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The American Family: Building a Foundation for Real Democracy and Freedom

by **Riane Eisler and Frances Kissling**
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For progressives, Independence Day offers an opportunity to recommit ourselves to creating a more equitable, caring, peaceful, truly democratic, and free society. Today, these goals are seriously threatened, both in the United States and worldwide. We are at a historic juncture where we are challenged to go deeper. It is a time to assess what has been missing and formulate long-range strategies.

Throughout the progressive movement, an effort to reframe our values in terms that can be embraced by most Americans is underway. Recently, progressives have started to apply the parenthood frame to politics in every area – except the family itself.

Progressives have basically ceded the meaning, value, and construction of family life to regressives, who recognize the foundational importance of family and other intimate relations in the establishment of social values and political and economic structures. The reason for their intensive focus on these relations is that the construction of family and other intimate relations directly influences what people consider normal and moral in all relations – public as well as private. Family relations affect how people think and act. They affect how people vote and govern, and whether the policies they support are just and genuinely democratic, or violent and oppressive.

People first learn respect for human rights or to accept human rights violations in the family in the context of the relations between women and men, parents and children.

Regressives have successfully pushed our culture back by insisting on a male-dominated, top-down structure of family. U.S. fundamentalists stress the "headship" of the father in the family, with women and children subordinate to the will of the father. So successful have their efforts been to establish this model that social values research indicates that in spite of the success of the women's movement, support for a patriarchal model of the family is on the rise. In 1992 when Americans were asked if the "father of the family is master of the house," 42% said yes. By 2004 the percentage had risen to 52%. Comparable data demonstrated that less than a third of Canadians and only 20% of Europeans agreed with this "traditional value."

Slogans like "traditional values" have often marketed a family where fathers make the rules and harshly punish disobedience – the kind of family that prepares people to defer to "strong" leaders who brook no dissent and use force to impose their will. These slogans have masked a family "morality" suited to undemocratic, rigidly male-dominated, chronically violent cultures.

We can, and must, offer a progressive partnership family agenda to counter the regressive "family values" agenda.

The task at hand for progressives is to invite responsible policy makers, leaders, the media, and the general public to look with fresh eyes at the

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meaning of the terms "family," "values," and "morality." We must redefine these terms in ways based on partnership, mutual respect, and caring rather than domination, top-down control, and coercion.

To build cultures of justice, safety, and democracy, we need families where women and men are equal partners and where children learn to act responsibly because adverse consequences follow from irresponsible behavior, where they learn to help and persuade rather than hurt and coerce, and where they're encouraged to think for themselves.

Toward a Progressive Family Values Agenda

A progressive agenda on family relations should be based on a common principle: the transformation from domination to partnership as the model for personal, social, economic, and political relations. A progressive agenda on family relations will embrace and reflect the core teachings that are at the heart of both religious traditions and humanist philosophy. Some guidelines for this agenda would include:

1. Focus on the rights of children to have a fair opportunity to grow up healthy and thrive, including the right to shelter, nutrition and health care, freedom from violence, and a clean environment.
2. Promote equality between women and men.
3. Support all families, whether children are parented by a man and woman, a single parent, or two parents of the same sex.
4. Promote an economic vision where the drive for productivity does not overshadow the value of having parents spend time with their children.
5. Support parents with policies such as a living wage, paid parental leave, high quality childcare, and preschool education for all children.
6. Protect reproductive freedom and show that the only way to prevent abortions is to provide family planning and sex education, as do other nations with much lower abortion rates.
7. Provide education for healthy, nonviolent family relations and parenting for both boys and girls, as offered by Nordic nations, which have much lower crime rates, prosperous economies, longer life spans, and regularly rate at the top of the U.N. Human Development Reports.
8. Promote real education reform that includes small classrooms and small schools where every child has individual support and attention.
9. Take a stand against corporate practices that harm children – from toxic dumps and other forms of environmental pollution to marketing unhealthy food and drinks – and recognize that we must address global warming and other environmental problems that threaten our children's future.
10. Make ratification of United Nations conventions to protect women and children a top priority.
11. Take a strong stand against intimate violence – the violence against women and children in families and other intimate relations that is a mainspring for learning to use violence to impose one's will on others.

To achieve these goals progressives must reclaim and redefine family values.

- Let's bring together both secular and religious groups already

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working for policies that support families where mutual respect and accountability, rather than inequality and rote conformity to orders for fear of harsh punishment, are modeled.

- Let's work with religious groups toward supporting real spirituality: compassion, empathy, and non-violence.
- Let's reach out to the people who are finding community and spirituality in religious institutions that preach fundamentalist ideas by helping them focus on these basic moral issues – and let's show that this is essential to build foundations for the less violent, more equitable, safer future everyone wants.
- Let's make ending family violence and other forms of intimate violence a top religious and secular issue that speaks to the heart of all people who care about children and families.

This is what people can – and will – respond to if we are clear and passionate in our message with standards and stories that inspire and transform beliefs, behaviors, and policies. Then we can resume the movement toward realizing the American dream of democracy, freedom, and justice for all.

Riane Eisler is best known for her international bestseller [The Chalice and The Blade](#). She is president of the [Center for Partnership Studies](#) and co-founder of the [Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence](#). Her other books include the award winning [Tomorrow's Children](#) and [The Power of Partnership](#).

Frances Kissling is president of [Catholics for a Free Choice](#) and a founder of the [Global Fund for Women](#). She is a frequent contributor to international media and her work has appeared in [The New York Times](#), [The Washington Post](#), and the [Journal for Feminist Studies in Religion](#).

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