

# ***The Balancing Actors: The New Silent Plurality***

Sunday morning address<sup>1</sup> to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, September 2, 2007

By Abe Markman

Since we started our journey in February of 2006, the Public Issues Committee or PIC has taken actions based on the following premise: The Ethical Society movement is well situated to address a central challenge of our time. That challenge is to find ways to heal the social, cultural, religious, racial, and political divisions of our era. It is our contention that the country has been in a forty year long ideologically driven dead lock. Although there have been signs of movement the healing process is in its early stages and needs an infusion of care.

In trying to meet this challenge, we have been trying to answer this question: “Are there ethically based positions that can heal the ideological divides in America?” Positions aimed at answering that question were researched and proposed to the Board and the membership. Positions on *Iraq, Stem Cell Research, Global Warming, Paid Family Leave, and Child Health Insurance* received nearly unanimous support. The positions are designed to cross scientific and family value divides. They resonate positively with the public, regardless of political or religious affiliation or economic status. Already we have seen many on both sides of the ideological divide becoming partners in advocating for them.

I have been asked what the ethical foundation of this effort is. It is based on empathy, understanding, research and action. It is empathy toward those with different views. It is understanding and research that identify common needs and common goals. It is action that is ethical, humane, and progressive. The goal is to bring out the best in people no matter what their social and political leanings are, and by doing so bring out the best in ourselves as well.

Now PIC is posing a new question: “Are there other positions that may be even more effective in the process of healing America? In order to answer that question let me explain whom I mean by The Balancing Actors, the subject of this paper. They are the millions of working and middle class Americans who are engaged in a balancing act, balancing economic activity and family concerns.

All of the balancing actors face the unpaid tasks of caring for babies, toddlers, young children and/or elderly parents while holding down paid jobs. As will be shown large majorities want relief.

The policies we are advocating for — Paid Family Leave Paid Sick Leave, Paid and Non-Mandatory Overtime and Flextime receive wide support on both sides of the family values divide. Providing employees more time to care for persons they love is an ethical pursuit with major ramifications for the physical and mental health of family members.

What follows are proposals to the Board of Trustees in these regards. With the Board’s endorsement, PIC will seek opportunities to bring these positions into the political arena on a non-partisan educational basis.

First, let’s start with the people — the balancing actors.

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker’s presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

The balancing actors have heavy responsibilities in the home and out of the home. They are mostly women, who while caring for their children or their elderly parents hold down paid jobs. As estimated in the Motherhood Manifesto, published by Nation Books about 80 percent of mothers aged twenty-five to thirty-four are in the work force.

In addition, hundreds of thousands of employed women and men provide care in their home for both their children and their aging parents. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 44 percent of Americans have an aging parent *and* children under the age of 21 to care for.

Likewise, an [ABC News](#) | [AARP](#) | [Gallup Poll](#) indicates that the vast baby boom generation — the 79 million people born from 1946 to 1964 — will find themselves caring for aging parents. That's starting to sink in for boomers, and the reality has already begun to weigh on many of them: Can they afford to help financially? How will it affect their work and personal lives? Will Mother move in? Who will take care of her?

Those caught up in the balancing act tend to be too preoccupied to campaign in their own self-interest. Although grassroots groups like MomsRising and ACORN are joining a growing chorus calling for family friendly policies there is a dire need for more advocates. Some of these policies are making some headway in the states but are encountering resistance nationally.

Policies referred to earlier, if implemented would relieve the enormous pressures on the Balancing Actors. The New York Society has adopted one such policy, Paid Family Leave for Ethical Culture. Other family friendly policies that the Public Issues Committee will be proposing to the Board of Trustees relate to Paid Sick Leave; Non-Mandatory, Paid Overtime; and Flextime.

You might ask why we are advocating positions that have not received as much attention, as for example: universal health care or universal childcare, voting fraud, or public financing of campaigns. Our answer is that we believe that advocacy of family friendly policies could create partnerships that cross ideological barriers. Such budding partnerships could in turn lead to coalitions that do take on the more challenging issues.

First, let's look at the evidence that balancing act policies are popular across a wide spectrum of the body politic. For example, Steven Greenhouse reported in The New York Times in 2005 that Paid Family Leave "is a rare issue that can unite liberals and conservatives: those on the left interested in better working conditions and those on the right who want to promote family values."

This is born out in a 2007 report published by Progressive States, a think tank. They found that (Family friendly work related) "issues divide right-wing politicians from their culturally conservative base. When California enacted its paid family leave law, surveys found 85% approval — with even 77 percent of those who identified themselves as political conservatives in support. Polls in the state of Washington found that 74% of voters in support of paid family leave."

Here is a closer look at the issues:

**Sick leave:** "More than 59 million Americans (mostly in the private sector) have no paid sick leave. --- As a result, millions of Americans go to work sick because they cannot afford to take unpaid leave. (They often) delay treatments for their children." That's from the Center for Policy Alternatives, and a nationwide poll by The National Council for Research on Women showed that registered voters by overwhelming margins vote for Congressional candidates who favor paid sick days for all workers.

**Non-Mandatory overtime:** The Economic Policy Institute in a January 2002 Briefing Paper was unambiguous in its opposition to forced overtime. It stated that, “The growth in overtime work, while helping to drive the healthy growth in output, has unhealthy social costs. It is taking a toll not only on workers, but also on their families, communities, and, ultimately on their patients, customers, and employers. More hours spent at work mean less time with the family, less time to help a child with homework, less time to play, less time for housework, and less time for sleep. These sacrifices can translate into increased accidents and injuries; greater chronic fatigue, and related diseases; reduced parenting and family time; and diminished quality of goods and services.”

Maryland, New Jersey, and Oregon have won recent legislative and regulatory bans on the use of mandatory overtime.

**Flexitime:** Here is an excerpt from the Motherhood Manifesto: “Widespread implementation of workplace flexitime policies will go a long way towards helping women maintain viable careers while having families. Businesses also benefit with higher employee retention, lower training and recruiting costs, and better employee performance.” In fact, major companies like Ernst and Young, Citigroup, Goldman Sachs, Johnson and Johnson, and American Express offer flexible work schedules, as Sylvia Ann Hewlett notes in her book “Off Ramps and on Ramps.” The schedules take into consideration time for elder care as well as childcare. As incentives to businesses, we recommend subsidies especially to small firms that offer Flexitime.

Why should the promotion of these ideas by liberals be important not only for the balancing actors but for the whole of society? To make my case calls for a detour into the recent past. We need to take a hard look at America over the last forty years. I maintain that the revolutionary social changes of the 1960s and 1970s are affecting our lives both positively and negatively to this very day. Many of us who consider ourselves liberals are in denial of the huge upset that a significant segment of the working and middle class experienced during that period. Whereas we saw the civil rights, the women’s rights, the anti-war movements, and the sexual revolution as contributing to profound advances in human values, others felt under attack. They were overwhelmed and traumatized. Their traditional way of life was threatened.

In order to recapture the sense of bewilderment felt by many at the time, let’s imagine what a white, working-class man, who led a relatively insulated, traditional life, could have gone through. Our imaginary man had a wife, and a teenage daughter and a young adult son. During a short ten year period, a black family moved next door, his teenage daughter became sexually active, his wife spoke of her need for fulfillment beyond the home, his son refused to fight for his country, a nephew came out of the closet, a close relative went through a divorce, a friend of his daughter died of a drug over-dose, riots occurred in major cities, and leaders in society were assassinated. On top of that, his income declined to the point that his wife had to find employment outside the home. This led to his children getting less care and protection in the home.

We may not find one man who went through all of this, yet for the average Joe, just living through an era when such things could happen to him and his friends would be enough to cause him deep distress and intense, sustained anger. He blamed liberals because he felt that while they were marching and protesting for their rights and the rights of others, they were trampling on his rights and ignoring his needs and values and the needs and values of his family.

As a result, many became receptive to the message of the religious right. They became vulnerable to the exploitation and manipulation of their unmitigated anger. With wedge issues like -- law and order, drugs, abortion, same sex marriage, the economic conservatives drew millions of working people to their side.

Where once they had been loyal supporters of the Roosevelt/Johnson New Deal and Great Society programs, now they enthusiastically joined with the Reagan/Bush conservatives. I call those who left the Roosevelt Coalition and became Reagan and Bush Democrats, "the exodus people." Now as senior citizens, many tend to vote for conservatives. Al From of the Democratic Leadership Council, writes that, "The reason that the overall senior vote for Al Gore was so close -- he won it by four points -- is that there were twice as many Reagan seniors as New Deal seniors. In addition, the proportion of Reagan seniors is only likely to increase in the years ahead as the older New Deal seniors die off. For example, in 1992 there were only 25 percent more Reagan seniors than New Deal seniors; by 2000 there were twice as many." Until the late 60s senior citizens were stalwart members of the Roosevelt Coalition

Although public attitudes have shifted away from conservatives to some extent since the election of 2004, the country is still severely divided. Red states have not turned Blue to any great degree. The U.S. Senate is still deadlocked.

Why do the divisions in the country persist? It is my firm belief that it is because after-shocks of the social, racial, cultural, and political earthquake of the 1960s and 1970s are felt to this very day. Consider that in the last few months conservative talk show hosts were bragging that they helped generate a modern day civil rights movement by successfully characterizing the immigration initiatives in congress as amnesty. Why do wedge issues associated with abortion, gay rights, and bigotry toward immigrants still have currency? It is because of the deep and painful wounds felt by many who could not abide the enormous changes of the 60s.

Because of persistent mistrust of liberals, the 2006 election could hardly be considered an endorsement of a liberal agenda. Rather it was an indictment of those responsible for bringing this country to its present woeful state of affairs. If you think the U.S. is ready for a new progressive era, consider this: Is there support in this country for extending Medicare to all of our citizens? Are we prepared to pay more taxes to adopt a universal day care system? Is the country ready for a major turn around in the pervasive destruction of the environment? What are some of the ways that liberals in general and members of Ethical Culture Societies in particular, can help bring about the progressive era we all seek?

— Charismatic leaders could shape and promote issues that influence the public. Al Gore and Michael Moore have made remarkable contributions but the jury is still out as to how much movement they have actually generated.

— The economic system could move into a free fall, bringing on a call for a new New Deal.

— Grassroots groups and coalitions could organize successful campaigns.

— Presidents and other elected officials, while withstanding enormous political pressure, could lead and educate the public and win enactment of enlightened measures.

— In respect to the position of this paper, liberals could identify and advocate for family friendly positions that cross cultural, religious, racial, Blue state/Red State divides.

In previous workshops and platform addresses, I proposed positions concerning universal day care and public education. Upon reflection, I may have been too ambitious. I have been searching for over twenty years for positions that might find resonance with the American people and with the tremendous help and support from PIC members, I think I have found them. Even if these policies are not enacted into law as soon as we would like, the image of liberals might be considerably improved as the process proceeds. We could be seen again as understanding the needs of traditional hard working family members. As indicated above, strange bedfellows meeting on common ground might form new partnerships and coalitions.

Here are two questions that I have been asked about this proposal:

— The first is — What do you mean by liberalism?

My answer is — I am referring to a value system of interpersonal behavior. I am not referring to liberalism as an economic philosophy.

— The second is — Family friendly policies are going to be intensely resisted by the business community.

Here is my answer: — Yes, that is to be expected. One goal is to enact these policies into law. Another goal is to convince the “exodus people” that liberals are on their side. Such an effort has the potential, perhaps in the long-term, to create a new progressive majority in this country.

In essence, it is our contention that this journey, if merged with many others, may bring on a new age of ethical, humane, enlightened, social and political progress.

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