

The Charlotte Post

The Voice of the Black Community

A subsidiary of the Consolidated Media Group
1531 Camden Road Charlotte, N.C. 28203

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Profits before children

North Carolina child care reforms have an eye exclusively on the financial bottom line

By Fred Darnley
SPECIAL TO THE POST

Sometimes the best hiding place is right in front of the person looking for the object. It appears that such is the case with Senate Bill 929 and House Bill 464, the General Assembly's attempts to regulate and subsidize child care heavily in North Carolina. What is being hidden? Money, and lots of it.

Let's suppose that you are in charge of the bureaucratic morass that has dominated the state's budget over the past generation.

Subsequent to the past two elections, you know you must deal with two things: welfare reform and education reform. What to do? You cannot significantly reform these groups either, for the reason.

The answer is staggeringly simple. You know that the medicare in love with the poverty machine and the educational pooh-bahs. All you have to do is tell the public that you are not creating or expanding a bureaucracy - you are creating a public-private partnership. In news conference after news conference you deny that this organization is a bureaucracy. You know that few if any journalists will ask the tough questions: Why is this organization not a bureaucracy, who is paying for it, what is the need for it, etc.

Step two: Tying the poverty machine and the education bureaucracy together. How can you keep both bureaucracies intact, tie the two together, spend the savings created by welfare reform and get the people of the state to champion this new monolith? In a word—children.

Sell the children. Scare parents and the general taxpayer into believing that, without this program, children will be stumbling idiots for the rest of their lives. In turn, make certain that the educational system avoids all blame for its history of ineptitude and fumbling. The argument now becomes one of "the children are not ready for school" rather than the schools are not ready for the children.

The remaining problems are minor. If you can eliminate private sector child care, you have won everything. After all, the demand for child care is going to grow exponentially as welfare reform takes hold, and the federal cash stream to support those children will be staggering. Placing child care into the public schools will do two things: provide unlimited federal support for your school systems and eliminate the last resistance to government control services.

Enter the two bills, Senate Bill 929 and House Bill 464. Very simply, they provide enough confusion, expense and general harassment in their provisions to eliminate, over time, all but the most determined private child care providers. Those private providers who are still standing after the adoption of these draconian measures will be operating at the mercy of the newly energized licensing consultant.

Of specific concern to operators of private day care centers, and therefore to parents, are rules regarding playgrounds and playground equipment, staff training, health and sanitation and then the linking of "enhanced program standards" with the receipt of government child care subsidies. Taken individually, few, if any, of the proposed regulations would prove fatal to a private day care center. Collectively, these regulations may prove lethal to numerous private providers who are, despite what some bureaucrats may think, offering quality care. Furthermore, none of the proposed regulations would actually improve the quality of care North Carolina children receive.

Those responsible for creating these regulations are well aware of this fact, yet they insist that the regulations are necessary to show that "we" care about children. But compassion is not the concern here, results are. And passage of these bills will not result in better-educated or safer children.

Most interestingly, the regulations proposed in SB 929 and HB 464 will be invoked to exclude taxpaying centers from the billions of dollars generated by welfare reform. Public schools, and all other state-operated facilities, are exempt from the licensing and regulatory measures created by SB 929 and HB 464. Thus, the state would impose vast regulations on private day care, driving up the costs and driving many providers out of business in the name of safety and compassion, yet leave the public schools untouched so that all but the wealthiest parents would have no professional day care option other than placing their children under the care of the state.

Children, then, would be wards of the state from infancy until adulthood. Apparently, creating dependency upon the state, rather than improving day care quality, is the true objective of these bills.

FRED DARNLEY is a fellow with the John Locke Foundation, a non-profit conservative think tank in Raleigh.

A national call for volunteerism

Sherman
Miller



Let us declare "volunteerism" as America's newest buzz word to assure the host of celebrities at the "Presidents Summit On America's Future" held in Philadelphia that raised the nation's consciousness. So now it is politically correct to care for your fellow person. With the chorus of President Bill Clinton and former presidential aspirants singing the praises of volunteerism, surely John Q. Public sees this bipartisan effort as a legitimate national creed. But this presidential euphoria masks a very disturbing hidden agenda of this summit that is escaping the prowess of the media.

Have you asked yourself why we need a presidents' summit that is underpinned by volunteering? Some will see it as a call to the humanitarian nature of man to do something good, thereby reincarnating altruism in mainstream America. The media is hellbent on making us all feel good about cleaning up our

neighborhoods and learning to smile at each other for a few days.

Nonetheless, my own efforts to devise rationales for the presidents' summit continually lead to my concluding that there is something critically wrong in our society that is rattling our national security and it necessitates a unified presidential front to squash this plague. An unsettling thought is that during our societal journey to become emotionally blinded with the virtues of the materialism we defrocked our nationalistic pride in the United States of America.

This national fascination with materialism ripened the atmosphere for the growth of four deadly plunderers that are kinking our national security armor. These pillagers are:

1) We see U.S. governmental officials being arrested for selling out this nation for money as though treason is a minor issue.

2) Paramilitary groups are declaring war on the U.S. government awakening us to the fact that sedition is not merely something we see on the evening news happening in the distant foreign countries.

3) Senior citizens are now the prey of both blue and white collar

bandits who are thriving off molesting and extorting our elders.

4) Terrorism reached America's shores where both domestic and foreign born terrorists relish exploiting our media to publicize their fiendish acts (e.g., the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building).

After a holistic look at the interconnectedness of the above plunderous actions, I concluded that their potency derives from exploiting the spiritual weakness of the United States of America that resulted from our national obsession with materialism. You also realize that to fight these scourges you must appeal to the goodness of mankind using positive propaganda in hopes of reincarnating altruism in mainstream America.

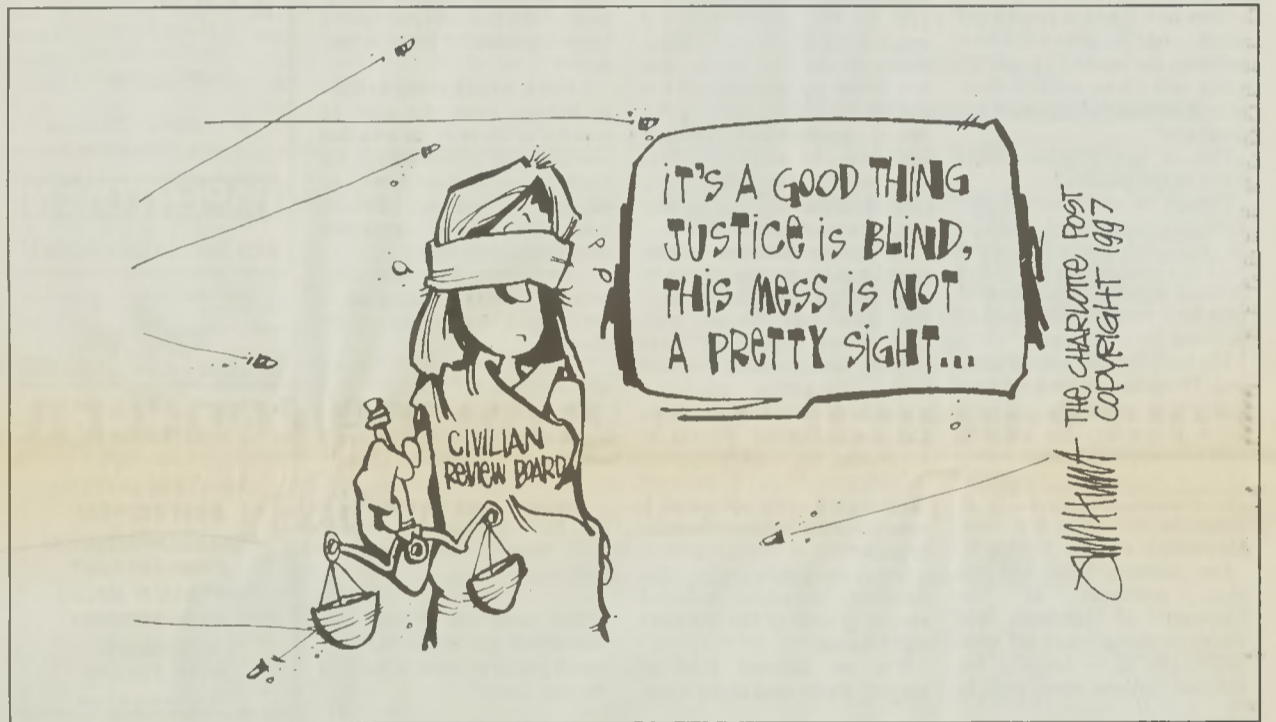
This positive propaganda technique is not new because former President George Bush spoke of a "kinder and gentler nation" and he had his points of light to reward good deeds. The massive media hype surrounding this Presidents' summit symbolizes that it is now too late to merely exploit catchy phrases because these turbulent times demand a significant change in the national psyche to preserve our

American way of life.

Coming to grips with the downside of a nation emotionally blinded with the pursuit of materialism is not unique to the U.S. Some former high flyer Japanese business leaders, the architects and builders of the modern Japanese miracle, are walking away from their corporate empires to live a life of poverty as Buddhist monks. These new Buddhist monks want a spiritual meaning in their lives.

Thus, there is a delicate balance between cultivating the soul of a nation and its material wealth and power. When the national psyche pendulum moves too far towards materialism, greed becomes an emotional blinder over the hearts of the masses signalling that dehumanizing your fellow person and the nation is OK. Perhaps this presidents' summit reminds us that a nation that loses its soul will crumble from an implosion no matter what its material strength. We are lucky that our leadership realizes this fact and they are trying to do something about it.

SHERMAN MILLER is an author who lives in Wilmington, Del.



Gingrich's difficult tasks

By Tom Raum
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — With the controversy of a \$300,000 ethics penalty mostly behind him and House work done on a balanced-budget blueprint, Speaker Newt Gingrich is turning to promoting lofty, but hard to achieve, initiatives.

As part of a continuing process of rehabilitation, the Georgia Republican is rechanneling his energies into a series of grandiose proposals — ones that seem assured to keep him in the limelight but out of the range of partisan fire and internal sniping.

In many ways, Gingrich's strategy echoes one used to great effect by President Clinton in 1996 as he reached out for middle-class support.

The "new" Gingrich agenda includes:

- A "national crusade" as intensive as the campaign for a balanced budget to eliminate illegal drugs in America by 2001.

- Sharp reductions in teen pregnancy and a national campaign to promote the importance of two-parent households.

- Wide-ranging improvements in education.

- An appeal to broadcast networks to revive "family hour" programming in prime time and a proposal that cable music television networks run more free anti-drug commercials.

- A constitutional amendment to permit prayer in public schools.

"We took four years to get this balanced budget. It was a huge effort," he said in a recent inter-

Speaker of the House has legislative work cut out for him with proposals

view. "The question now is what is worth America accomplishing that is comparable to this four-year effort."

The House approval of the balanced budget compromise negotiated between the White House and congressional Republicans came after hours of debate. Gingrich devoted much of his attention in his first term as speaker to a balanced budget plan, but did little of the day-to-day negotiating this time.

Even as he spoke in favor of the measure's adoption, Gingrich, a former history teacher, couched his endorsement of the compromise in terms of a history lesson. "The founding fathers would all, I think, look down on us and be happy," Gingrich said.

He said that the framers of the Constitution had deliberately created constitutional obstacles to easy solutions. "If this system could work quickly, it could become a dictatorship."

Gingrich has been sounding some of his new themes in recent speeches here.

He had planned to put them all together in a new agenda-roll out speech Tuesday evening to a college audience in Indianapolis, but the speech was put off because of the balanced budget debate on the House floor. His

aides said it would be rescheduled.



Gingrich

In many ways, Gingrich is following a process used successfully by Clinton last year.

Clinton learned that proposing initiatives popular with the middle class —

but that cost the federal government little or nothing — yielded maximum political mileage while presenting little exposure to attacks.

The president spewed forth proposals for combatting teen pregnancy, for battling drug use. He proposed a program to make sure every child could read by the third grade. He called for a cleanup of a third of the nation's toxic waste sites. And he also ordered Justice Department guidelines on teen curfews and "moments of silence" in school.

More recently, Clinton has backed away from many of the vague promises of that campaign in favor of more specific, limited proposals, befitting his continued incumbency, while Gingrich has gone for the big-vision items.

Gingrich's apparent strategy is to turn attention away from his ethics and leadership problems, and to put himself on a high road. He calls it preparing America for the millennium.

But his GOP critics suggest that the pie-in-the-sky rhetoric may not help him exercise control of the more down-to-earth agenda in the House.

There, actual legislation must be drafted and debated to carry forth the broad goals of the balanced-budget agreement. Many battles are expected.

A big fight also looms on Clinton's proposal to extend most-favored-nation trade status to China — which Gingrich supports but on which Republicans are deeply divided.

"I think Newt's performance in those debates will wind up being more important than futuristic speeches," said conservative activist and publisher Bill Kristol. "I think at the end of the day, Republicans out in the country want a real agenda pushed in Congress, not simply speeches about how things could be improved in America."

But Charles Black, a longtime GOP operative, said Gingrich's new emphasis "is a function of the fact that Congress and Washington were preoccupied with the budget."

With the basic balanced-budget blueprint now in place, "he wanted to move on to the big picture," Black said. "He's trying to get us beyond the budget and get us over the horizon."

TOM RAUM covers politics and national affairs for The Associated Press.