PS for 3/15/90

Promises to “Fix” the Religious Daycare Issue

One of the several reasons why Congress left the Hawkins and Downey daycare bills twisting in the wind at the time of the Christmas recess was a failure to agree on how to handle the ticklish issue of religious daycare. At least a third of center-based daycare is run or sponsored by religious institutions, and this type is particularly important in the inner cities.

The American Civil Liberties Union et al are adamantly opposed to religious daycare receiving any federal funds, even indirectly. The National Education Association et al are just as stubbornly opposed to the whole idea of vouchers to give parents choice in daycare.

Religious daycare providers are not demanding direct federal grants, but they do demand that any federal grant program allow parents to receive vouchers or certificates that would be usable for any daycare of the parents’ choice, including religious daycare. To deny this would be to interfere with the parents’ right of choice, and would also discriminate unfairly against religious daycare because it would place it at an economic disadvantage with subsidized secular daycare.

It should be emphasized that, when parents talk about their freedom to choose religious daycare, they mean daycare that is truly religious. They do not mean daycare in a church basement that has been secularized to receive federal funds.

Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-MO) circulated a memorandum dated last October 5 in which he promised that the Democratic House leadership will “ensure the option of child care provided by religious institutions.”

President George Bush made a similar strong promise, and religious groups plan to hold him to them. When he appeared at the National Religious Broadcasters convention on January 29, a handout was circulating on the letterhead of the usually soft-spoken National Association of Evangelicals entitled “Will the White House sell out Evangelicals?”

President Bush met the challenge head on, saying: “I want to ensure that parents, not bureaucrats, are the ones who decide how to care for their children. It will not see the option of religious-based child care restricted or eliminated. I will fight that

every inch of the way." Bush then received a standing ovation from the thousands in attendance.

The rumor is going around the cloakrooms that the Democrats are planning on a cosmetic "fix." That means they want to appear to allow vouchers for religious daycare, but also include other language that makes this practically impossible.

Letters are now circulating among those who care about this issue which set forth the five points that must be included if the religious issue is actually to be fixed. Unless all five points are included in the legislation, the "fix" would be a fraud because religious daycare either would never get any federal vouchers or would find it too dangerous every to accept them.

1) If the legislation contains funds for a federal daycare grant program to the states, the grant program must guarantee to assisted parents the option of receiving a child care certificate or voucher which will empower the parents to choose any child care they want for their children. That choice must include religious daycare.

This provision is particularly important if the grant program provides increased Social Service Block Grants to pay for daycare in public schools. Any legislation which expands the role of the public schools in caring for preschool children is unacceptable unless it guarantees assisted parents the right to select non-public-school care through vouchers or certificates.

2) Any daycare grant program must contain explicit language requiring states to allow parents to use the program's vouchers or certificates in facilities which provide children with religious instruction and activities.

3) Any daycare grant program must allow religious organizations accepting vouchers to give preference to members of their own faith with respect to employment.

4) Any daycare grant program must allow religious organizations accepting vouchers to refuse employment to person whose past or present conduct violates the religious or moral teachings of the religious organization.

5) Any daycare grant program must permit states to exempt religious daycare from regulation and still receive vouchers or certificates. Currently, some 15 states do not regulate religious daycare.

These demands are very reasonable. The first, second and fourth items above were actually contained in the Dodd-Hatch daycare bill passed by the Senate last year, and the second and fifth items above were contained in the Stenholm/Shaw bill which received 195 votes in the House last year.

The next couple of weeks will tell whether or not the Congress is going to increase options for daycare through vouchers, or reduce options by forcing parents to use government daycare in order to receive any benefits.