

Why America gave up on the fight for a family-friendly workplace and why it's starting again ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

At the first-ever White House Summit on Working Families in June, President Obama took the podium to raucous applause, which only got louder during his speech. "Many women can't even get a paid day off to give birth," he declared. "That's a pretty low bar. That we should be able to take care of."

The crowd went wild, but he wasn't done. "Child care...costs thousands of dollars a year," he pointed out. "There are other countries that know how to do childcare well. This isn't rocket science." Cheers went up from the advocates, researchers, labor groups, and plenty of working mothers in the room.

After describing our lack of paid family leave and universal child care policies, he said, "They shouldn't be bonuses. They should be part of our bottom line as a society." The applause in the room reached a fevered pitch.

While some observers may have brushed it off as mere pandering to the liberal base - and women in particular - before midterm elections, the excitement around these statements is well warranted. Obama's bear hug of policies like paid family leave and universal child care represents a break with a long, tortured past.

The United States very nearly had universal child care. In 1971, both houses of Congress passed the Comprehensive Child Development Act, which would have provided child care at a sliding scale to every child that needed it, the first step toward a universal system. All it needed was President Nixon's signature.

Nixon had been in support of child care, and in fact said that "so critical is the matter of early growth that we must make a national commitment to providing all American children an opportunity for healthful and stimulating development during the first five years of life." A task force on women's rights that he convened found that the lack of child care was the primary obstacle for women, and recommended creating "a system of well-run child care centers available to all pre-school children."

But his signature, and the creation of universal child care, was not to be. On the advice of Pat Buchanan, his special assistant, he issued a scathing veto. Calling it "a long leap into the dark for the United States Government and the American people" and "the most radical piece of legislation" to emerge from the current Congress, Nixon's veto bemoaned the "family-weakening implications" of the bill. "For the Federal Government to plunge headlong financially into supporting child development would commit the vast moral authority of the National Government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach," he stated at the end.

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