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Federal Estate Tax Discounts for Potential Income Tax Liability for Retirement Accounts?

-by Neil E. Harl*

It’s been well-established for decades that discounts in valuation for federal estate tax and federal gift tax purposes could be claimed on corporate stock (and partnership interests) for minority interest and non-marketability. And it has been clear for nearly two decades that discounts could be claimed for co-ownership interests as well. Moreover, for nearly a decade, in valuing corporate stock, courts have allowed a discount for potential income tax liability.

More recently, arguments have been made that discounts for potential income tax liability should be allowed in valuing U.S. Government savings bonds and, even more significantly, that discounts should be allowed for potential income tax liability for retirement accounts. Neither argument has been successful to date.

The following discussion focuses first on the authority for discounts for potential income tax liability on corporate liquidations (which provides the underpinning for the taxpayers’ arguments in the other areas) with attention then shifted to the probabilities for success with potential income tax liability on government bonds and on retirement accounts.

Discounts for potential income tax liability on corporate liquidation

The Tax Court, until 1998, had consistently held that projected income taxes (capital gains tax, recapture tax and tax on ordinary income) on liquidation did not reduce the value of closely-held stock when the fact of liquidation was speculative and uncertain.

Resistance to a discount for the potential income tax liability was based on two factors – (1) when the facts did not suggest that the shareholders intended to liquidate the corporation, the court refused to assume that a hypothetical buyer would do so; and (2) before 1986, the Internal Revenue Code permitted the tax-free liquidation of corporations under some circumstances which made it possible to avoid all or most of the income taxes upon corporate liquidation. These factors were viewed as rendering the tax liability on corporate liquidations so speculative as to be irrelevant.

In a 1998 Court of Appeals case, Eisenberg v. Commissioner, the court acknowledged the reasons why the Tax Court had resisted a discount for potential income tax liability but brushed off the government’s assertion that liquidation was not imminent in that case and also the argument that tax liability was too speculative to be allowed. The court concluded...
that an adjustment for potential income tax liability “... should be taken into account in valuing the stock at issue in the closely-held C corporation even though no liquidation or sale of the corporation or its assets was planned at the time of the gift of the stock.” The Second Circuit Court of appeals remanded the matter to the Tax Court to ascertain how much discount should be allowed and the gift taxes to be paid by the taxpayer. Other courts have followed the Eisenberg decision.

The argument in retirement accounts

In Smith v. United States, the estate filed a claim for refund for overpayment of federal estate tax on the grounds that retirement accounts in the estate should have been valued at a discount (suggested at 30 percent) to reflect the federal income tax liability that would be triggered when distributions were ultimately made from the retirement accounts to the beneficiaries. The court, noting that the retirement accounts were classified as “income in respect of decedent,” pointed out that the accounts would not receive an adjustment in income tax basis at the death of the decedent and the gain would be taxed to the beneficiaries on receipt of each distribution. The court added that Congress had specifically provided a deduction for the federal estate tax, if any, levied on the retirement accounts in an effort to avoid a double tax.

The appellate court then added that the Tax Court has refused to depart from the “willing buyer-willing seller” test for valuing assets and has been unwilling to accept the idea that the transfer is between the individual decedent and that individual’s estate or beneficiaries. The appellate court then pointed out that a hypothetical buyer would pay the value of the underlying securities as reflected by the applicable securities exchange prices; a hypothetical seller would likewise sell the securities for that amount. The court concluded that a hypothetical buyer would not consider the income tax liability of a beneficiary on the income in respect of decedent inasmuch as the buyer would not be paying the income tax on the gain involved.

The Second Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed the argument that the recent cases allowing a discount for income tax liability on corporate liquidation should be followed and explained that those cases were distinguishable.

In conclusion

The decision in Estate of Smith v. United States is a compelling precedent against allowing a discount for retirement accounts (and other items of income in respect of decedent).

Footnotes


5 Estate of Smith v. United States, 300 F. Supp. 2d 474 (S.D. Tex. 2004), aff’d, 391 F.3d 621 (5th Cir. 2004); Estate of Kahn v. Comm’r, 125 T.C. No. 11 (2005).


7 Estate of Ford v. Comm’r, T.C. Memo. 1993-580, aff’d, 53 F.3d 924 (8th Cir. 1995).

8 See I.R.C. §§ 336, 337.


12 Id.

13 Id.

14 Id.


16 300 F. Supp. 2d 474 (S.D. Tex. 2004), aff’d, 391 F.3d 621 (5th Cir. 2004).

17 Id.

18 Id.

19 Id.


21 Smith v. United States, 391 F.3d 621 (5th Cir. 2004).

22 Id.

23 See notes 6 – 15 supra.

24 391 F.3d 621 (5th Cir. 2004).