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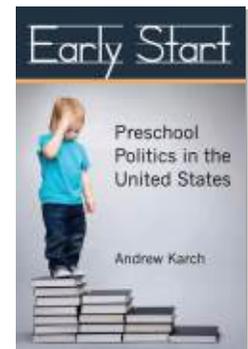
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3 | A Watershed Episode: The Comprehensive Child Development Act

Interest in early childhood policy remained high after the inauguration of President Richard Nixon, thanks in part to the widespread attention Head Start received. A March 1969 memo to the Advisory Committee on Head Start argued that the program helped produce “an unprecedented amount of national interest in the importance of early childhood development.”¹ Some accounts in the popular press touched on similar themes. An article in *Business Week* explained, “The concept of widespread day care for pre-school children, developed during the Johnson years, is generating more interest and enthusiasm during the Nixon Administration than ever before.”² In Congress, the central debate surrounded the appropriate role of the national government in this policy sector.

As the congressional debate crystallized, it shifted in two directions that had important long-term consequences. The first shift was the widespread embrace of a comprehensive approach to child development. Programs for young children were viewed as part of a multifaceted effort to improve children’s overall well-being. Head Start epitomized this more encompassing approach. It offered educational, nutritional, and other services and sought to reach children, parents, and the larger community. The April 1969 creation of the Office of Child Development within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare also reflected this shift. HEW secretary Robert Finch alluded to this new way of thinking as he announced the creation of the new office: “Today, our nation’s schools and child care programs are in the process of changing toward a more comprehensive approach to the physical, social and intellectual development of children and their families.”³

The second shift represented an even sharper break with the past. Whereas previous governmental initiatives were targeted and crisis-oriented, the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a turn toward universal

programs. By April 1967, the National Education Association (NEA) had proposed universal schooling beginning at age four, a recommendation that one observer attributed to Head Start and early childhood research.⁴ In a March 1971 statement, the Research and Policy Committee of the Committee for Economic Development endorsed a “massive effort to establish both public and private preschool educational programs.”⁵ The turn toward universal programs “represented an abrupt departure from previous government policy” (E. Rose 2010, 43), and it reshaped the politics of early childhood policy.

The combined impact of these two shifts took some observers by surprise. One explained, “As I reflect on the past decade, I also am struck by the fact that I never thought in the early ’60s there would be a nationwide program, a nationwide emphasis on the needs of young children.”⁶ Perhaps the most remarkable development of all was the 1971 passage of the Comprehensive Child Development Act, which both supporters and opponents viewed as a step toward a permanent national framework for the universal provision of preschool services. Even though Congress proved unable to override a presidential veto, its passage was noteworthy. After a brief overview of the policymaking context of the late 1960s and the legislative and executive branch activity that preceded the passage of this landmark bill, this chapter describes the politics of the Comprehensive Child Development Act. The significance of this critical juncture cannot be overstated. The veto sparked a series of reactions and counterreactions that help explain the fragmentation and decentralization of early childhood policy in the contemporary United States.

A Changing Context

The late 1960s were a time of considerable ferment in early childhood policy. Passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act facilitated some of this activity. In fiscal year 1967, over \$1 million in Title I funds were expended for services for prekindergarten and kindergarten children.⁷ Title III of the ESEA authorized spending on supplementary educational centers and services, and in the same fiscal year, there were sixty-one projects serving an estimated forty thousand preschool children at a cost of \$3.1 million.⁸ These funding levels rose rapidly in the late 1960s. In fiscal year 1969, the Office of Education spent approximately \$50 million in Title I funds and \$12 million in Title III funds. It also spent about \$30 million on the Follow Through program that supplemented Head Start,

and it issued \$100,000 in grants to state education agencies for early childhood education projects. The agency's total allocation for early childhood education in fiscal year 1969 was approximately \$115 million.⁹

The national government also allocated funds to several day care programs. By September 1969, three major programs existed within HEW. Head Start funds could be used for day care, state welfare departments could receive grants-in-aid for child welfare services including day care services, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) funds could be used for day care under certain conditions. The Department of Labor usually included day care funds as part of its manpower training grants, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provided matching funds (on the basis of two-thirds to one-third) for the construction of neighborhood centers that usually included day care.¹⁰ Multiple task forces and panels on child development provide further evidence of heightened national government interest in early childhood policy. The Federal Panel on Early Childhood was created in 1968 "as a first step to improve and expand all early childhood programs financed by federal funds."¹¹

The income tax deduction for child care expenses, which had been established in 1954, remained in effect. As of May 1970, it permitted a deduction of up to six hundred dollars for the care of one child and up to nine hundred dollars for the care of two or more children under age thirteen so long as the care enabled a working woman or another specified person to be gainfully employed. These limits applied to all widows, widowers, and separated and divorced persons, regardless of income. To claim the deduction, a married woman or a husband whose wife was incapacitated had to file a joint return with the spouse. The deduction would be reduced by one dollar for each dollar of the combined adjusted gross income exceeding six thousand dollars.¹²

State and local government activity also occurred. More states and localities supported kindergarten programming or made kindergarten attendance compulsory rather than voluntary. Before the late 1960s, kindergarten had generally been viewed as "advanced nursery school" or as the "stepchild of the elementary school";¹³ it was not well integrated into the public school system. Things changed significantly and rapidly. A fall 1968 survey of sixty-four communities found that 69.8 percent of the children who were eligible to attend kindergarten were doing so, with 58.1 percent enrolled in public kindergartens.¹⁴ A report on the survey attributed these changes to Head Start, which, the authors claimed, made kindergarten "more respectable and more fundable."¹⁵

Despite this government activity, the supply of early childhood services paled in comparison to the demand for them. A March 1969 Library of Congress report noted that the aforementioned government programs would meet only a small proportion of this demand because they focused on low-income families. It concluded, “As far as the non-needy general public is concerned, there are at present no federal programs or proposals which could be expected to provide it with day care facilities and services on any significant scale.”¹⁶ Over the next decade, this claim would frequently appear in debates over government involvement. Supporters of increased national government involvement argued that the needs of the American family were not being met.

The late 1960s and early 1970s also witnessed growing interest in early childhood programs among private nonprofit and for-profit organizations. A May 1970 report by the Department of Labor summarized several innovative programs created by corporations, labor unions, women’s groups, and others. It noted, “The widespread shortage of day care has brought many businessmen into the field. Numerous companies are setting up chains of day care centers under the franchise system.”¹⁷ In October 1970, *Business Week* profiled the growth of the private sector and concluded, “The future may hold a billion-dollar bonanza for the fledgling industry.”¹⁸ Two former educators described this development as a “hustle” and questioned the ability of profit-making corporations to provide high-quality care.¹⁹ They noted that private-sector programs tended to be expensive and custodial, and they argued that those with an educational component tended to neglect thinking processes and social development.²⁰

During the late 1960s, in sum, the general contours of early childhood policy were changing. Young children were increasingly being cared for outside their homes, and more public funds were being spent on preschool, kindergarten, and day care. These governmental efforts, even when combined with those of nonprofit and for-profit organizations who entered the day care market, seemed incapable of meeting the growing demand for early childhood programs. In the words of the executive director of the National Committee for the Day Care of Children, “This relatively slow rate of growth bears absolutely no relation to the nation’s need for more day care facilities.”²¹ Many observers concluded that the national government should try to fill the growing gap between supply and demand. Both the Nixon administration and Congress took action in the late 1960s.

Precursors to the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971

On October 20, 1968, just weeks before he was elected president, Richard Nixon gave a radio address in which he argued that the national government had a vital role to play in education policy. He pledged to “maintain our national commitment to preschool education, expanding as necessary such programs as Head Start and Follow Through.”²² Nixon attempted to make good on this pledge upon taking office. A year later, the administration claimed it had taken five “significant actions” on early childhood policy. The first was rhetorical, a presidential “commitment to assure that every child would have adequate developmental opportunities in the first five years of life.”²³ The second significant action was the creation of the Office of Child Development. Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner hailed this action as a major step forward because it reflected “a broad-gauged and realistic grasp of the critical importance to the nation of a far-reaching, coordinated, comprehensive approach to child development.”²⁴ The third significant action occurred in July 1969, when the administration sent a representative to testify on the Headstart Child Development Act. This bill was one of several early childhood measures introduced during the Ninety-First Congress.

The final two actions illustrated the administration’s belief that day care was inextricably linked to welfare reform. President Nixon’s welfare reform proposal, the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), was listed as the fourth significant action. It included a major day care authorization whose goal was to allow previously unemployed welfare recipients to work. The administration insisted that the authorized care “would be developmental and comprehensive in nature.”²⁵ FAP’s existence and demise would influence the debate over the Comprehensive Child Development Act. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare encouraged wider use of AFDC funds for day care, which was the fifth significant action listed in the memo. The national government provided three dollars for every state dollar spent on the “development and operation of day care programs for the children of welfare recipients who were participating in work and training programs, and also for the children in families which are former or potential recipients of public welfare.”²⁶ HEW also promoted coordinated early childhood planning and action through the Community Coordinated Child Care (4-C) program. The 4-C program was “a structure of community organizations brought together to coordinate, plan and mobi-

lize *all* of that community's resources for children."²⁷ This effort had attracted the interest of several states and about one hundred communities by October 1969.²⁸

Day care and child development were also prominent topics at the White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1970. In a 1973 interview, the presidential appointee who directed the conference noted that the administration did not have a "great commitment" to these issues and that "it would have been embarrassing not to have one."²⁹ The conference nonetheless illustrated the continued interest in early childhood policy. Its forum on developmental child care included a task force on delivery services that said programs should be "universally available at parental option, offering a diversity of choices."³⁰ It also emphasized programs that were developmental, rather than custodial, in nature. One participant explained, "Day care must be . . . more than baby-sitting. It must build on what we know about child growth and development, about the developmental tasks of children. It is education, health, nutrition, socialization, and more."³¹ Conference delegates were asked to rank sixteen issues, and "comprehensive family-oriented child development programs" including "health services, day care and early childhood education" ranked first in a weighted average of the 1,912 ballots cast.³² The president of the Day Care and Child Development Council of America called day care "the star of the conference show"³³ and argued that the success of the developmental day care forum meant that "we have now the potential of becoming a national force."³⁴

Several early childhood measures were introduced by Democrats and Republicans during the Ninety-First Congress. Representative Patsy T. Mink (D-HI) reintroduced the Preschool Centers Supplementary Education Act.³⁵ The bill provided funds for day care centers to expand, upgrade, supplement, and increase the educational content of their programs. Mink called her bill "an extension of the Head Start opportunity to children not now eligible for it, though nonetheless needful of it."³⁶ She also joined forces with Representatives John Brademas (D-IN) and Ogden Reid (R-NY) to sponsor the Comprehensive Preschool Education and Child Day Care Act of 1969, which attempted to open up "comprehensive programs of child development . . . to all children, not just the disadvantaged."³⁷ In the Senate, Walter Mondale (D-MN) and twenty-one Democratic cosponsors introduced similar legislation, the Headstart Child Development Act of 1969. While similar in their focus on universal access to comprehensive services, the House and Senate bills offered contrasting approaches to the question of service delivery.³⁸

Jule Sugarman, the acting director of the Office of Child Development, urged the Nixon administration to respond to this congressional activity. In June 1969, he wrote, "Our objective should be to develop legislation which makes possible financial support to public agencies or private agencies with a long-term commitment to providing children's services."³⁹ Sugarman argued that such a proposal should give priority to communities who were seeking to coordinate their preschool and day care programs and to programs serving the disadvantaged. In October, he argued that the president was losing control of the issue to Congress and that it was "highly desirable for the president to regain the initiative by proposing a comprehensive early childhood bill."⁴⁰ He even described the possible parameters and authorization levels of a presidential initiative.

Sugarman was something of a freelancer within the administration. He did "a great deal of negotiating with [Congress] without checking out what was considered appropriate by the administration."⁴¹ The direct negotiations led others in the administration to conclude that he was "working with [Congress] a good deal more closely than is considered appropriate for a bureaucrat in the executive branch of the opposite party to do."⁴² In December 1969, Sugarman testified before a House subcommittee on the Preschool Education and Child Day Care Act of 1969. He had been sent "with instruction to say little, very little, about this bill and to appear somewhat negative, which under orders he did do. But that was simply stalling around."⁴³ Despite Sugarman's efforts and increasing congressional momentum behind early childhood legislation, the administration's position on these initiatives remained ambiguous.

Lacking a clear signal from their nominal party leader, congressional Republicans offered their own early childhood legislation. Representative Ogden Reid and Senator Charles Goodell (R-NY) introduced the Federal-State Education Act of 1969. Developed by New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, it provided "substantial block grants to each of the states for use at the preschool, elementary, secondary, vocational, junior college, higher and adult education levels."⁴⁴ States could spend as much as 55 percent of their grant monies on early childhood programs.

Congressional Republicans also worked on early childhood legislation that modified the bill that their Democratic House colleagues had developed. Before introducing legislation in the spring of 1970, they met with several different members of the Nixon administration in an attempt to generate support. The meetings did not lead anywhere, and it became "gradually and increasingly evident . . . that there wasn't going to be very much action," due to the administration's "previous commitment to wel-

fare reform.”⁴⁵ Undaunted by a lack of presidential support, congressional Republicans introduced the bill. A subcommittee held hearings on it and reported it to the full committee. Nothing further was done, but Republicans were optimistic about what the future held for early childhood legislation. One participant explained, “We went away feeling rather good that we had aired the subject. We had complete, full, legislative hearings on it, built a real framework, a real foundation for action in the beginning of the 92nd Congress. We’d come in, we’d be all ready, everybody would be all steamed up.”⁴⁶ Subsequent developments demonstrated that several distinct constituencies were indeed “all steamed up” but that the real legislative battle was only about to begin.

The Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971

When the Ninety-Second Congress convened in 1971, advocates of an expanded national government role in early childhood policy were optimistic about their prospects.⁴⁷ In an April 1971 speech, Senator Mondale, who had been appointed chairman of the newly created Subcommittee on Children and Youth of the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee in February, stated, “The prospects have improved for expanded government support of early childhood efforts. We will have some kind of legislation shortly, and along with it more money.”⁴⁸ Mondale’s prediction matched the feeling of congressional Republicans who felt that legislative action was imminent. The debate over early childhood legislation proved more controversial than Mondale and others anticipated, however, and advocates’ inability to clear all of the necessary legislative hurdles would have profound long-term implications.

The Child Development Coalition and Its Proposal

On January 15, 1971, Senator Mondale sent a letter to Marian Wright Edelman of the Washington Research Project. Noting congressional interest in child development and the organization’s expertise, he wrote, “I would welcome your judgments on the essential components of such legislation, and would also like to ask your assistance in bringing together the ideas and opinions of similar groups who would make useful inputs at this stage in the development of a national program.”⁴⁹ The organization was very receptive to this request. The bills debated during the preceding Congress caused some labor and civil rights groups to fear that “a very successful,

community-based Head Start program [would be turned] over to state government, with inadequate standards and inadequate funding and with a tremendous risk of losing parent and community involvement.”⁵⁰ Edelman and others felt that the most effective response would be to convene a broad coalition of groups with an interest in children. The coalition would debate the main issues, make its policy decisions, draw up legislation, and ask members of Congress to introduce the bill.

The Washington Research Project called a meeting and invited representatives from the “liberal day-care establishment,” labor groups, women’s groups, and civil rights groups.⁵¹ They were pleasantly surprised by the positive response they received. Diverse constituencies attended the meeting for distinct reasons. According to Edelman, “The women were there, in part, for their children, but in part because they wanted to have options. Labor was there for the political reasons of needing to help its constituency who had child care problems. The civil rights movement was there because it had a stake in these Head Start programs in the South.”⁵² The National Welfare Rights Organization, whose interest grew out of the day care provisions of President Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan, joined the coalition.⁵³ The American Federation of Teachers and the NEA also participated, even though “there was a real emphasis away from early childhood education programs in the public schools.”⁵⁴ The National Association for the Education of Young Children was an active coalition member, while some other early childhood groups were not actively involved.⁵⁵ Though the coalition was criticized as only involving “the usual people who anybody normally would expect to speak up for [child development legislation],”⁵⁶ it successfully brought together diverse constituencies who shared an interest in early childhood policy.⁵⁷

The coalition worked for months before agreeing on a proposal. It prioritized developmental child care, socioeconomic diversity, parent-controlled programs, a substantial investment of new money, and local flexibility and control.⁵⁸ The group brought its proposal to Senator Mondale and Representative Brademas and asked them to introduce it in bipartisan fashion. Mondale was receptive and “basically introduced the bill the way the coalition felt it should be enacted.”⁵⁹ Brademas, hoping to garner Republican support and bowing to the political realities of the House, made several changes. The House version of the bill provided for less parent participation and lower authorizations than the Senate version. The House version was also silent on the “very crucial question [of] whether states or localities would be responsible for the administration of the program.”⁶⁰ It provided that only localities with populations in excess of

“blank” would be eligible to do so. No figure was filled in when the bill was introduced.⁶¹ Despite their differences, both versions of the legislation reflected the main goals of Edelman’s coalition.

The proposal called for a comprehensive approach to child development that incorporated educational, nutritional, health, and remedial services.⁶² This feature of the proposal reflected the intellectual shifts described in chapter 2 of this book. Supporters explained that a custodial approach to day care would not serve children’s interests. Mondale argued, “The one non-negotiable criterion is that these early childhood programs enhance the child’s development rather than simply enabling the mother to work.”⁶³ This focus also implied, however, that the coalition and its supporters did not favor a purely educational program. In the context of Head Start, Representative Albert Quie (R-MN), a key congressional player in early childhood policy, had referred to the danger of “permitting the public school educational establishment to place undue emphasis on the educational aspects and so little on the other aspects of training [children].”⁶⁴ Similarly, the coalition believed that only multifaceted early intervention programs would have lasting effects. They used Head Start as their model and called for “health services, nutrition services, educational services of some undefined kind but some educational help, and whatever else kind of help that family needed.”⁶⁵

Socioeconomic diversity represented the second key element of the legislation. Neither the Senate nor the House version made comprehensive services available to all children, but both versions laid the foundation for a universal program. The original Senate language stated that programs “should be available as a matter of right to all children regardless of economic, social and family background.”⁶⁶ Mondale said that he hoped to “build on the successful experience of Head Start and deliver educational, health, and nutritional day care services to *all* children.”⁶⁷ In the words of one opponent of the bill, “The time frame for making the program universal was never clearly set forth, but the intention of universality was clear.”⁶⁸ Creating the framework for a universal program was “perhaps [the] most revolutionary” element of the proposal (Zigler and Muenchow 1992, 123).

The universal approach was justified on both policy and political grounds. In policy terms, supporters pointed to the potential educational benefits of economically integrated programs. In an April speech, Mondale quoted Dr. Edward Zigler, director of the Office of Child Development: “The middle-class child does have a number of attributes that the poor child could profitably model. By the same token we often find in

poor children particular strengths and characteristics worthy of emulation by the middle class child.”⁶⁹ Brademas referred to the famous Coleman Report to make a similar point about the ability of young children from distinctive backgrounds to learn from one another. He argued that “poor children develop much more rapidly, at least in cognitive terms, when they participate in programs with children of middle income backgrounds than when segregated by family income.”⁷⁰ As Congress debated the legislation, the National Organization for Women described the ethnic and socioeconomic integration as critical and concluded, “We cannot support programs that further separate the poor from the rest of the population.”⁷¹ Civil rights leaders made a similar point in a letter to President Nixon, claiming, “By bringing together children of different racial, social, and economic backgrounds, the program would provide them with an invaluable opportunity to grow up knowing each other as individuals.”⁷²

In addition to lauding the policy impact of a universal program, supporters described it as a political strategy. In the United States, antipoverty policies targeted on the poor alone “have not been politically sustainable, and they have stigmatized and demeaned the poor” (Skocpol 1991, 414). Coalition members alluded to this history in pressing for a universal program. One explained, “We don’t have a very good history in this country of programs that are available only to the poor. The history of successful social programs has been programs that are universally available.”⁷³ According to Marian Wright Edelman, the legislation consciously sought to include “middle-class folk” to avoid being called a “poor people’s program.”⁷⁴ Coalition leaders worried that “poor people’s programs were not going to be able to command the constituencies that were needed for long-term survival.”⁷⁵ The debate over universality influenced the rhetoric that proponents used to justify the legislation, as they emphasized its benefits for all children. It also led to a heated debate about the income level at which eligibility should be set. Eligibility levels became a key point of contention between congressional leaders and the Nixon administration.

Parent-controlled programs represented a third component of the coalition proposal. Conceding that social scientists would offer competing interpretations of the child development literature, Edelman claimed, “What we do know will make a difference . . . is that families have to be involved with children if there’s going to be any long-range effect. . . . There is just a limit to what government can do.”⁷⁶ As a result, she felt that “the key decision-making power should rest with parents and families.”⁷⁷ Parental involvement would serve two objectives. First, it would lead to better outcomes for children, as the education they received and the other

lessons they learned would be reinforced in the home. According to developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, “If [early intervention] programs are to have lasting effects they must concentrate not only on the child himself, but equally, if not more, on the environment in which he lives, especially the members of his family.”⁷⁸ Second, parental involvement would aid community empowerment, a primary objective of the Community Action Program. Many coalition members had been involved in that program.

The legislation also called for a substantial investment of new money in early childhood programs. Edelman argued that a strong financial commitment from the national government was necessary to reach children and families who would not otherwise have access to the kind of help that they needed.⁷⁹ The House version set a lower authorization level than did the Senate version, but the cost of the program over the short and long term was a key issue. Civil rights leaders argued, “We do not know exactly what the program will cost in the years ahead. We *do* know, however, that the cost of *not* having a program is already too high.”⁸⁰ Some supporters portrayed government spending on early childhood programs as an investment that would pay for itself over the long term.

Others argued that the financial impact of the legislation would not be that large. Brademas, for example, pointed out that it required the creation of a child development council and the approval of a comprehensive child development plan. These requirements, he argued, would limit financial outlays over the short term.⁸¹ Despite various attempts to downplay the cost issue, some opponents possessed “a very real fear that it’s going to cost too much.”⁸² For a Republican administration that wanted to reform welfare and cut program costs, the potential price tag of the legislation seemed “horrendous.”⁸³

The last major component of the proposal was local flexibility and control. Indeed, the issue of program administration provoked considerable controversy. Some members of the coalition, especially civil rights groups, rejected any legislation that granted state governments a prominent role. Their views grew out of their experiences in southern states, especially in Mississippi. The state of Mississippi declined to apply for Head Start funds in 1965, leading a group of private, public, and church organizations to form the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM). After CDGM’s first year of operation, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) accused CDGM of mismanaging funds and cut off its funding. The grant was given to another group viewed as less threatening to whites. Edelman, an influential CDGM board member, helped save

the program by finding a new director and persuading local leaders to work within the system to regain funds. The Mississippi experience nonetheless made her a strong foe of state administration (Zigler and Muenchow 1992). She argued that “anybody who was southern, who had been working with community-based programs, saw [state administration] as the end of all these very good southern programs.”⁸⁴ In both its initial proposal and its lobbying efforts, the coalition fought to preserve local control. Critics viewed its position as an overreaction and argued that “you cannot build every piece of legislation around what you think might happen in Mississippi.”⁸⁵

In both its House and Senate forms, the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971 represented a fundamental change in how the national government approached early childhood policy. Its ten bipartisan cosponsors in the House described it as “the most significant proposal on child care ever introduced in Congress.”⁸⁶ Brademas noted that it offered stability and, “for the first time,” a “permanent commitment by the federal government to better the lives of all children.”⁸⁷ Its key features—comprehensive services, socioeconomic diversity, parent-controlled programs, a substantial investment of new money, and local flexibility and control—represented a “radical departure from previous government attitudes toward early childhood services” (Steinfels 1973, 18). There was no precedent for its extension of national government assistance to nonpoor families, and it was not linked to the traditional justifications that characterized the emergency nursery schools, wartime day care centers, and Head Start (Nelson 1982, 278). Supporters of the bill did not frame it as a temporary response to crisis conditions. Instead, they advanced several claims that reflected the diverse objectives of the child development coalition, each of which was challenged by opponents of the legislation.

The Cases for and against the Comprehensive Child Development Act

As members of Congress considered the legislation, they generally focused on its eligibility requirements, the nature of the services it would provide, and the question of prime sponsorship. Even among its supporters, there was “a considerable difference of opinion as to the population to be served, the content of the program, and the delivery system.”⁸⁸ By emphasizing issues of program structure, Congress arguably neglected the fundamental philosophical question of whether national government involvement in early childhood policy was appropriate (McCathren 1981,

111).⁸⁹ Significant public attention to that broader question did not emerge until President Nixon vetoed the bill in December 1971, and I will discuss it in that context. This section profiles four prominent rationales for national government involvement and explains how opponents responded to each of them.

The relationship between day care and welfare reform was the first rationale for national government intervention. The child development coalition did not emphasize this potential link, but the Nixon administration was especially interested in it. Several program indicators suggested the existence of a “welfare crisis” in the 1960s. Welfare caseloads, participation or take-up rates (the percentage of eligible persons that received benefits), and program outlays all grew explosively. Congress made several changes to welfare policy during the 1960s, but none of them had the desired effect. The expansion of day care availability was viewed as a potential solution because it would help “welfare mothers to be able to take jobs or obtain training in order to get off the welfare rolls—thus cutting welfare rolls in the short run.”⁹⁰

Critics questioned this connection and pointed to the limited ability of earlier reforms either to move welfare mothers into the labor market or to provide high-quality child care for their children. For example, one essay on the history of day care centers in the United States questioned whether they had ever successfully moved women into the labor force. It concluded that the historical record was “filled with cautionary tales that scarcely legitimate the kind of inflated rhetoric that we are now hearing” (Rothman 1973, 13).

Cognitive development was a second justification for national government intervention. Supporters believed that all children would benefit from child development programs, but they emphasized its potential impact on disadvantaged children. Mondale cited recent research finding that “ghetto youngsters lose on the average of 17 I.Q. points between 15 months and three years of age if they receive no preschool education or tutoring.”⁹¹ Supporters also claimed that child development spending would pay for itself over the long term due to its impact on cognitive development and other outcomes, because it would help produce effective members of society, reducing future spending on various social programs. For example, they claimed that “providing developmental opportunities for disadvantaged children [could reduce] the likelihood that they will enter welfare rolls in the future.”⁹² Brademas cited the congressional testimony of Sheldon H. White: “It may turn out to be more sensible to invest

heavily in the first years of a child's life and spend less as he moves through elementary and secondary education."⁹³

Critics of the child development legislation, citing the Westinghouse study of Head Start and other sources, doubted that early childhood programs would be a positive experience. Questioning whether the developmental impact of the programs would be lasting, they contended that young children would be better served by remaining at home. In sum, they argued that "sending four-year-olds off to school results in far more harm than good."⁹⁴ They also claimed that supporters were overselling the potential benefits of early childhood programs while neglecting their potential drawbacks.

The third rationale for national government intervention was the transformation of the American workforce. The proposal would "provide adequate day care for the increasing number of children in families where both parents work."⁹⁵ Supporters of government action argued that the day care needs of the American family were not being met. Senator Fred Harris (D-OK), for example, referred to a "crisis in the availability of child care services."⁹⁶ Supporters of the legislation often described a discrepancy between the demand for day care services and the number of available slots. A June 1971 press release argued that there were "five million preschool children in the United States whose mothers work, yet day care services are available for only 641,000 of these children."⁹⁷ With the number of working mothers projected to continue on its upward trajectory, supporters pressed for government action. Changes in patterns of participation in the labor force and their accompanying impact on the American family, they argued, required greater public investment in early childhood programs.

The transformation of the American labor force was due largely to increased participation among women, including the mothers of young children. Women's equality therefore represented a fourth rationale for government intervention. Supporters argued that the legislation gave "all women, not just the poor, a genuine choice between child care and work outside the home."⁹⁸ This justification was frequently associated with the broader movement for women's liberation, which included child care availability among its major objectives. According to one report, "Twenty-four hour community controlled day care was a major cry around which women across the country rallied on Women's Liberation Day, August 26, [1970]."⁹⁹ The movement argued that child care should be available to all women regardless of their employment status, run by the people who use

it, viewed as an educational and social experience, and voluntary. Supporters claimed that “there are many mothers who would like to work but cannot find adequate day care.”¹⁰⁰ Women’s equality was an especially controversial rationale for national government intervention, due to its association with the women’s liberation movement. One observer called this connection the political factor “that’s doing [the most] to weaken the chances of getting legislation.”¹⁰¹

Opponents of the Comprehensive Child Development Act reacted especially strongly to the child care shortage and women’s equality justifications. They denounced the measure in strong terms, bemoaning its implications for American family life. They argued that day care enrollment would weaken the mother-child bond, with harmful consequences for children and their families. For example, one letter to House Speaker Carl Albert (D-OK) attributed the most serious social problems of the day to the breakdown of the family unit, noting, “You must realize that removing children from their mothers’ influence for extended periods of time during their formative years could prove disastrous.”¹⁰² Other critics questioned the underlying premises of the women’s liberation movement, arguing that most women “find spiritual and emotional satisfaction in being the hand that, through rocking the cradle, as the timeworn synecdoche has it, comes to rule the world.”¹⁰³

For some opponents, the notion of government-supported child care was especially threatening to their values. The mayor of Belle Glade, Florida, argued that the bill was “designed to destroy the family and the home, place our children in government institutions, and lead us into a totalitarian state.”¹⁰⁴ A conservative publication complained that the child development legislation would “destroy the nation’s economy, the nation’s morality, the family unit, law and order, and ALL individual incentives and resourcefulness.”¹⁰⁵ The strident and alarmist tone of these critiques is striking.

Intense rhetorical attacks on the Comprehensive Child Development Act were commonplace by the late summer. The legislation was repeatedly denounced in harsh terms in *Human Events*, a publication of the John Birch Society. A group of conservative professors from around the country formed the Committee on Children and produced a report documenting the faults of the legislation.¹⁰⁶ This elite activity was supplemented by the efforts of “independent parents’ groups across the country [that were] united in their concern over the diminishing cohesiveness of the family unit.”¹⁰⁷ Trying to derail the legislation, opponents repeatedly stressed themes of parental autonomy and individualism, claiming that American

homes should remain “inviolable retreats from busybodies—especially federal busybodies.”¹⁰⁸

In sum, the child development coalition and its allies claimed that their proposal would help welfare mothers in entering the labor force, enhance the cognitive development of (disadvantaged) children, meet the growing day care needs of the changing American family, and contribute to the achievement of women’s equality. The diverse members of the coalition privileged these goals to varying degrees but were united by their support of the proposal. Opponents disputed all of these claims, deriding the bill as “parent replacement” legislation that regarded children “almost as wards of the state.”¹⁰⁹ They argued that it was fiscally irresponsible, administratively unworkable, and loaded with family-weakening implications. As these battle lines were drawn, however, neither side knew for certain whether it could claim the Nixon administration as an ally.

The Nixon Administration and Child Development Legislation

Supporters and opponents spent months attempting to divine the administration’s position on the Comprehensive Child Development Act. Advocates repeatedly referred to Nixon’s 1969 message to Congress in which he promised to “make a national commitment to providing all American children an opportunity for healthful and stimulating development during the first five years of life.”¹¹⁰ They claimed that endorsing the child development bill would enable the president to fulfill his pledge. In developing and lobbying for its proposal, however, the child development coalition made limited contact with the Nixon administration. A lawyer with the Washington Research Project conceded that this inattention to the executive branch was “probably the one place where we didn’t do the job we should have done.”¹¹¹ In June, the administration issued a statement “indicating interest in some form of a child development bill.”¹¹² This tepid endorsement papered over a divide within the executive branch. As the legislation continued to wind through Congress, however, “the administration pulled more and more away from any interest in and support for child development.”¹¹³ Consequently, neither supporters nor opponents felt confident about presidential support.

According to historian Sonya Michel (1999, 248), the Comprehensive Child Development Act “initially caught the Nixon Administration somewhat off guard,” because the administration had been focused on welfare reform. Certainly, key players like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Richard Nathan placed a higher priority on welfare reform than on child develop-

ment.¹¹⁴ The amount of bipartisan activity on the latter topic during the Ninety-First Congress, however, drew notice from at least some members of the administration. In February 1971, HEW secretary Elliot Richardson decided to back the House bill from the previous session as long as some modifications were made. A departmental work group drafted substitute language, submitting its initial recommendations to the secretary just after the new House legislation had been introduced in March.

In a memo, the departmental work group highlighted several differences between its proposal and the new House legislation. Even with the changes made by Brademas, the new proposal placed a higher priority on local and parental control and was “much more community-dominated.”¹¹⁵ Prime sponsorship was a key area of disagreement. The departmental proposal limited prime sponsorship to states, cities with populations of at least five hundred thousand, and Indian reservations. The House bill had a more expansive definition, allowing smaller units of local government and public or private nonprofit groups to qualify as prime sponsors. The composition and role of child development councils and local policy councils was another area of disagreement, and it reflected the broader debate over parent and community control. Income eligibility standards, the provision of services for national government employees, and the role of the Office of Child Development were addressed. The departmental work group also discussed potential legislative strategies, but it did not make a definitive recommendation about how Richardson should proceed.¹¹⁶

Although the work group’s memo indicates that HEW was giving serious thought to child development legislation, it would be a mistake to interpret this stance as the administration’s position. There was a battle within the administration between HEW and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). In fact, the HEW memo mentioned that “OMB is disinclined to recommend that the administration support child care legislation.”¹¹⁷ OMB believed that publicly funded day care should be “strictly limited to families who fell under the provisions of the Family Assistance Plan” (Steinfels 1973, 189). This division was crucial, because Richardson could not testify on behalf of the administration or enter good faith negotiations with Congress until OMB cleared his position. A House subcommittee held hearings on the legislation in late May and early June. Richardson and Edward Zigler, director of the Office of Child Development, were invited to testify on behalf of the administration, but “they had nothing to say [because OMB] had still not come forward with an acceptable position.”¹¹⁸ The Senate extended a similar invitation to the HEW secre-

tary, and Richardson postponed his testimony three times as he waited for clearance.

On June 8, Richardson finally sent Brademas a statement explaining that the administration favored a “workable, unified system for administering the various child care programs now in place and soon to be enacted by the Congress.”¹¹⁹ A Democratic insider summarized this position as “indicating interest in some form of a child development bill, controlled by the states, no authorizations listed, and considerably less parental participation.”¹²⁰ The statement was widely interpreted as a victory for Richardson and an unexpected breakthrough, but significant differences remained between what the administration had endorsed and the amended legislation moving through Congress. Zigler and another official were not well received when they finally testified before a Senate subcommittee, even though their testimony “seemed to provide a ‘green light’ for child development legislation” (Zigler and Muenchow 1992, 142).

The primary problem was that the administration was unresponsive to what had occurred on Capitol Hill. The original bill had been substantially rewritten, and positions on such issues as prime sponsorship had begun to harden, but the administration failed to provide “the kind of testimony that could be given directly in reference to the bills being proposed; it was as though you were speaking into a vacuum. If one were to contemplate the ideal child development legislation that the administration would support, this is what it would comprise.”¹²¹ Observers continued to describe the administration’s position as “unclear”¹²² and “hazy”¹²³ because it had not engaged the revisions that had already been made. Months had passed in which the Office of Child Development’s “hands were tied,” with “no way to negotiate seriously and to make any kind of promises on behalf of the administration.”¹²⁴ In a sense, Richardson’s breakthrough was too little, too late.

The Child Development Bill Moves through Congress

In attempting to move its proposal through Congress, the child development coalition and its congressional allies made two crucial tactical choices. The first one, which set them up for significant second-guessing, was to conduct a stealth lobbying campaign with limited input from and attention to the American public at large. It brought together dozens of organizations and sought to line up the necessary congressional support. Its campaign “was not an effort to educate the country. It was undertaken deliberately that way, because it was thought [to be] best and the quickest

way to get it through the Congress.”¹²⁵ Edelman described this strategy as a calculated gamble but a tactical necessity: “It was our judgment that . . . if we had any chance of getting it through we were going to have to be very quiet, just do our work, line up our support, and move it.”¹²⁶ This stealth approach led one observer to claim that the legislation “was not a popular act, it was a lobby of lobbyists.”¹²⁷ The coalition’s decision not to engage the public seemed to affect only the late stages of the congressional policy-making process.

The second tactical choice made by the coalition and its allies was to attach the child development program to a bill extending the life of the Office of Economic Opportunity. The OEO was scheduled to expire on June 30, 1971, and they assumed that Congress and the president would not allow that to happen. They believed that this tactic would permit consideration of the child development program at the earliest possible date and enhance its chances of becoming law. This tactical decision facilitated the proposal’s movement through Congress, but it was insufficient to prevent a presidential veto.

Several major controversies arose as Congress considered the Comprehensive Child Development Act. Program eligibility was a major sticking point. Supporters generally viewed a universal program as their long-term goal, but the legislation would not serve all children in the short term. Services would be free for children living in families with incomes up to a certain level, and higher-income families would be able to participate by paying a fee. The chief policy issue was where the line should be set. The House and Senate versions of the legislation initially drew the line at \$6,960 for a family of four, a figure the Bureau of Labor Standards (BLS) had determined as the cost of family consumption.

Critics, including the Nixon administration, argued that a high cutoff would increase the cost of the program. After the Senate passed legislation with the BLS provision, Richardson sent a letter to House minority leader Gerald Ford (R-MI). Noting there that the legislation was inconsistent with the administration’s welfare reform proposal, Richardson estimated that a program using the BLS standard would cost twenty billion dollars.¹²⁸ He warned that an unfunded program would lead to a “tragically unfulfilled promise to the American people of the kind that has already undermined their confidence in the government.”¹²⁹ Although the figure of \$6,960 had received strong bipartisan support in committee, the legislation was amended on the House floor to reflect the administration’s preference. Eligibility for free services would be limited to families making under \$4,320 per year. The child development coalition and its allies

viewed this change as “a very serious problem because it would permit targeting so carefully on the poor that there would never be broad enough involvement in the program to increase it to meet even a fraction of the needs that existed.”¹³⁰ The discrepancy between the House and Senate versions of the bill would eventually be reconciled by a conference committee, with the House prevailing on the eligibility issue.

Another sticking point was the issue of prime sponsorship, which became “the principal item of debate during [the legislation’s] journey through Congress” (McCathren 1981, 106). The Nixon administration felt that prime sponsorship should be limited to state governments for reasons of administrative feasibility. It would mean that there would be no more than fifty administrative bodies to monitor, regulate, and fund (Steinfeld 1973, 205). Richardson relented slightly on this stance in his June statement, outlining a program in which “for cities with a population of 500,000 or more an option for self-designation as prime sponsor is available if the chief elected official requests such a designation through the governor.”¹³¹ As has already been discussed, many members of the child development coalition were skeptical of a state-based approach and felt that local boards would be more sensitive to the needs of poor and minority children. Mondale expressed similar reservations. He argued that any grant to the states “gets to be pretty thin by the time it reaches the end of the pipeline. It is terribly important that we make money available directly to community groups and directly to local governments.”¹³²

The issue of prime sponsorship came to a head in the House, where Brademas battled his own committee chair, Representative Carl Perkins (D-KY), over the population cutoff. Brademas and Republicans on his subcommittee had agreed on a figure of one hundred thousand. Republicans pledged to support the bill if this major feature, which they perceived as providing a “positive role for the states,” was retained.¹³³ Perkins, in contrast, wanted to lower the figure to ten thousand. Republicans joined forces with a few Democrats to defeat the chair’s amendment in committee, but Perkins was successful on the House floor. This amendment increased the number of eligible localities and “had the effect of stripping the bill of almost the entire Republican support it had in the House.”¹³⁴ State officials were alarmed by this change. Even before it was made, the National Governors’ Conference sent a letter to Albert Quie (R-MN) in which it complained that the House proposal “would, in effect, bypass state governments.” The conference pressed for “a strong state role with related federal safeguards.”¹³⁵ Congress essentially ignored this entreaty. One Republican congressional staffer claimed that the governors “really

didn't get organized" and were "totally lost in the process."¹³⁶ Their limited impact on the Comprehensive Child Development Act stands in sharp contrast to the prominent state government role during later debates over early childhood policy.

As Congress considered the legislation, insiders predicted an especially tough fight on the Senate floor. One staffer foresaw "some tough, close votes that could go either way on several issues like local vs. state control, parental involvement, and eligibility for other than poor children."¹³⁷ Indeed, the first real opposition became evident as the Senate debated the bill in September. Senator James Buckley (Conservative-NY) "launched a whole attack on the concept of child development" and "denounced [the bill] as an effort to impose federal control over all American children."¹³⁸ With administration backing, Senator Robert Taft Jr. (R-OH) introduced six amendments to narrow the scope of the child development program. The amendments would have, among other things, lowered the income eligibility threshold for free services and limited the role of child development councils. The floor managers of the bill successfully defeated all six amendments, which received support from conservative Republicans and several southern Democrats.¹³⁹

The climax of the Senate debate occurred when Taft introduced a motion to recommit the bill to the Labor and Public Welfare Committee with instructions to delete the child development program. The motion was defeated, 17–46. On September 9, the Senate passed the bill by a 49–12 roll-call vote. The House followed suit three weeks later, adding the comprehensive child development program to the OEO bill on the floor. The House passed the OEO extension by a 251–115 roll-call vote on September 30.

The House and Senate bills differed significantly on prime sponsorship, parental control, and other features of the child development program. As a result, the bill went to a conference committee. The conflict between Perkins and Brademas persisted. Perkins, using his prerogatives as committee chair, took the unusual step of not appointing the sponsor of the bill to the conference committee. Perkins feared that the legislation would negatively affect his rural district, a concern shared by others who represented similar areas, but his decision to exclude Brademas from the conference committee was also described as "petty" and "personality oriented."¹⁴⁰ Conferees adopted a provision permitting localities with a population of five thousand or more to be designated as prime sponsors if they met certain requirements. This provision "infuriated House Republicans because they felt that the conference committee had ignored their

views” (Zigler and Muenchow 1992, 145). Five of the six House Republican conferees refused to sign the conference report because they objected to the proposed delivery system. The provisions for prime sponsorship also generated staunch opposition from both Democratic and Republican governors (Cohen 2001).

The conference committee spent significant time debating who would receive free child development services and what type of fee scale would be established for those above the cutoff. The Senate version made free services available for families of four with annual incomes below \$6,960, while the comparable figure in the House version was \$4,320. Mondale and Quie attempted to negotiate a compromise, but Richardson insisted on the lower figure. Eventually, Richardson endorsed a compromise on the fee schedule. It adopted the House cutoff for free services, incorporated a “very modest fee” for those making less than \$6,960, and gave the HEW secretary the authority to set a sliding fee scale for families above that level.¹⁴¹ As the conference concluded and House Republicans expressed their qualms about the delivery system, however, Richardson “wrote a strange letter which in essence removed his initial support.”¹⁴²

The child development coalition and its congressional allies generally praised the conference report. The American Academy of Pediatrics urged its adoption and described its emphasis on the community level as “responsive to the needs of individual children and communities.”¹⁴³ The League of Women Voters concurred, stating, “Those who see in this legislation threats of federal control over the minds of children should recognize that it is precisely the requirements for local prime sponsorship and parental participation that protect against just that danger.”¹⁴⁴ Alluding to the difficult conference negotiations and a possible presidential veto, Mondale praised the conference report and expressed his hope that “the compromise [on free services] would prevent a threatened Administration veto.”¹⁴⁵ Opponents of the child development section argued that it would be expensive and impossible to administer and that it intruded on parental autonomy. On December 2, the Senate adopted the conference report by a 63–17 roll-call vote. The vote in the House took place five days later and was much closer, due in part to administration lobbying and a concerted effort by minority leader Gerald Ford to defeat the conference report. The House adopted the report by a 211–187 roll-call vote, with 135 of the opposition votes coming from Republicans. The Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971 was then sent to the president as part of the OEO bill.

The Veto

The Nixon administration's position on the Comprehensive Child Development Act remained unclear and puzzling to conference committee participants. Supporters hoped for a favorable outcome because the proposal responded to the president's call for a national commitment to the first five years of life, reflected the top priority of the 1970 White House Conference on Children and Youth, and enjoyed bipartisan support in both houses of Congress.¹⁴⁶ After the measure finally cleared Congress, "the signals came very clearly that the president was probably going to veto the bill."¹⁴⁷ The president returned the measure without his approval shortly after the House approved the conference report. By that point, the occurrence of the veto was not as surprising as its tone. Written by Patrick Buchanan, the president's veto message harshly denounced the child development program and "offered a sweeping indictment of the whole concept" (Zigler and Muenchow 1992, 147).

The veto message criticized other aspects of the OEO legislation but described the child development section as its "most deeply flawed provision."¹⁴⁸ It acknowledged the need for additional day care services in the United States but criticized the measure for its "fiscal irresponsibility, administrative unworkability, and family-weakening implications."¹⁴⁹ The proposed cost of the program was one hundred million dollars for planning and program development in fiscal 1972 and two billion dollars in fiscal 1973. Nixon argued, "[T]he expenditure of two billions of dollars [*sic*] in a program whose effectiveness has yet to be demonstrated cannot be justified. And the prospect of costs which could eventually reach \$20 billion annually is even more unreasonable."¹⁵⁰ In terms of program administration, the president criticized the child development program for relegating the states to an "insignificant role" and "creating a new army of bureaucrats."¹⁵¹ He claimed that the low population cutoff "actively [invited] the participation of as many as 7,000 prime sponsors—each with its own plan, its own council, its own version of all the other machinery that has made Head Start, with fewer than 1,200 grantees, so difficult a management problem."¹⁵²

Supporters of the child development program were especially offended by the language the president used to describe its negative implications for the American family. Nixon closed his veto message by asserting, "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.”¹⁵³ This portrayal of the child development program struck a chord with many Americans, tapping into their strong distrust of the national government and appealing to the ideal of parental autonomy. Conservative columnist James J. Kirkpatrick argued that the veto “ranks among [President Nixon’s] finest state papers of recent months.”¹⁵⁴ Supporters of the bill denounced the tone of the veto message. Brademas later called it “one of the most inaccurate and demagogic messages ever penned by an American president.”¹⁵⁵ An attorney with the Washington Research Project said, “It was just a cruel and very deceiving veto message.”¹⁵⁶

Observers attributed Nixon’s rhetoric to several factors. Some pointed to the president’s standing with the conservative wing of the Republican Party. During the summer, the John Birch Society, the American Conservative Union, the Mormon Church, and several other conservative organizations had launched a letter-writing campaign against the child development proposal. By the time Nixon issued his veto, he faced increasing pressure from this constituency after announcing his intention to visit China. In addition, conservative representative John Ashbrook (R-OH) had recently announced that he would run against Nixon in the 1972 Republican primary. The child development program therefore “offered the president an opportunity to regain some of the support he might be losing with the trip to China. That is, he couldn’t cancel his trip to China, but he could veto this and echo some of the concerns about communal upbringing and governmental control that the right wing had been offering.”¹⁵⁷ One observer stated simply, “I personally think the president made a very practical political decision that he had more to gain from vetoing it than from signing it.”¹⁵⁸

The coordinated conservative lobbying campaign was especially noteworthy in the absence of anything comparable among the bill’s supporters. One insider claimed, “It was the right wing that mobilized, and the liberal coalition supporting child development did not. No public outcry ensued. One lesson certainly to be learned from all of this, is that [supporters spent] too much time talking to each other and not enough time in finding ways to mobilize and inform public opinion.”¹⁵⁹ This observation indicts the coalition’s tactical choice to attempt to move the bill through Congress without a grassroots campaign. Conservative organizations produced an avalanche of letters against the proposal, but supporters could not generate a comparable wave of public support.

Several observers questioned the political skill and effectiveness of the child development coalition, while others argued that it ultimately failed

to achieve its objectives due to its unwillingness to compromise.¹⁶⁰ One Republican Senate staffer said of the coalition, “They felt it was an all or nothing ballgame, or at least that was the impression that they gave; and I still feel that we would have had something had they been willing to bargain more.”¹⁶¹ Coalition leaders rejected the charge that they had not been sufficiently flexible. Edelman said, “It’s very clear to me in retrospect, and looking at the president’s message, that whatever bill we’d done would still have resulted in his vetoing that bill. He had *no* intention of signing it.”¹⁶²

Other observers attributed the veto message to the declining fortunes of the administration’s welfare reform proposal. Historian Elizabeth Rose (1999, 215) explains, “When it became clear that his larger welfare reform measure was unlikely to pass, however, [the president] decided he had little use for a large-scale day care program and vetoed the bill.” Indeed, the presidential veto message made multiple references to the Family Assistance Plan, noting that it had been before Congress for over two years and characterizing the child development provisions as duplicative.¹⁶³ The conflict between welfare reform and child development legislation highlights the difficulty of adopting innovative policy changes if they are not a high presidential priority (Thomas 1975, 174). In a 1975 interview, Quie noted that “major legislation has tended to come from an administration” during the Johnson and Nixon presidencies.¹⁶⁴ The Comprehensive Child Development Act was a congressional initiative that was developed with minimal input from the executive branch. One staffer argued that a prominent source of the veto was the fact that the bill was being compared to Medicare even though it was not a presidential initiative: “I think it would be difficult for any president . . . to stand up and sign a bill which he had not requested, a bill of this magnitude.”¹⁶⁵ Signing such a bill, he argued, would implicitly acknowledge that the administration had failed to recognize an important societal problem and that Congress had made up for the shortcomings of the executive branch.

Conclusion: The End of the Beginning

The strident tone of the veto message had its intended effect. On December 10, the Senate failed to override the veto. The vote was 51–36, with twenty-nine Republicans and seven southern Democrats backing the president. Thirteen Republican senators who had previously voted for the conference report switched positions and voted to sustain the veto. Thus

the remarkable story of the Comprehensive Child Development Act came to an end.

Many child development advocates were disheartened by this turn of events. One member of the Office of Child Development said that a “post-partum depression” swept over the agency and was shared by many individuals on Capitol Hill.¹⁶⁶ The veto squelched any enthusiasm in the House of Representatives for a child development bill, as Perkins and others concluded that developing new legislation would ultimately be an exercise in futility.¹⁶⁷ With the benefit of hindsight, several scholars have pointed to the veto as a crucial turning point in the evolution of early childhood education and care in the United States. David Kirp (2004) characterized it as the moment when “the national movement for universal preschool came heart-breakingly close to success.” Joan Lombardi (2003, 4) used similar language, claiming that the veto “set the child-care agenda back for decades: While other countries moved ahead, the United States stood still.”

Such assessments overlook that the debate over the appropriate governmental role in child development never really ended. As will be described in chapter 5 of this book, the Senate pressed ahead with revised legislation in 1972, even though supporters recognized that they faced an uphill battle. For Edelman and other leaders of the child development coalition, the veto simply was not a reason to halt their campaign. She explained, “You go back year after year until you get it. It’s going to be harder to get it now, there’s going to be more debate. But it seems to me if you’re committed to a thing you go back.”¹⁶⁸ The decentralized institutional structure of the American political system meant that child development supporters did not necessarily have to go back to Congress to achieve their policy goals. They could and did turn to other institutional venues, most notably the states. This tactical choice produced some political successes but also contributed to the long-term fragmentation of early childhood policy.