

SYNOPSIS - EPISODE 2

ONCE UPON A TIME: When Childcare for All Wasn't Just A Fairytale



Childcare in America is a frayed patchwork—uneven in quality, unaffordable to most and failing many of our youngest children and their families. Once Upon a Time allows us to imagine how things might be different if all the nation's children had access to high-quality early care and education for the past four decades. That's because we almost did.

During WWII, the Lanham Act funded a national network of child development centers which served 600,000 children whose mothers, known as Rosie the Riveters, were manufacturing the armaments in the nation's factories crucial to winning the War. But when the War ended most of the women were sent home and, despite protests, the childcare centers were shut down.

By 1970 the number of working mothers was rising rapidly once again. Then Senator (and later to be Vice President) Walter Mondale proudly tells us why he introduced a bill that would provide high-quality childcare and early education, home visiting and other services to each and every family that wanted it.

The bill was called the Comprehensive Child Development Act (CCDA). Children Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman, then a young attorney, helped write the bill. She explains how the CCDA came out of the Civil Rights and Women's Movements and President Johnson's earlier Great Society successes and was modeled after Head Start. Community control of the child care programs was central to the bill. The CCDA passed Congress with support from both Democrats and Republicans.

But for the bill to become law, it needed President Nixon's signature. The White House was divided and no one knew what Pres. Nixon would do.

Patrick Buchanan, a young White House speechwriter at the time, reveals how a group of powerful conservatives, "the elite of the Conservative moment," he calls them, went to work behind the scenes to secure the president's veto, re-casting the bill as government intrusion in the family.

On camera Buchanan reads the veto message he wrote for Nixon which tarred the CCDA not just for its costs but on ideological grounds as "a communal approach"

to child-rearing. When Mondale reintroduced the bill, it was met by a right-wing firestorm attacking it as “the Sovietization” of American children.

Nixon’s veto and the assaults on the bill were the first time “family values” were invoked to undermine initiatives intended to help families. Buchanan says, “We stopped that piece cold. And I’m glad we did.” Mondale’s former legislative aide Syd Johnson reflects, “In politics, fear almost always triumphs over hope.”

Historian Robert Self observes that the veto of the CCDA marked a seminal inflection point from our nation’s progress towards a more inclusive society to the “fend-for-yourself” America of today.

But there is a federally-funded childcare program for the nation’s largest employer: the U.S. military. The Armed Forces’ childcare was once as abysmal as the rest of the nation. In 1989, 18 years after Nixon’s veto, Congress mandated that the military offer quality childcare, six weeks to age five, to all its families. At Camp Pendleton Marine Base, we witness some of the best childcare in the country, all of it affordable, child-centered and strictly regulated.

If those who secure our military security can have universal, high-quality childcare, what about those who secure our economic security, our civilian workforce? We came achingly close once. What will it take to enact effective child and family policies today?

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