

THE Nation.

Nothing New Under the Wingnut Sun: A Coming Preschool Backlash?

By: Rick Perlstein - February 14, 2013

It was one of the most cheering propositions in the president's State of the Union Address: "Tonight, I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every single child in America."

The formulation, it's true, is redolent of the ideological timidity of the "liberalism" of our age: instead of the federal government just doing something that's good, it sets up unwieldy, confusing funding streams to have someone else do it instead. (Political scientist Steven Teles defines this as American federalism's "kludgeocracy": "For any particular problem we [arrive] at the most gerry-rigged [sic], opaque, and complicated response.") But all the same it's a great goal for a president to get behind. As Obama went on to explain, "Every dollar we invest in high-quality early childhood education can solve more than seven dollars later on, by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime."

The problem is, the White House might just be naïve enough to believe this is a relatively easy political sell. The breakthrough research on the payoffs to investment in "universal pre-K" was done by a Nobel Prize-winning economist named James Heckman, of the University of Chicago—and Heckman is, fundamentally, a prototypical University of Chicago economist, a neoclassicist. So it's a "conservative," market-based idea, right? Like cap-and-trade. Like the "individual mandate" in health insurance. So how could conservative Republicans object?

Right. You see where I'm going with this.

The president signaled that part of the sale when he noted two states that "make it a priority to educate our youngest children": Georgia and Oklahoma. Said The New York Times, "Oklahoma and Georgia have Republican governors and were won by Mitt Romney in last year's election. Both states have expanded their preschool programs in recent years." So it is that Obama traveled to Georgia today to promote the plan.

The Times then quotes an earnest liberal with one of those what-conservative-could-object observations: "If you look at how pre-K has grown, you can see a range of different governors supporting it," said Helen Blank, the director of childcare and early learning for the National Women's Law Center. "We should be able to come together on something that we have clear research on." You know, the kind of observations that have become so familiar to us, eight seconds before the conservatives refuse to come together with Obama in any way, shape or form.

And on cue, here's John Boehner, dismissing the notion out of hand: he says getting the federal government involved in pre-k is "a good way to screw it up."

Obamaism in action. The hand of fellowship extended, there to be smacked away with extreme prejudice by Republicans for whom fellowship is inconceivable, whatever the Nobel Prize-

winning “research” might say. (Oh, and then there’s this: research? What research? Said the Cato Institute’s director of the “Center for Educational Freedom,” “Why would you want to very expensively expand the programs like this if the evidence of effectiveness is not really sound?”)

But the politics of this won’t be about the research. Like I’ve been saying: “liberals get in the biggest political trouble...when they presume a reform is an inevitable concomitant of progress. It is then they are the most likely to establish their reforms by top-down bureaucratic means. A blindsiding backlash often ensues.”

The worst backlashes of these sorts are always the ones that come from perceived federal government interference with the prerogatives of the nuclear family. This is what that phrase “family values,” whose fetishization by the right is so inscrutable to us on the left (for what could better preserve family values, we say, than living wages, paid family leave and all that other stuff the “family values” right could never dream of supporting?) means to them: the prerogative of the patriarch to control his family as he wishes, absent state interference—which, even if the kludgy Obama preschool plan in actual fact will not threaten at all, it will be perceived as doing anyway, “death panel” style.

Please support our journalism. Get a digital subscription for just \$9.50!

The preschool backlash is one of the oldest stories in the history of “New Right” organizing. A bill proposing a national system of nursery schools, under the authorship of Minnesota Senator Walter Mondale, was on a glide-path to passage in 1971. “Backed by Democrats, Republicans, and a highly mobilized set of interest organizations,” historian Kimberly J. Morgan has written, “the bill’s middle-class appeal made it seem like a political sure bet in the months preceding the 1972 election season.”

The experts agreed: What could go wrong?

Then came a visitation from a new political planet: the nascent “family values” right.

A young University of South Carolina graduate named Connie Marshner accepted a job in 1971 on Capitol Hill as a secretary for Young Americans for Freedom. Quietly, on her off hours, according to historian Leo Ribuffo, she transformed herself into an expert on a bill she decided was the quintessential example of the “therapeutic state invading the home.” Wrote Ribuffo, “Marshner established a letterhead organization and sent out mailings denouncing Mondale’s bill to local church women. To her own surprise this small effort prompted hundreds of thousands of letters to the White House.” Nixon vetoed the bill—with a speech that precisely tracked the nascent religious right rhetoric on the family: its good intentions, he said, were “overshadowed by the fiscal irresponsibility, administrative unworkability, and family-weakening implications of the system it envisions...our response to this challenge must be...consciously designed to cement the family in its rightful position as the keystone of our civilization.”

Civilization having been preserved—for the time being—Marshner claimed credit, began making the mobilization of “little clusters of mainly...evangelical, fundamentalist Mom’s groups” her life’s work, then got a job as head the new Heritage Foundation’s education department, and was soon in Kanawha County, helping organize the textbook wars there.

Mondale’s plans and Obama’s are as different as night and day: the 1971 law really did establish federal daycare centers; the Obama legislation will surely push some byzantine scheme to

distance the federal money from the local implementation as much as humanly possible, insulating it from any conceivable charge he has in mind Maoist-style mind-control camps for 3-year-olds. So, home free, right? Well, if you believe that, I've got an Obama death panel to sell you right here. And a contraption exemption for religious employers.

I dearly, dearly hope the White House has anticipated that backlash this time, and has figured it into their political plans. If not, that's political malpractice from them.