Paid child care for working mothers? All it took was a world war [1]

When the men came home, the programs went away.
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EXCERPTED

I am typing this from inside an indoor playground in Portland. We are new to town, it's the tail end of summer and my 4-year-old daughter can't start her new preschool until next week. It's also raining, and our house is full of boxes. We took a bus here and paid $11 to enter, and I am now in the awkward semiconscious state of the working parent without child care: looking down to try and remember what I wanted to write; looking up to determine whether the piercing scream is my child, or just my child's fault. I will not make my deadline, but my daughter will be spared a gloomy afternoon inside the house, and I will be spared the guilt of letting her watch TV all day while I try to earn money.

It is painful, from this vantage, to read a piece in this newspaper, from 70 years ago, describing a different Portland scene: a room for children overlooking the Willamette River, "with windows on two sides to insure proper lighting and walls of pastel shades, in blues, yellows, apricots, depending on the exposure of the individual room." In this paradise, one of the two new nurseries built by the Kaiser Company for the children of workers in its Portland shipyards, "the children will have an opportunity to live wholesome, happy lives" — so promises the article, written by the director of the company's Child Service Department.

The mothers of these children were "welders, clerks, timekeepers and secretaries" many of whom had been recently mobilized for the workforce. The nurseries — a partnership between the federal government and the Kaiser Company — were open seven days a week, 12 months a year. There was an infirmary for sick children and food was provided. There was even a cafeteria where women could pick up hot meals to take home after work.

But it took a bloody global war, and its production demands on the country's workforce, for the United States to make such meaningful provisions for working parents.

[The problem persists today: 20 percent of parents are going into debt for child care.]

It is difficult to read this today, when it is widely acknowledged that American parents and caregivers are living through a child care crisis. Ours is an economy in which wages have stagnated and the cost of child care has soared — and, paradoxically, child care providers remain underpaid. In the face of this untenable situation come periodic public callbacks to World War II, when federal funds and partnerships, like the one with Kaiser, provided subsidized child care for hundreds of thousands of working women.

We had universal child care once, the line goes — why not again? I think of the office where I once worked, the mad dash to get to the day care in time to pick up my firstborn: What if I had gone to work knowing she was next door, that she was socializing, that she was fed, that she was surrounded by festive painted walls? And crucially, that I could afford it.

As with any moment in United States history, a closer look reveals a more complex reality. We did not have "universal child care": we had a gesture toward it — one that benefited a select group of people, and was bitterly contested along the way. But for the families that it helped, it was an incredible, once-in-a-century boon.

The Federal Government got into the child care game before World War II. During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration ran a collaborative federal and state program of nursery schools, aimed at creating jobs. When America entered World War II several years later, the employment situation reversed: With the country approaching "full employment," every industry scrambled for workers.

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