

LERA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
“Rebuilding America in a Global Context”
January 6, 2008
New Orleans, Louisiana

I am pleased to be in New Orleans at the 60th Anniversary of the Labor and Employment Relations Association—this is the culmination of an incredible year for me, serving as your President, and one that ends on a very high note. I have had the privilege of traveling throughout the United States, speaking to members of LERA chapters and meeting with labor, management, government, neutrals, and academics as well. I am pleased that we are assisting in the economic development of New Orleans by staying here and contributing to the local economy. I have bought 2 T-shirts to support the New Orleans Public Library as well.

We are also entering the 60th year of the Taft-Hartley Act, enacted in the spring of 1947 to deal with labor-management relations after a tumultuous strike-prone post-war year as well as the 60th anniversary of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) which was established as an independent federal agency. The Industrial Relations Research Association (IRRA) now called LERA turns 60 and this means that all those organizations, such as industrial relations schools and colleges, are all “baby boomers”. This also gives us a chance to reflect on what has happened and where we go forward. For whatever its worth, Farah Fawcett, Larry David, Meat Loaf, David Letterman, and Glenn Close, also hit the 60th mark this year, along with Bill Richardson and Hillary Clinton.

Last year, outgoing president David Lipsky focused on the end of the long-existing social contract in the American workplace and sagely assessed both the impact of that change and what might result from it. My subject today is something else David initiated but did not speak about last year, namely, the future of this organization.

It’s now been several years since we changed the name of this organization, which was all to the good, but to nobody’s surprise, changing the name was merely the first step in a total review of our purpose, our structure, our functions, and our future. David put together a strategic planning group to come back with some clear ideas and strong medicine that would be needed to turn around what increasingly appeared to be an unclear purpose, an outmoded governance structure, and a decline in membership.

Planning of course is not very useful in any organization if the leadership does not play a key role in working closely with the planners. We also have had to contend with the old adage that “day to day operations drive out planning.” That can be interpreted also to mean that no one engages in truly serious planning until they believe there’s a real problem that planning can help resolve.

The planners – led by Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld. Who will soon become our president-elect, and Nancy Peace – confirmed for us those new ideas and structures were indeed necessary. In carrying this forward, my role began with forming an informal working team of our outgoing and next two presidents, along with myself, to ensure some continuity beyond the one-year span of anyone’s term.

Thankfully, David Lipsky agreed to continue to be involved as immediate past president, and Tony Oliver and Joel, as the next two presidents also realized the need for this new degree of coordination.

We need to renew the value of LERA to each segment of our membership. Our academic members need to know that they are participating in a high-level organization in which scholarship is recognized as the route to generate new ideas and confirm what really works in the real world of the workplace. Members from both labor and management need to feel that they are benefiting from learning about new approaches, discussing them amid a widely-respected group of informed “insiders” and finding out how colleagues have fared—again, knowing what is working and what isn’t. Neutrals—both private and government—need also to be aware of trends in the workplace and ideas from the academy; they too will contribute from their experiences.

But none of this can happen if we do not confront and meet our current challenges—we need to reverse a decline in membership by making LERA something that is invaluable to all who are connected with it. We need to integrate the highly effective operations of our many local chapters in a way that encourages local participation in the national organization and vice-versa.

This year we rolled up our sleeves and got started. We managed to continue founding funding for the industrial councils program and we integrated the councils into our National Policy Forum last June—which was held in Washington, DC and whose theme was “Searching for the New American Dream’. That forum drew more than 250 members and attendees from councils and interest groups to deal with such issues as labor relations in the airlines, autos, and utilities industries, as well as pensions, retirement, and the role of states and Congress in health care and family and medical leave.

We interrupted this exciting but admittedly somewhat dry task by publishing a cartoon book of *New Yorker* cartoons with laughs about the world of work and our ability to see the highs and lows over the past sixty years.

There are many new ideas percolating too---including the idea of a Fellows program for mid-career academics and practitioners; more publishing opportunities for both; and the idea of forming a National Labor-Management Leadership Forum for there is now no central body where these groups can talk away from the collective bargaining table. This is a chance to lower the temperature on what is often a lack of consensus and heightened tempers. We are hopeful that we can do this with some additional support from you and others. The Collective Bargaining Forum, the National Policy Association, and other

groups are gone. Such a focus is needed to have the dialogue that encourages creative problem-solving.

This Conference itself now hosts a variety of formats—subject integrations and debates as well as presentations and discussions---and aims to attract many non-members to see what LERA has to offer. Yesterday, for example, we heard our distinguished speaker, Prof. Claudia Goldin from Harvard, talk about wage inequality and its relation to the race between technology and education—this was showcased by NY Times columnist Paul Krugman, the same Paul Krugman who spoke this morning at the AFL-CIO sponsored breakfast at 7am. How is that for planning? And then another distinguished panel will deal with the use of alternative dispute resolution to rebuild New Orleans and New York, in the wake of catastrophes. This forum will draw from local experts who have tried to make things work in New Orleans as well as others who have seen attempts after September 11th in New York City. For indeed, our theme is “Rebuilding America’ and we have many challenges to do this.

Much remains to be done. LERA’s committee structure has not proven responsive to many of the challenges we have asked the committees to address. More positively, our board of directors has wholeheartedly supported what must be changed in order for LERA to prevail as well as endure. As William Faulkner memorably put it in accepting his Nobel prize, which by the way, was in one of those other field they give them in besides Economics. He said, “I believe that man will not only endure but will prevail.”

None of what we have accomplished to date nor what will get done in the future would be possible without a lot of good people in LERA working together. That begins with my thanking both my predecessor, David Lipsky, who, among all his accomplishments, has brought our development program to the \$1 million mark, just a start but a big one, and my successor, Tony Oliver, who brings out the best in everyone, as does his successor, Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld. Joel’s indefatigable leadership and planning is most appreciated. Much support has come from our Board members as well as the local chapter members and presidents, many of whom have been kind enough to invite me to speak at their meetings.

Perspectives on Work—especially the 60th anniversary issue you now have – is a tribute to Charles Whalen’s perseverance and skill. I also deeply appreciate the support I’ve received—for more years than I care to mention—from my colleagues and leaders at the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service.

In my own work, I have seen significant developments that we may find ourselves influenced by and involved in over the next few years. Here are some questions to consider:

1. Where are our young people going, studying, and thinking about? I’ve been presenting a program on “Generational Conflict at the Workplace” and have been intrigued at how there is a generational divide between the Traditionalists, those born before World War II, the Baby boomers, those born after 1946 to 1963; the

Generation X folks (who wish the baby boomers retire soon so that can get those promotions—born between 1964 and 1980) and the Generation Y or sometimes called the Millennial Generation (those in their twenties now, born after 1980) who are just entering the work force.

We've been having workshops and discussions at many LERA Chapter meetings and I've even been able to take this concept abroad when I worked with other cultures—for example, in Romania, when I was training lawyers in mediation as part of a project sponsored by the Romanian Ministry of Justice and US Embassy, I asked my colleagues (of all ages) who were their heroes growing up? In the United States, many baby boomers mention John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King; Generation X have theirs as well; but in Romania, many of the lawyers said they had no heroes, and if they did it wasn't any one from politics, but from music and sports.

While some may say that we have always had discussions between generations and this is nothing new, I have found that these workshops are a way to have a creative and constructive problem-solving dialogue to deal with how to communicate on the job and deal with issues of respect and technology too.

2. The need for better communications and training, found me this year, since last February training our US Marine Corps Advisors in negotiations and mediation before they become embedded in the Iraqi army—these young men are learning how to role play in conflict situations with discussions, bilateral meetings, with the use of interpreters, and how to do creative problem-solving. It has been a very rewarding experience as we hear from Lt. Colonels and Majors who tell their troops that most of their time will be spent negotiating! This had meant that I have traveled to Camp Pendleton and Quantico numerous times to work with my mediator colleagues, and through the use of role-plays, videos, discussion, we have come up with a program that meets their needs.
3. The use of negotiation and mediation training in other countries—and conflict resolution at the grass roots level—means that I have worked on a project with the Department of Labor and now the University of Michigan to develop dispute resolution skills at the enterprise level in the People's Republic of China. This is designed to have workers and HR professionals deal with such issues as overtime, health and safety, and temporary workers and to solve these problems in a peaceful manner. It has also meant working with Chinese arbitration tribunals and discuss how those skills could be improved.
4. I also want to highlight best practices abroad---I've been in Cambodia where we helped to train labor mediators from the Government as well as work with the highly successful Cambodian Arbitration Tribunal. This is an organization that is well respected by all sides and which publishes its decisions in English as well as Khmer language. Indeed, the Cambodian experience is one practice that works for wage and labor disputes in the textile, hotel, and other industries. I've also seen

how interactive American-style training can work in other countries—using it in Indonesia where labor, management, and government groups sat at mixed tables to solve real and imaginary problems, including forming an “ideal” labor-management committee, writing out its mission and purpose, and providing it with a creative name.

5. I have learned from my ILO colleagues—and was able to have them assist us when we were training labor and management groups in Eastern Africa in Kampala, Uganda. We had 60 people and only two trainers (Commissioner David Thaler and myself)—so we enlisted our ILO hosts to assist—and we ran the meeting very well---we saw how some of the same exercises had different outcomes. One exercise called “the Ostrich Egg” deals with the importance of disclosure of key information—if you don’t ask the right questions, or disclose the important information, you either won’t reach an agreement, or will come to one that isn’t as beneficial to either side. And what we found is that our trainees learned more from “failure” than “successes” – meaning that those who missed something, will always remember that—and the next time they negotiate, they will be sure to ask a version of “please tell me why you want what you want? And that is because if I know why someone wants something, I can figure out what weight to attribute to it and also, what alternatives could be suggested.
6. I have learned from international visitors to the United States too. Recently, a Korean Labor Institute Study delegation visited the US and FMCS and asked us about the experience with PATCO in 1981. The Koreans now have a new law for public sector which into effect this year and does not include the right to strike. They asked us how they can learn from us and our experiences when the air traffic controllers went on strike (illegally) and were permanently replaced. I was able to mention that LERA had recently published an article on the anniversary of PATCO in the *Perspectives* magazine of Summer 2006.

Lastly, I would like to engage in a little crystal ball gazing—or taking a careful look at where we’re going and how we might get there. Here are my impressions:

We have yet to see whether the decades of diminishment (decline in real wages) have reinvigorated or dealt a death blow to the American middle class; as

- housing prices decline,
- mortgages come due,
- college tuition zooms past the inflation rate,
- the savings rate is tiny,
- one-job, working-life careers disappear,
- adequate health care and a decent pension are in doubt,
- air quality (pollution as well as high gas prices) falls,
- long daily commutes, and the tensions arising from long hours of commuting.

Technology grows more into the fabric of our lives more than ever:

- the growth of the virtual workplace, countering the commuting needs and strains I just mentioned,
- wider use of PDA's (personal desk assistants)---be they trees, pilots, or my own: my family calls it my "crackberry",
- pervasive use of the internet for communication, and, more and more for research. Indeed, the internet has become the "virtual water cooler" and that is why a recent NLRB decision, 2-1 on the use of the internet by workers pointed to how much a part of the workplace it has become.
- constant availability through cell phones and video conferencing, so that privacy and boundaries become an issue,
- working different hours through flextime and location of colleagues throughout the world, and
- the need to develop research and educational niche markets to survive and prosper.

For us in this field, it did not take reading Tom Friedman's book, "The World is Flat" to realize that the speed of change is sharply rising around us—spurred by the successes of China and India already are gaining as they industrialize, consume more resources, produce cheaper goods and services, and make us take notice of new competition.

So, in sum, what does the crystal ball see LERA in our future—be it three, five, or ten years from now? Where will we all be three or five years from now? I would like each of you to close your eyes for a moment and vision where you would be in three years...that's 2011...you are three years older, (but you look great)—what do you want to have happen? What can you do to help make that happen?

For me, engaging in this exercise involves answering plenty of questions: What one good thing can each of us do to make the world a better place?

- What new infusion of ideas can we use when we teach?
- What new idea can we use when we go to work?
- Negotiate a new deal?
- Meet a new person?
- Does it mean a pledge to be nicer?
- To spend more time with the family?
- To rearrange priorities?
- To declutter your life?
- To pay bills on time;
- To decide what meetings are really worthwhile and attend them, and
- To say than you to those who have helped?

And lastly, for me, it is to acknowledge someone who has become like a human GPS (Global Positioning System) in my life—who has helped me to focus, to find direction,

especially when I get lost, and who has made this year work out—I wish to thank my husband, Richard B. Hoffman, for I couldn't have done this without him.

And thank you all. See you next year in San Francisco for the National Conference, January 2-6th, 2009, and hopefully much sooner at the many LERA chapter functions in the Spring and Fall, including the FMCS Labor-Management Conference, June 8-10th in Washington, DC.