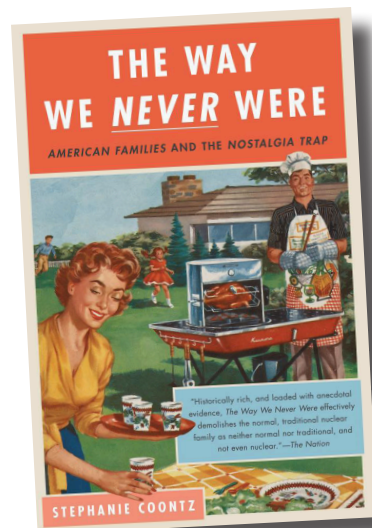
Stephanie Coontz was off her daily diet of research and writing in late June 2015 while she was vacationing in Hawaii. After a Friday of hiking, body-boarding at the beach, and snorkeling out to a rock where turtles gathered, she checked her email. Waiting was a flurry of messages from excited colleagues. They wanted to know whether Coontz, a Washington historian, had caught the news. The U.S. Supreme Court had just announced its landmark ruling on same-sex marriage. The court's 5-4 opinion cited Coontz twice. Just after Confucius and Cicero.

A longtime faculty member at The Evergreen State College, Coontz had made a big impression on the country's top legal minds. "Like national, epic-historical big," said columnist Danny Westneat in *The Seattle Times*. Her writing about the evolution of marriage from an unequal property contract to a gender-neutral bond of love had influenced the court's thinking, the law of the land, and millions of lives.

It wasn't the first time the limelight reached Coontz. She had chiseled a niche as the nation's leading fact-checker on matters of family and marriage.

Her 1992 book, *The Way We Never Were*, took a trenchant look at American nostalgia for the good old 1950s. Coontz brought a basket of hard-boiled reality to the picnic of soft-focus memories. Rates of poverty, child abuse, marital unhappiness, and domestic violence were higher in the 1950s than in subsequent, more-libertine decades. The prosperity of white men was tied to government subsidies, high rates of union membership, and unequal treatment of women and minorities. Reviews of her book inspired "Ozzie and Harriet Lied" headlines.

With impeccable timing, Coontz hit shelves as a national family-values debate raged. Vice President Dan Quayle made coast-to-coast news for suggesting that TV character Murphy Brown's decision to become a single mother made her the kind of tramp who was driving the country into a ditch.





Little did young Stephanie know that she would teach at a college whose mascot is a geoduck. *Stephanie Coontz*

Born in Seattle, she was quickly uprooted. Her father, Sidney Coontz, a labor organizer, used the GI Bill to go to college and become an economics professor. That took young Stephanie to academic outposts in California, Idaho, England, New York and Utah. Her mother, Patricia McIntosh, was an “ambitious, independent” student at the UW before marrying Coontz’s father. She tried living the mid-century role of wife as stay-at-home nurturer, booster and mother. In time, she came to feel something was missing. She and her husband divorced. She restarted her studies. She became an English professor at Eastern Washington State College and a founder of the Cheney school’s Women’s Center.

Coontz’s mother credited her awakening to Betty Friedan’s 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*. “It was as if someone had sucked all my insides out, as if there was nothing in there but emptiness... as if marriage and that supposedly admirable self-sacrifice that goes with it had robbed me of

personality, brains, determination, guts, really.” After reading Friedan she thought, “my God, that’s it, that’s the answer.” Friedan’s radical idea? That women could restore meaning to their lives through education, work and community involvement.

Coontz, who would later write a book about Friedan’s impact on a generation of women, graduated from high school a year early and took off for undergraduate life in Berkeley, California. She was soon involved in civil rights campaigns, then the free speech, and anti-war movements. Her activism had been partly driven by an anti-communist film, *Operation Abolition*. It was the *Reefer Madness* of the red-baiting era, when the Boston Public Library came under fire for displaying a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* and public librarians in Seattle and Ephrata were fired for not taking anti-communist loyalty oaths. The film “was so clearly a work of propaganda that it did for a young person like me the opposite of what it intended,” she says.

Her mother later recounted the drama of talking to her daughter on a pay phone during a 1964 campus demonstration that led to mass arrests. Police were grabbing students, who purposefully went limp, “by the feet and pulling them down the stairs.” She could hear over the phone “the bumps as their bottoms hit the floor.”

Then Coontz said she had to go and the phone went dead. Her mother read about the arrests of some 800 demonstrators. More than student bottoms were thumping the stone stairs of Sproul Hall. “One conscientious reporter counted the



Coontz spoke at an anti-war rally crowd of more than 2,500 at Seattle Center in 1970. *The Seattle Times*

marble steps as he followed a girl whose head jarred sickeningly as she was dragged down. There were ninety.” Coontz initially went limp to be dragged out. But she got up and walked when she saw people’s heads whacking the stairs. “Always felt a bit chicken,” she says decades later, “but in retrospect I no longer feel guilty about it!”



Coontz (center) led a joke “invasion” of Fort Lewis, complete with toy guns and peace-sign flags.
Stephanie Coontz

After a brief expulsion, Coontz went on to win a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship that allowed her to pursue graduate studies in history where she wanted. She chose to come home. Her mother’s pioneering side of the family had deep roots in the Olympia area. They settled in Washington decades before it became a state. Coontz’s widowed grandmother lived alone in the Seattle area. Coontz decided to study at the UW so she could help her.

SHE PLAYED a leadership role in the Seattle anti-war movement, which swelled as the draft call escalated on its way to inducting 2 million American men. In 1968 she was part of a group that was booted from Fort Lewis, where they went to ask soldiers to join a newly formed GI-Civilian Alliance for Peace. Costumed as a cigar-chomping general, Coontz led a return the next year in a joke “invasion” of the Army base.

* Coontz’s grandparents Albert and Helen (Eastman) McIntosh lived in a Tumwater house, between where the historic Crosby and Henderson Houses stand above Tumwater Historical Park.

The Seattle Times soon reported that “the dark-eyed girl with the clear voice and a quick smile is unquestionably a successful politician.” The grad student with a 3.75 GPA didn’t speak in the “strung-out, strung-together jargon of the New Left.” (“I never used the word ‘pig,’ ” Coontz says about an epithet some protesters spat at police officers.) Her socialism was tempered. She condemned bomb-throwing and window-smashing. Given a stage and bullhorn, she called for peaceful change. Democracy was a desirable way to govern, she said. But it didn’t do black people much good to be able to eat at an integrated restaurant, if they couldn’t pay for the food. Economic changes were also needed.

To some, she was still a freeloading troublemaker. “Here we have a 25-year-old woman in her sixth year at tax-built and tax-supported universities doing her level best to destroy this country,” said Seattle’s Daryl Hogan in a 1969 letter to the editor, “and she is presented as some kind of prima donna...Yet she has contributed nothing to support this society that has so amply endowed her.”

TV reporter Don McGaffin told Coontz his station got more hate calls when she appeared on-air than any other Seattle radical. McGaffin’s theory: because she looked like a sorority girl, viewers were more inclined to give her a listen rather than leave the room or change the channel when they saw another scraggly peacenik on the screen. They stayed for Coontz. And they got mad as hell hearing the well-spoken socialist’s pitch for sharing the wealth.

“I always thought, ‘Isn’t that wonderful?’ If you present yourself as someone who is not trying to show how different you are, or how radical you are,” she says, “they might listen to you. And maybe they’ll not like you, but maybe some will actually listen to you.”

UW students lashed out in a stormy week of protests in May 1970 after National Guard troops shot and killed four students at Ohio’s Kent State University. Coontz led thousands of students in daily rallies. Many spilled onto Interstate 5 and blocked the freeway on successive days.

The next week Coontz was walking down stairs in the UW Communications Building when two men “dressed like radical students or hangers-on” jumped her and punched her several times. She was kept overnight in the health center for observation but not seriously injured.



As an undergraduate at University of California, Berkeley in the 1960s, Coontz was involved in the free speech movement.
Stephanie Coontz



Coontz ran for Congress that year on a Socialist Workers Party ticket, urging a 100-percent tax on war profits and polluting industries. One headline captured the election results in four words: “Minor parties remain minor.” Coontz received 2.6 percent of the vote.

She moved to New York City to work for the National Peace Action Coalition. She never did finish her Ph.D. But

she secured a teaching job at Evergreen four years later, a rare hiring chronicled by a headline: “Ex-war resister gets Evergreen faculty post.” Her mother earlier had applied for a faculty post at the unconventional Olympia school.* “Although Evergreen didn’t have disciplines,” Coontz says, “they told her they didn’t really need another person in English literature. They were actually looking for a historian. At which point, my mother said, ‘My daughter is an historian’ and encouraged me to apply. And to my surprise I got it.”

A FEMINIST PUBLISHER asked Coontz, who had been an editor for the publishing arm of the Socialist Workers Party, if she wanted to write about women’s history. She started digging. She wasn’t thrilled about what she found. There were lots of books coming out. But they all seemed to be about what had been done to women through the ages, or what a few women had accomplished despite what was done to them.

Coontz looked for an opening that involved men and women interacting on a regular basis. “Suddenly, it was like, ‘the family, duh.’”

But family and social history were not very respectable fields of study then. “So thank god for Evergreen,” she says, “and not having to publish or perish.” She spent parts of 12 years researching and writing *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600-1900*. She now calls the



Coontz poked at Hollywood’s fictional “misty water-colored memories of the way we were.” *TESC*

* Evergreen faculty don’t have titles such as “professor.” Coontz says one colleague called the school “Plato’s Republic with electricity.”

book pompous in its use of big words. But it built a foundational expertise and academic credibility.

With her focus freed from mortality rates of colonial families and other grim facts of the 18th century, she looked around the real world and saw the values debate erupting, with women leading groups trying to restore what they considered “traditional” family norms. “Neither they, nor the liberals opposing them actually knew very much about what family history was really like,” she says.

She set out to write a book called *Myths and Realities of American Families*. Then an editor saw one of Coontz’s chapters and said “that’s the title of the book!” With a push from the Murphy Brown squall, the values debate stormed into the 1992 election season. *The Way We Never Were*, with its title poking at fictive Hollywood romance, poured high-octane “fuel in the sound-bite fires.”

She was back in the public eye, this time as a full-fledged academic.

Now it was *The Seattle Times* book reviewer praising her, and without a mention of her weight or wardrobe. Instead Mary Ann Gwinn produced 27 incisive paragraphs on the way Coontz “takes a measured, reflective stroll through history to demonstrate how the ‘simpler time’ we long for was never so simple.” Step after step was built on bricks of data: In 1957, the teenage pregnancy rate was almost twice as high as it was in 1983; at the end of the 1950s, an era of economic expansion, a third of all children were considered poor; domestic violence was more common than in subsequent decades.

A myth buster was born.

She crisscrossed the country, basking in Oprah Winfrey’s nationally-syndicated attention and debating Pat Buchanan on CNN’s *Crossfire*. When she didn’t hear creative solutions emerge from the ruckus, she spun off a sequel in 1997, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms With America’s Changing Families*. *The New York Times* found it layered with “pragmatic optimism.”

Remedies in the book started with a better understanding of history. Government supported families in the 1950s with subsidies for college education, home-mortgage loans and massive transportation projects. Strong labor rights led to high union membership. Businesses were more inclined to invest in stability than funneling profits to shareholders.



Until two centuries ago, “marriage was considered too important to leave up to the emotions of two people,” Coontz wrote. *Jay Takaaze/TESE*

Even if families were to return to 1950s form—dad bringing home the bacon, mom cooking it up with a smile, kids saying grace—government and business were unlikely to follow. Government had shifted benefits from workers to businesses and the wealthy. Corporate tax breaks and subsidies cost three times what Americans spent on all welfare programs.

For many workers that spelled eroding benefits, constant worries about layoffs, and a move into “casualized” work, as part-timers and subcontractors, while companies prioritized the bottom line. It was absurd for James Danforth Quayle III to blame mothers for working. Many did so, even when married, to keep their kids out of poverty. Coontz saw child care, parental leave, and limits on work as compelling new health and safety regulations, every bit as vital to the public interest as meatpacking safeguards were a century before.

SOME CRITICS THOUGHT Coontz really hit her stride in 2005’s *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. “She’s no chatty pop-prof,” one reviewer said. “This is a thorough examination of the history of marriage.” In tracing the evolution of matrimony from cave dwellers to computer programmers, Coontz found most of that time could have been themed, “What’s Love Got to Do With It?”

Until roughly two centuries ago “marriage was considered too important to leave up to the emotions of two people.” It was about economics and politics, gaining property and strategic alliances. Or as Coontz likes to put it: “Marriage had as much to do with getting good in-laws and increasing one’s family labor force as it did with finding a lifetime companion and raising a beloved child.”



Coontz is grateful Evergreen emphasizes undergraduate education rather than the “publish or perish” pressure faculty often face in academia. *Shauna Bittle/TESSC*

But then heterosexuals began to change it. Marriage became rooted in love and free choice. And then equality instead of fixed gender roles. And it was decoupled from procreation and child-rearing. It became clear marriage responded to changing times.

The Supreme Court embraced Coontz’s logic that once heterosexual marriage was unmoored from strict gender roles, it couldn’t legally be denied to same-sex couples. (Justice Antonin Scalia’s dissent called the majority opinion “profoundly incoherent,” and compared its logic to the “mystical aphorisms of the fortune cookie.”)



Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy embraced Coontz's view that the history of marriage is one of both continuity and change.

Coontz was flattered by the citations of her work in Justice Anthony Kennedy's majority opinion.* But when she read his decision, she realized he didn't fully grasp her book, or chose to ignore key parts of it. Kennedy argued that gays and lesbians deserved to marry, in part, because matrimony had always "promised nobility and dignity to all persons."

That was not the history Coontz excavated. "For thousands of years, marriage conferred nobility and dignity almost exclusively on the husband, who had a legal right to appropriate the property and earnings of his wife and children and forcibly impose his will on them."

She had a point. In Washington state, husbands could use physical force to legally rape their wives until the law was changed in 1983.

AS THE 21st CENTURY took hold, an old problem lingered. Some women were cracking glass ceilings, but many were "still stuck in the basement looking for an up escalator." Gender equity had stalled. American women were still being paid less than men for similar work. Progress had slowed so much that women were not expected to achieve pay parity until 2058. The forecast was even worse for African American women and Latinas.

When a woman stopped working to have a baby, she tended to fall further behind, compounding the pain. The lack of family-friendly work policies and affordable child care, combined with men's higher wages, encouraged many women to cut back when work conflicted with family obligations. And that only reinforces gender inequality, Coontz says.

"On average, when a woman leaves the workforce for a year to care for a child, she loses almost 20 percent of her lifetime earnings power. If she spends three to four years away, it reduces her potential lifetime earnings by 40 percent."

And yet if moms don't quit work, they're also penalized. "Studies show that employers are less likely to hire or promote mothers than childless women (or fathers) on the assumption that they are less committed to work."

With her usual optimism, Coontz points to the good news: men have come a long way, baby. "Since 1965, husbands have doubled their share of housework and tripled their share of child care."

* Kennedy twice cited *Marriage: a History*. Coontz and 25 historians also submitted a "friend of the court" brief in the case, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriage. Kennedy cited the historians' brief as well.



“Our founders did want to build a wall,” Coontz says. “Between church and state.” *Shauna Bittle/TESS*

Unfortunately, when men have tried to help out in child care, seeking paternity leave or a more flexible schedule, they’ve met with resistance because of the breadwinner mentality. “So your discrimination against men comes when they ask for flexibility,” she says. And that only perpetuates the problem with women stepping out of the workforce.

What’s needed? Coontz says new corporate policies, affordable child care and preschool education, and family leave. If women were paid the same as men for comparable work, that would slash the poverty rate in American families. Men, women and children would benefit

if the U.S. adopted job-protected, subsidized family leave. Of 193 countries in the United Nations, only a few—and the U.S. is among the outliers—do not mandate paid maternity leave; almost half of all countries also offer paternal leave. “Again, this is where we recruit men,” she says. “We have to show them paternity leave is in their interest as well.” (Ahead of the curve, Washington in 2020 will become the fifth state to offer paid family leave; it is also considered to have one of the strongest pay-equity laws in the country.)

Norway has implemented paternity leave and child care, she says, with interesting results. “They’ve found that men who take paternity leave do end up earning a little less over the course of their lives than they would if they hadn’t. But their wives earn so much more over their lives that the family as a whole is better off.” And household tensions are reduced. A study in Norway found a 50-percent drop in domestic spats about housework and child care after men had taken paternity leave because they were more aware of what was done around the house.

It’s not an easy sell to conservatives. Former Fox TV host Bill O’Reilly yelled at Coontz that he wasn’t going to pay for child care for single mothers. “I want society to tell people you’re on the road to destruction if you’re a single parent,” O’Reilly said. Coontz, a single mother for much of her son’s life, laughed it off and quoted statistics to reinforce her arguments.

COONTZ RETURNED to the nostalgia beat in 2018 with a fresh angle for the *Harvard Business Review*. A 17th-century Swiss doctor had mixed two Greek words to coin the term “nostalgia,” she wrote. It described the “algos,” or pain, felt by people who left their native home, or “nostos.” During the American Civil War,

Union Army doctors reported 5,000 serious cases of nostalgia.* Physicians were soon debating how to treat this homesickness.

Their concern abated near the end of the 19th century when modern industry and communications made people more open to change and less susceptible to the disease. Researchers later identified a milder strain—a longing for a feeling once shared with friends and family, not a literal return to another place or time. “This kind of nostalgia makes people feel warmer themselves and act more warmly toward others, including strangers,” Coontz says.

But in the run-up to the 2016 election we saw a more pernicious form, what Coontz calls “past-sickness.” This is a longing to reproduce an idealized piece of history, rather than personal feelings. And when people are collectively nostalgic for an idealized era, they “start to identify more intensely with their own group and to judge members of other groups more negatively.” They become more hostile to those perceived as outsiders; they deny diversity and social injustices of the past.

When politicized, this nostalgia can lead to delusions about a golden era in the homeland, supposedly ruined by interlopers. “And when people get scared and think they’re losing and see themselves as under attack, they get into this sort of pathological nostalgia,” she says. Make America Great Again enthusiasts appear to idealize the 1950s, when real wages were rising for working-class white men, and America emerged from World War II as the only major industrial power that had not been decimated, setting the stage for the U.S. to play an outsized role for several decades.

Like nostalgia outbreaks of the past, Coontz says this one was triggered by an understandable sense of loss. For roughly three decades—1947 to the early 1970s—men with high-school educations saw their earnings, adjusted for inflation, steadily rise, and outpace what their fathers had made at the same age. And over that same time, the vast majority of the country’s income growth went to the bottom 90 percent of the population.

But this prosperity was an exception, powered by government subsidies and expanded labor rights, not the norm. And the trend, it turns out, was an aberration. Profit motives reasserted their supremacy. Economists declared that corporations were responsible only to stockholders. Jobs were shipped overseas. Union ranks sank. CEO salaries soared to such heights that they averaged 300 times what their workers made.

And wages sagged for blue-collar men. Between 1980 and 2007, median real earnings of young men with a high-school education declined by 28 percent. They worked hard, and then harder with fewer benefits. And they still saw their paychecks shrink.

* In her 2011 book *Homesickness: An American History*, historian Susan J. Matt says 74 Union soldiers died of nostalgia between 1861 and 1866. Units barred bands from playing melodies such as “Home, Sweet Home.”

During that same period, the top 10 percent of all earners received 95 percent of income growth.

But rather than blame the forces and fat cats who drove down their wages, shuttered their factories, and gutted their pensions, Trump supporters have scapegoated others, particularly immigrants.

Too often, America's working class has been pitted against one another, Coontz says. In colonial America, "Irish indentured servants and black slaves worked so closely together that the Negro spiritual was a blend of the Irish ballad and African folk song." But plantation owners felt threatened by the prospect of interracial alliances. "And that's how they started giving special treatment to indentured servants who reported slaves who had accumulated any property. It was a very conscious attempt to divide."

The absence of effective leadership makes it easier for some to see the solution as going after someone their own size instead of the big guys. "I see this as a huge obstacle but not an insurmountable one," Coontz says, pointing to the New Deal and desegregation as examples when blue-collar Americans were less divided. (Frustrated at what she saw as Hillary Clinton's aloofness, Coontz says she watched TV during the 2016 campaign and yelled at Clinton's speeches: "Would you EFFIN' name a truck driver or a farmer? Would you add one of them please?")

She doesn't dispute evidence of racism in the 2016 election. But she draws a distinction between active defenders of white supremacy and those who appear less conscious of their biases. She points to blue-collar timber counties in southwestern Washington—Cowlitz, Grays Harbor and Pacific—that voted for Barack Obama in two elections and then turned around and voted for Trump. Those counties don't seem inherently racist,* she observes. But some residents were likely upset by liberalism (environmentalism having dramatically impacted logging) they saw as threatening the security that traditional family, religion, race and culture had provided. Others may have been sexist, or just anti-Clinton. They were ripe for the "angriest" candidate, all the more so if he promised a return to tradition. "So I don't think it helps at all to label them with



Ever optimistic, Coontz points to good news in marriages: husbands have doubled their share of housework and tripled their share of child care. *Karissa Carlson/TESS*

* Trump did not bring out droves of new voters in those three counties; 2016 turnout was lower in all three counties than it was in the 2012 and 2008 presidential elections. And Clinton did not come close to reaching Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 vote totals in the three counties.

the same thing,” Coontz says.

She points to her husband’s experience. “When he was working in the airline industry and his fellow workers would say something racist, he had a way of handling it that I thought was really good. He would say, ‘You know, personally I’m not prejudiced.’ And no one wants to be prejudiced, but it’s not as red flag as ‘you’re a racist.’” His co-workers would say they weren’t prejudiced either. “And then they’d get into a really good discussion about it.”

COONTZ IS NOT WORKING on a new book. She’s reluctant to start one now because there’s so much watchdogging to do on recycled and redeveloped myths. (“Our founders *did* want to build a wall,” she says. “Between church and state.”)



Coontz’s family has deep roots in Thurston County, where she lives on farm property that belonged to her great grandfather. *Stephanie Coontz*

She also gets offers to write shorter, newsy pieces about marriage and family. NBC asked her to weigh-in on the feuds of Kellyanne and George Conway. Kellyanne is a senior counselor to President Trump; George is an outspoken critic of the commander-in-chief. Trump, the third wheel in this awkward imbroglio, has called George Conway “a stone cold loser” and “husband from hell.” Coontz couldn’t find a historical precedent for this odd couple, but she saw trouble brewing. In her view, George’s contempt for Kellyanne’s boss, and by extension, her work, combined with Kellyanne’s defensiveness, amount to a formula for d-i-v-o-r-c-e.

Coontz’ other “big passion” is helping researchers—be they historians, psychologists or sociologists—explain their findings in ways people can use and understand. “Too often they’ve just been kept in the ivory tower,” she

says. To help them avoid mistakes like the kind she made with ponderous writing, she’ll point out things like “this paragraph you buried on page eight is what people are dying to know about how marriages work.”

She is faculty emerita, effectively retired from Evergreen. Much of her recent work has been in service to the Council on Contemporary Families, where she is director of research and public education. Based at the University of Texas at Austin, the council is a nonpartisan, nonprofit association of family researchers.

Coontz and her husband live on an organic farm—property first acquired by her great grandfather—in Thurston County. Still a good cook, she’s known to whip up a homegrown meal for guests of arugula and fennel salad, nettle risotto, fried

green tomatoes, Angus beef, and applesauce.

When asked how to characterize the politics of a '60s radical-turned-*Ladies Home Journal* marriage consultant, she says, "I don't feel comfortable calling myself a socialist at this point. I have begun to really appreciate the value of free markets—although ironically our current version of capitalism seems to be pretty much destroying those. Mostly I'm out to figure out what are the most pressing injustices we see...and what can we do to make this society a better place for everyone. So I don't have a name for it anymore."

As for the letter writer who said back in 1969 that she contributed zilch to society, a bunch of folks—students, readers, historians, judges, and newlyweds—would beg to differ. Bill O'Reilly might too.

Although O'Reilly berated Coontz's arguments for expanding child care and parental leave, they have become orthodoxy for Democrats seeking the 2020 presidential nomination. O'Reilly, meanwhile, left Fox News in the wake of *New York Times* reporting that the network had paid out \$13 million in settlements to women who alleged he engaged in sexual harassment and other inappropriate behavior. O'Reilly dismissed the stories as "crap."

Discussing her penchant for taking a very long view of history, Coontz recalls a movie she saw about a rebel in the Spanish Civil War. "There are two things he says you need to make revolutionary change: Patience. And a sense of irony."

Bob Young
Legacy Washington

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