

BY TIM SABLİK

When Uncle Sam Watched Rosie's Kids

To support women working on the homefront in World War II, the U.S. government funded a temporary nationwide child care program

One of the most enduring images of the American homefront during World War II is a poster created by Pittsburgh artist J. Howard Miller in 1942 for Westinghouse Electric Corporation. It depicts a woman in a blue work shirt and red bandana flexing her arm and exclaiming, “We Can Do It!” Although the image was less well-known at the time than a similar painting by Norman Rockwell for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Miller’s poster has since become the one most associated with the “Rosie the Riveter” campaign to encourage more women to enter the wartime workforce.

Once the United States entered the war in late 1941, the country needed to mobilize both the personnel and the materials to fight a war on two fronts. While American men reported to training camps and shipped off overseas, government officials called upon women to support the production of tanks, planes, ships, munitions, and other supplies at home. According to a 1953 report from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau, nearly half of all single women were already in the workforce prior to the war. But the labor force participation rate for married women was much lower — around 15 percent. For policymakers hoping to ramp up war production, the report’s authors observed, “Married women constituted the country’s greatest labor reserve.”

Many of these married women were also mothers, so bringing them into the workforce meant grappling with the issue of child care. During a 1943 hearing before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, witnesses shared stories of children



Children participate in story hour at a child care center in New Britain, Conn. The center opened in September 1942 for children ages 2 through 5 whose mothers engaged in the war effort.

locked in cars or chained to trailers while mothers were at work. Factories reported an increase in absenteeism on Saturdays when schools were closed. Others expressed concerns about rising juvenile delinquency among school-age children left to their own devices after school and during the summer.

Efforts to address these concerns would bump up against social norms opposed to working mothers as well as disagreements and infighting among federal agencies. The solution that eventually emerged was America’s first, and to date only, nationwide, universal child care program.

NORMS VERSUS NEEDS

Before the Industrial Revolution, most people worked at or near their homes, on farms or producing home-made goods to sell in local markets. In her acceptance lecture for the 2023 Nobel Prize in economics, Harvard University economist Claudia Goldin explained that this home-based economy allowed mothers, who have historically been responsible for most child rearing duties, to both work and watch after their children. Once the United States industrialized and work shifted from homes to factories, married women’s participation in the labor

force fell. According to Goldin, less than 10 percent of married women in the 1920s reported working outside of their home. Many in society strongly believed that the best place for young children was at home with their mothers. This convention was reinforced by firms through the adoption of “marriage bars” – policies to not hire married women and fire single women workers who got married.

Because so few mothers participated in the formal economy, there was little need to formulate a national child care plan. The United States’ entry into World War I saw women drawn into the labor force in greater numbers, but most of these new entrants were young and unmarried. The Women’s Committee, part of the Council of National Defense established by Congress in 1916 to coordinate production and other resources on the homefront in support of the war effort, discussed the need to care for children caught up in the disruptions of war. But any nurseries that were created to support wartime working mothers were funded and staffed locally.

Debates about child care for working mothers resurfaced with the outbreak of World War II. Anticipating that mothers might be called to support wartime production, the Children’s Bureau (which was then part of the Department of Labor and today is part of the Department of Health and Human Services) convened a conference in Washington, D.C., on July 31, 1941. The event brought together federal, state, and local representatives to discuss how to support working mothers and their children during the war.

In attendance at that conference were representatives from the Work Projects Administration (WPA), one of the New Deal agencies established during the Great Depression. As part of its efforts to combat widespread unemployment, the WPA had dipped its toes into child care. Then called the Works Progress Administration, the WPA funded an emergency nursery program



Children of unemployed miners at the Jere WPA nursery in Scott’s Run, W.Va. in 1937.

that consisted of nearly 1,500 schools by the end of the 1930s. This care wasn’t universal. It was open only to young children (ages 2-4) of low-income and unemployed families. It also wasn’t intended to boost female labor force participation by caring for the children of working moms. The primary goal of the program was to provide employment for teachers displaced by the Depression.

Despite the federal government’s involvement in child care through this past experience, there was still significant resistance early in the war to expanding such services. When the Children’s Bureau released its recommendations from the conference in February 1942, it noted that “the committee is unanimous in its belief that mothers of preschool children and especially of those under 2 years of age *should not be encouraged* to seek employment; children of these ages should in general be cared for by their mothers in their homes.” (Emphasis in original.)

A HISTORICAL ACCIDENT

Despite these reservations, the federal agencies overseeing the homefront

would change their minds after the United States entered the war. The path to establishing a child care program, however, was far from straight. In 1940, Congress passed the National Defense Housing Act, known as the Lanham Act. The law was aimed at expediting the construction of housing in communities that might see a surge in population due to wartime production. In June 1941, a month before the Children’s Bureau’s conference, Congress amended the law to authorize support for “any facility necessary for carrying on community life substantially expanded by the national-defense program.”

Such facilities included schools, utilities such as water and sewer, and hospitals. Child care wasn’t mentioned. According to a 1994 *Polity* article by Susan Riley, then a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, Federal Works Agency (FWA) administrators held discussions with members of Congress and the White House throughout late 1941 and early 1942 about the possibility of using Lanham Act funds for child care. Finally, in August 1942, the House

Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds agreed that the FWA could use the funds for that purpose. This recognition took place “*without* official congressional debate, *without* passage of legislation specifically authorizing child care, and *without* appropriations of funds directly for that purpose,” wrote Riley. (Emphasis in original.)

“So, the first large-scale attempt at universal preschool is kind of a historical accident,” says Joseph Ferrie, an economic historian at Northwestern University. “It’s the result of a deal, rather than anything actually written in legislation.”

Around the same time, Congress and the president were taking other steps to meet child care needs. In July 1942, Congress appropriated \$6 million to fund the WPA nurseries in wartime production areas. That same month, President Franklin Roosevelt allocated \$400,000 from the Presidential Emergency fund to support states in expanding school programs to care for the children of working mothers. These measures were short-lived, however, and the Lanham Act would, after fits and starts, become the main source of funding for wartime child care.

The Lanham program’s rollout was beset by infighting among agencies, with leaders of the Children’s Bureau and the Office of Education vying to strip control from the FWA, arguing that they were better suited to overseeing a child care program. In early 1943, they worked with the Senate to introduce the War-Area Child Care Act, which would have reorganized the Lanham child care program under their control. The bill passed in the Senate but failed to be taken up in the House. President Roosevelt put an end to the infighting in August 1943, placing control of the program firmly in the FWA’s hands. The prior month, Congress had also appropriated funds for the Lanham Act to be used for community facilities such as child care centers. The FWA’s work could now truly begin.

THE LANHAM CENTERS TAKE SHAPE

As war production ramped up and unemployment fell, Depression-era public works programs like the WPA were dissolved. As the parent agency of the WPA, the FWA managed to secure funding through the Lanham Act for 1,150 WPA nurseries by 1943. Florence Kerr, who had been an administrator for the WPA and later the FWA, said in a 1963 oral history recorded by the Smithsonian Institution that saving those nurseries was “one of the first things that we looked into.”

The FWA also began distributing grants through the Lanham Act for the establishment of new centers. According to a 2017 article in the *Journal of Labor Economics* by Chris Herbst of Arizona State University, communities in “war impact areas” could apply for Lanham funds to build and maintain child care facilities, train and pay teachers, and cover operating expenses. War impact areas were those involved in the production of any goods essential to the war effort as well as agriculture. To qualify, communities had to demonstrate that they lacked the resources to meet the increased demand for child care on their own.

Initially, grants issued by the FWA were intended to cover 50 percent of costs, with the local community picking up the rest of the tab. In practice, however, federal subsidies ended up covering closer to two-thirds of the costs. Local funds largely consisted of fees raised from participating parents. The FWA capped such fees at 50 cents per child per day (equivalent to about \$9 today), raising the cap to 75 cents in 1945 (about \$13 in today’s dollars). This money was mostly used to cover the cost of food served to children in the centers. Moreover, although mothers working in the war industry were the target beneficiaries, there’s no indication that nonworking parents were excluded from using Lanham centers.

“While this program existed to enable mothers to contribute to the nation’s war production effort, there

was nothing in the legislation that explicitly required employment,” says Herbst.

Lanham nurseries provided care for children from ages 2 to 5, while child care centers looked after school-age children before and after school and during the summer. Consistent with the Children’s Bureau’s recommendations, few if any Lanham facilities provided care for children under the age of 2, despite expressed demand from working mothers with young children. According to Herbst, it was typical for preschool children to spend 12 hours per day at the nurseries. When school was in session, older children might spend a few hours before and after school. The availability of care also varied according to local need. In communities with factories operating 24 hours per day, centers were open at night.

To get the program up and running quickly, FWA administrators rented and reused existing buildings and relied on schoolteachers for staff. Federal agencies created a training program for Lanham teachers and volunteers, and some cities partnered with local universities to create their own training. Federal guidelines recommended keeping classrooms small, with a 10:1 student-to-teacher ratio, and Herbst found that most centers followed this recommendation. Students were served lunch, a snack, and even dinner in cases where centers were open late. That said, quality varied, as the FWA left operations largely up to the discretion of local administrators. In his article, Herbst cited the example of a center in Baltimore that had 80 children in one room with one bathroom, and those children had to cross a highway to reach the playground.

Every state except New Mexico received funding for child care through the Lanham Act, as well as Hawaii and Alaska (which were not yet states) and Washington, D.C. According to the program’s first report in August 1943, there were 1,726 centers operating with nearly 50,000 children

enrolled. The program reached its peak in July 1944, a month after Allied troops landed in Normandy, with 3,102 centers and just shy of 130,000 children enrolled. Nearly two-thirds of the children served by the program were preschool age. In its 1953 report, the Women's Bureau estimated that about 550,000 to 600,000 children received care from a Lanham center at some point during the war

END OF THE WAR AND LASTING LEGACY

Did the Lanham centers bring more mothers into the wartime workforce? In his article, Herbst found that female employment increased more in areas that received Lanham grants compared to those that didn't. But in a recent National Bureau of Economic Research working paper with Goldin and Claudia Olivetti of Dartmouth College, Ferrie found that, in practice, the program didn't draw many new female workers into the labor force because most Lanham centers were established in places that already had high female labor force participation rates.

That said, Ferrie notes that policymakers didn't know when the war would end. Even after the Germans surrendered in 1945, war production and the Lanham program didn't slow down. There was still the Pacific theater to contend with. Ferrie cites his father as an example of this continued wartime mentality. He shipped off to the European theater in 1944 and, after the German surrender, returned to base in the United States to begin

training for the invasion of Japan.

"It's at that point that policymakers realize that they have this program in place that's going to allow them to continue to draw even more women into the workforce, particularly women who hadn't yet left the home because they have young kids," says Ferrie.

That need never came, however, as the Japanese surrendered on Aug. 15, 1945, and World War II ended. After that, the FWA moved swiftly to unwind the Lanham child care program. The agency had reminded states at the beginning of the year that federal support for the centers was contingent on the war. If they wished to keep them open beyond that, states and localities would need to pick up the full tab. True to their word, just three days after the Japanese surrendered, FWA officials announced that federal funding for Lanham centers would end by October 1945 at the latest.

"The legislation was very clear about the funding for these child care programs. It was never meant to live a life after the war," says Herbst. "This was seen as a war expedient necessary to support women contributing to the nation's war effort. Once the war ended, the expectation was that these programs would go away, men would come back home and fill the jobs they had prior to the war, and women would resume their domestic responsibilities."

The rapid wind-down sparked a large outcry from Lanham communities, however. The FWA was flooded with letters and petitions from 26 states and Washington, D.C., urging officials to maintain funding at least

until soldiers had returned home, as many mothers still needed to work to support their families. This outcry was loudest in California, which was home to several major war production facilities and which, as of August 1945, had nearly a quarter of all children enrolled in Lanham centers. FWA officials acquiesced to these demands and extended funding for the centers through February 1946. But despite the program's popularity, its fate was sealed. Members of Congress wanted to quickly return to normalcy after the war, and many feared a surge in unemployment as soldiers returned home. Under the prevailing norms of the time, women were expected to step out of the workforce to make room for the men.

Today, the long-term benefits of early childhood education are well established, thanks to the work of economists like James Heckman of the University of Chicago. Both Herbst and Ferrie found lasting positive effects on children who grew up in areas with Lanham centers, including generally improved outcomes in high school and higher earnings in adulthood.

Federal involvement in child care since World War II has tended to focus on specific groups, such as the Head Start program that serves children from birth to age 5 from low-income families. Present-day policymakers who have called for a more universal child care program sometimes cite the Lanham Act as an example. But just as opinions about the government's involvement in child care differed in the 1940s, similar debates continue today, nearly 80 years after the Lanham program ended. **EF**

READINGS

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