

Bush dismantles child care [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

What kind of society have we become? Before members of Congress departed for recess, they gave President George W. Bush -- hardly known for his wisdom or compassion -- the right to define what constitutes torture and to suspend the constitutional right of habeas corpus. But our elected representatives couldn't find time to pass the Labor, Health and Human Service appropriations bill which, among things, funds child care.

The "Child Care Crisis" -- the absence of anyone to care for America's children, elderly and disabled -- has turned into the new millennium's version of the "Problem That Has No Name." It is the 800-pound elephant that sits in Congress, our homes and offices -- gigantic, but ignored.

And, it keeps getting worse. According to a new 50-state report on child care policies just released by the National Women's Law Center, the Bush administration has successfully dismantled government services for children. State funds for child care assistance have fallen for the fifth year in a row. The problem will soon become catastrophic when large numbers of single mothers bump up against their five-year life limit on welfare.

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The report also finds that states are failing to adequately compensate providers. Helen Blank, NWLC director of leadership and public policy, describes the consequences of paying child care workers such poor wages.

Low-income children are denied critical early learning experiences. Parents find it difficult to access the child care they need to work. And providers, who are often low-income women themselves, face earning less or going out of business.

Poor working mothers face other barriers as well. Two-thirds of the states have raised the income eligibility and copayments for child care and 18 states have long waiting lists. All of these barriers to adequate childcare make it extremely difficult for women to work, feel confident that their children are safe and to get off welfare.

But do either Democrats or Republicans think this constitutes a threat to the national security of our society? No. In fact, more than three decades after Congress passed -- and President Richard Nixon vetoed -- the 1971 comprehensive child care legislation, child care has all but dropped off the national political agenda. And, with each passing year, the child care crisis only grows larger, burdening the lives of working mothers. But it never reaches our nation's political agenda.

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Overworked American families, whose time spent at work has increased three extra weeks between 1986 and 1997, suffer from what sociologist Arlie Hochschild has called a "time bind." But both social conservatives and the Religious Right, who glorify "family values," refuse to support any national effort to help working families regain a sense of stability and balance.

Conventional wisdom also reinforces the widespread myth that child care is not a problem, that American women have gained equality, entered a new post-feminist era and that it's time for disgruntled feminists "to move on." This is hardly new. Ever since 1970, the mainstream media has been pronouncing the death of feminism and reporting that women have returned home to care for their children. The early 21st century version of this journalistic narrative describes -- with a certain celebratory tone -- how elite, wealthy and predominantly white women are "choosing" to ditch their educational credentials and "opting out" in favor of home and children.

What's missing in all these stories is the fact that the vast majority of ordinary middle-class and low-income working mothers have to work. They have no choice. Such stories also obscure the reality that an absence of quality, affordable, and accessible child care and flexible working hours greatly contributes to a woman's so-called "choice" to stay at home.

Poverty -- like the child care crisis -- remains invisible to mainstream America and largely outside the national political discourse. Yet, in 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that poverty rates in U.S. had increased for the fourth straight year and had jumped from 31.6 million people in 2000 to 37 million, including 13 million children.

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Congress's indifference to child care, however, is merely one example of this country's failure to address poverty and the growing child care crisis. It's easier to sacrifice cherished civil liberties in the name of fighting "the war on terror" than to address the need for superior education, universal health coverage, climate change, subsidized child care, mass transit, and affordable housing, all of which constitutes real national security for families and their children.

Look into the mirror. What are your values? Is your sense of security only tied to a national security program that has resulted in two failed wars and an unprecedented assault on our democratic rights? That is the question that all Americans should ask themselves before they cast their votes in November.

- reprinted from AlterNet

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