

Why America never had universal childcare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The fix for “The Hell of American Day Care,” described in Jonathan Cohn’s heartrending cover story, is obvious: a universal, federally financed and regulated, quality child care system.

The aggravating fact is we almost had it. More than forty years ago.

The U.S. ranks third to last among OECD countries on public spending on family benefits. That we lack anything resembling a 21st century family policy is not an oversight. It is not because American society refuses to come to grips with the reality of working mothers. Rather, it is the result of a political hijacking so fabulously successful it wiped away virtually any trace of its own handiwork.

In 1971, Congress passed the Comprehensive Child Development Act on a bipartisan vote. Co-sponsored by Minnesota Senator Walter Mondale and Indiana Representative John Brademas, the act established a network of nationally funded, locally administered, comprehensive child care centers, which were to provide quality education, nutrition, and medical services. Mondale viewed the measure as a first step toward universal childcare. Wanting “to avoid typing it as a poor person’s program,” Mondale later explained, the centers were to be open to all on a sliding scale basis. Congress authorized real money for the program—in today’s dollars, the equivalent of five times the 2012 federal budget for Head Start.

But President Richard Nixon vetoed it. Declaring the Comprehensive Child Development Act to be “a long leap into the dark,” Nixon ominously warned that it 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.”

As late as 1972, the GOP platform had a strong child care plank.

“Even for Nixon, it was surprising,” Mondale later wrote. Nixon had in fact requested two statements from his staff, one to sign and one to veto the act; the administration had helped to draft the bill; most of those in the administration who opposed it wanted Nixon to say only that it would be too costly to administer. Instead, Pat Buchanan, then a special assistant to Nixon, prevailed. Itching to escalate the nascent culture war, Buchanan inserted his fevered imaginings into Nixon’s official message.

Still, Buchanan didn’t—at least yet—get the reaction he hoped for. The consensus stood with women’s rights—in the nation and in the GOP itself. Four months after Nixon’s veto, a huge bipartisan majority in Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment. Later that year, women delegates to the 1972 Republican convention won a strong child care plank in the party’s platform, albeit over Nixon’s objections.

Meanwhile, Mondale and Brademas regrouped. To fend off accusations they were “anti-family” communist sympathizers (New York Republican Senator James Buckley said the law would create pressure “to encourage women to put their families into institutions of communal living”), they scaled back their ambitions. Gone was the word “comprehensive” in the title and 90 percent of the funding. Their revised Child and Family Services Act passed the Senate in 1973, but died in the House.

You’ve probably never heard this story because of what happened next. In 1975, child care legislation expired for good, buried under an avalanche of angry letters against the very idea of publicly supported child care¹.

The coup de grace was delivered by a grassroots movement of fundamentalists—many of them women—galvanized by an anonymous flyer that circulated widely in churches in the South and West. The flyer made false and unhinged claims—that it would be illegal for parents to make their children go to church or take out the trash, that children would have the right to sue their parents and organize labor unions.

Consider what that stirred up in one Bible Belt state. The flyer made its way to the Oklahoma chapter of Women Who Want to be Women, a recently formed anti-ERA fundamentalist women’s group. Fantasies about forced child care were already familiar to them from a popular anti-ERA pamphlet written by the national founder of the Four Ws. (The so-called Pink Sheet deemed the ERA “the most drastic measure in Senate history” and said it would, among many other horrors, force mothers to put their children “in a federal day care center.”) The Oklahoma Four W’s made killing national child care legislation their first political campaign, and they successfully lobbied the

Oklahoma City PTA council to oppose the bill.

Most members of Congress, including those from Oklahoma, received thousands of letters against the Child and Family Services Act, many of them recycling the anti-child care flyer's perfervid claims.

So, of course, even though a majority of the public still supported the measure, our brave Congressmen caved.

And here we are today, with no national solution to the absurd and at times, tragic, lack of safe, affordable, quality child care.

President Obama is seeking to change that with a proposal for a ten-year, \$75 billion investment in universal pre-Kindergarten. It's a promising initiative that deserves serious attention. Who, after all, could be against 'pre-kindergarten'? Perhaps it's a good time to remember the history of the bold effort to create a universal child care system and the reactionary opposition it inspired.

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