

Buttigieg's paternity leave is a reminder that the US prioritizes work over family ^[1]

The transportation secretary is 'at work' like the heroic workaholic he is – but that undermines the whole point of parental leave

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EXCERPTS

What Pete Buttigieg reveals about paternity leave in America

Brace yourself, because what I'm going to say next may shock you. Here we go: an American man adopted newborn twins and then had the audacity to take some time off work to look after them! No, I can't believe it either. No self-respecting, red-blooded man should be spending time with his tiny babies. He should be in the office, missing those early months, so he can focus on what's really important. Forget bonding with your vulnerable newborns, there are urgent emails to be sent.

The man in question, of course, is the US secretary of transportation, Pete Buttigieg, who recently adopted twins with his husband. Conservatives have, predictably, been having homophobic hysterics about the loving family but were tipped over the edge when it emerged that Buttigieg had taken parental leave. The Fox News host Tucker Carlson, the patron saint of family values, ridiculed Buttigieg's parenting last week. "Paternity leave, they call it," Carlson sneered. "Trying to figure out how to breastfeed. No word on how that went." Carlson, by the way, has four children. No word on how much time he spent with them when they were born. No doubt he was a Real Man™ and left his wife, or the nannies, to do all the parenting.

Buttigieg's paternity leave was criticized again on Tuesday when a reporter from the conservative outlet Newsmax asked the White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, whether it wasn't wise for Buttigieg to come back to work. Psaki responded by saying: "He is at work. I was on a conference call with him this morning." She then went on to talk about how important parental leave is.

Psaki's response to the Newsmax has been widely celebrated on social media and by the more liberal news outlets. There have been a number of headlines like: "Psaki shuts down Newsmax's reporter's attack." I wonder whether the people praising Psaki actually listened to what she said. Because her very first instinct, let me remind you, was to insist that Buttigieg is still working. (Buttigieg, by the way, had a similar response to Carlson's attack – he went on MSNBC shortly after to stress that he has "been available 24/7 on issues that can't wait".)

Contrary to all the gushing headlines, Psaki didn't "shut down" the Newsmax reporter at all. Rather, she reassured her that Buttigieg may be on leave but he's still juggling all of his responsibilities like the heroic workaholic he is. And that's an absolutely terrible response. It undermines everything Psaki later says about the importance of parental leave. Because, last time I checked, parental leave is supposed to be leave. You're not supposed to work at the same time. I get it: Buttigieg has a very important job. But if the transportation department can't function without him for a couple of months, then we should all be very worried indeed. A commitment to parental leave is more than just noble words, it means putting into place processes that let people actually take that leave.

You expect conservatives to have stone age views about paternity leave but let's face it, the Democrats have a hell of a long way to go in this department also. Buttigieg's paternity leave was an amazing opportunity for the Biden administration to communicate just how important paid family leave is. They should have shouted about Buttigieg's paternity leave from the rooftops from the very beginning. They should have used him as an opportunity to talk about the importance of men taking time off – and how we will never achieve gender equality until men start taking their caregiving responsibilities seriously. Instead it looks suspiciously like they tried to keep Buttigieg's leave under wraps. The transportation department didn't announce that Buttigieg would be taking leave when it began in mid-August. The only reason it made headlines is because Politico broke the news last week with a newsletter describing Buttigieg as being "MIA" and asking whether Buttigieg can "have it all". Having it leak out the way it did makes it look like it was some kind of dirty secret. The defensiveness since (he is working, promise!) only reinforces that.

I don't want to be too downbeat. Buttigieg's paternity leave is a big deal and an example of how social norms are slowly changing for the better. Still, the fact that Psaki is getting wild praise for what was ultimately a pretty dreadful response is depressing. It shows just how much the US – the only rich country in the world without a law on paid leave for new parents – prioritizes work over families. It shows just how little the American people seem to expect from their own government. And it shows how even liberals in the US still seem to have a

hard time with the idea of a man putting his kids before his job.

There's a hotline to help men cool down

If you're a man in Bogotá, Colombia, dealing with anger issues you can now call the Calm Line to get help. The service was set up to fight violence against women by addressing the root cause: machismo. As the New York Times explains, the central idea is that "machismo hurts not only women, but men, too, by confining them to a narrow set of emotions and roles – men must be strong, men cannot fail, men cannot cry – that leaves them prone to isolation, violence and social conflict". The Calm Line was started by the government of Claudia López, who became the first woman and the first openly gay mayor of Bogotá last year and is just one part of a broader initiative to confront machismo.

Ghana's president calls for 'tolerance' as parliament considers anti-LGBTQ+ law

Gay sex is already punishable with up to three years in jail in Ghana. The new bill, which is (of course!) called the family values bill, would criminalize being LGBTQ+ further. Ghana's president, who has said same-sex marriage will never happen under his watch, is calling for civil debate and tolerance as he tries to take away people's rights.

Most rapes in New York went unsolved in 2020

Remind me again how we need to keep paying billions of dollars to fund the police if we want to protect women? Because I'm not seeing a particularly good ROI here.

Vienna museums open adult-only OnlyFans account to display nudes

A Vienna tourist board spokesperson said the city and its cultural institutions had been finding it "almost impossible" to use nude artworks in promotional materials on social media because of censorship. Perhaps big tech should more on censoring neo-Nazis than nudes.

Teen girls are developing tics and TikTok could be a factor

The Wall Street Journal has a fascinating story about a surge of teenage girls around the world seeking medical attention for tics, which they link to social contagion and TikTok. A rather less sensational explanation, of course, is that the pandemic has screwed everyone's mental health up.

The week in Wizardarchy

New Zealand has terminated the contract with its official wizard after 23 years of service. The 88-year-old (who has made some dubious comments about women) is not happy about it. "It's just they don't like me because they are boring old bureaucrats and everyone likes me and no one likes them," he complained. Perhaps he should just be thankful for two decades of wizarding: it was a very long spell.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: maternity and parental leave ^[4]

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