

That one time America almost got universal child care^[1]

Author: Badger, Emily

Source: Washington Post^[2]

Format: Article

Publication Date: 23 Jun 2014

EXCERPTS:

There is a passage in Gail Collins' fantastic book on the recent history of American women, "When everything changed," that has haunted me since I first read it about three years ago. In it, Collins describes a moment in political history that's hard to imagine today -- when Congress passed a bipartisan bill establishing universal child care.

The entitlement never came to be, and the problem of what to do about child care remains on the table four decades later. President Obama was wrestling with it again on Monday in a White House "summit on working families," from which groundbreaking reforms for working families seemed, yet again, unlikely to emerge.

Back in 1971, though, the United States came as close as it has ever been -- unbelievably close -- to ensuring universal child care. And if you are a woman who did not live through this era (or a woman who did not read Collins' book and then lament its history lesson with all your girlfriends), you may not know that this ever happened. The sudden realization of which somehow makes the disappointment all the more biting.

That year, Congress passed a bill, the Comprehensive Child Development Act (which now merits all of three paragraphs in Wikipedia), that would have created a national network of federally funded child care centers, with tuition subsidized depending on a family's income. It was budgeted at \$2 billion for the first two years (the equivalent of about \$10 billion today). That money was supposed to be a serious first step toward alleviating the challenges of a labor force increasingly full of working mothers. The government was to fund meals, medical checkups and staff training. No family would have been required to participate, but every one would have had the option.

"It was an entitlement," Collins wrote in a New York Times column last year, "and, if it had become law, it would have been one entitlement for little children in a world where most of the money goes to the elderly."

Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike supported the bill. The Senate passed it 63-17. Supporters expected President Richard Nixon to sign it. Then Nixon (with the urging of Pat Buchanan, then working in the White House) vetoed it with scathing language denouncing the "radical" idea that government should help rear children in the place of their parents. The veto rested on cultural grounds more than financial constraints. Here is the passage from Collins' book that lingers:

The goal was not just to kill the bill but also to bury the idea of a national child-care entitlement forever. "I insisted we not just say we can't afford it right now, in which case you get pilot programs or whatever," Buchanan said. The veto message was actually a toned-down version of what Buchanan had suggested -- he wanted to accuse the bill's drafters of "the Sovietization of American children." But it did the job Buchanan... had hoped it would do. It delivered the message that it was much more politically dangerous to work in favor of expanded child care than to oppose it.

There was little public attention surrounding the bill at the time Congress was debating it. After the veto, though, the very idea of government-funded child care spawned a fantastic misinformation campaign, complete with rumors that any such efforts would inevitably lead to government indoctrination of small children, and child labor unions empowered to fight their parents.

When I think today about public policies that would have the greatest tangible impact on women my age (and their mates), I think about this entitlement that never was, which would have helped to ease endless dilemmas around work and children -- and the costs of managing both. There are few greater financial shocks today than child care, which costs more than college in 31 states, which often costs more than the second income a working mother might earn while someone else cares for her children. That we don't have universal child care today speaks to the strength of philosophical opposition among a few 40 years ago, in the midst of the Cold War and on the eve of the culture wars. "We didn't want this in the United States of America," Buchanan told Collins. "The federal government should not be in the business of raising America's children. It was a political and ideological ideal of great importance."

UPDATE: Chris Herbst, an assistant professor at the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University, emails to tell me that the full historical record in the United States on universal child care is even worse than what I've described above: During World War II, he points out, "we had it, but then dismantled it!" From his note:

For four years during the U.S.'s involvement in World War II (1943-1946), the nation ran a universal child care program funded through the Lanham Act. The program was intended to be a temporary war emergency measure so that mothers with children ages 0-12 could contribute to the nation's war production effort. Nearly every state received Lanham Act funds to build and maintain child care centers, to train and pay teachers, and to heavily subsidize daycare costs for families.

Herbst's research on the program (which compares states that more heavily invested in it than others) found that the Lanham Act contributed to sizable increases in maternal employment and long-run benefits for their children, including higher educational attainment and adult employment outcomes. These benefits also went largely to the most economically disadvantaged children.

As for what happened to the program itself? Once the war ended (and the need for women in the workplace receded), federal resources for such child care dried up, and most of the centers were closed. A prescient quote from Eleanor Roosevelt, who believed the program should continue: "Many thought they [the centers] were purely a war emergency measure. A few of us had an inkling that perhaps they were a need which was constantly with us, but one that we had neglected to face in the past."

-reprinted from the Washington Post

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: federal programs ^[4]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/07/one-time-america-almost-got-universal-child-care>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/07/one-time-america-almost-got-universal-child-care> [2]

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/06/23/that-one-time-america-almost-got-universal-child-care/> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>