

# The Case Against Day Care

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by Marjorie Boyd

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The election of Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale makes it probable that we will soon have some kind of federally subsidized system of day care centers. Carter has promised "a national day care program" and Mondale has long been the principal supporter of day care legislation in the Congress.

As a mother of small children, I understand the strong appeal of a government day care system. It would enable a woman to work outside the home, secure in the knowledge that her children were safe, clean, and well fed. It would mean that she would not have to lose her seniority at her company or in her union when a new baby is born, or face re-entering the job market with rusty skills and little self-confidence as her last child enters school. In a country where it is at least supposed that work is one of the great sources of satisfaction in life, it's wrong to deprive women of careers. And for women who for economic

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reasons have to work full-time, day care is a necessity.

And we all know what recommends day care to compassionate legislators. It would mean that the neglected child who now wanders through busy city streets with his door key hanging from a string around his neck would be in a safe place, and it would mean that the infant left alone, dirty and crying in his crib, would be clean, warm, and well fed.

All these arguments in favor of day care come readily to mind because they appear regularly in magazines and newspapers; the arguments against day care do not. Most people do not know that psychologists and psychiatrists have grave misgivings about the concept because of its potential effects on personality; nor do they know that officials of countries that have had considerable experience with day care are now warning of its harmful effects on children.

Although none of Mondale's proposals for large-scale day care systems

has become law, federal aid to day care centers has continued to grow each year under a variety of other programs: the Social Security Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, President Ford's WIN Program, the Model Cities Program, the Concentrated Employment Act, and the Education Professions Development Act. We are moving inexorably toward this new way of rearing our children, with hardly a second thought; we are embarking on a program that will run well into the billions of dollars, that will dwarf in size and expense and effect most other social programs the American government has instituted.

Not only has the public not been warned of the potential dangers of day care, it has been led to believe that care in a center is superior to home care because it enables children to receive the benefits of "early education." The assumption by parents that early education would be of great and lasting value was responsible for the widespread popularity in the

1960s of the Head Start program and for the movement to longer nursery school hours.

However, this trend has recently been reversed. A 1969 joint study by the Westinghouse Electric Corp. and Ohio University compared children who had been in Head Start with children who had stayed at home during their pre-school years and found almost no intellectual difference between the two groups. The Westinghouse report was, and still is, criticized by some feminists and social activists as being "too narrow," but when later private studies and even the government's own Office of Economic Opportunity's inquiry supported the Westinghouse conclusion, enthusiasm for Head Start and early education began to wane.

But the major charge against day care continues to be that children cared for in large centers will suffer damage to their emotional, rather than intellectual, development.

The great bulk of a person's per-

sonality and character are formed within the very first years of life, and psychiatrists have always stressed that a satisfactory relationship between a child and a mother figure during that crucial early period is essential for healthy personality development. An infant establishes what Erik Erikson calls "basic trust" during the first months of life. Gradually he comes to believe that his mother figure and the small group of other people (father, babysitter, grandmother, etc.) who take care of his physical needs can be trusted and will not desert him. After this trust is established, the baby is able to turn his attention outward and begins to develop elementary skills and curiosity about the world. If there are too many different caretakers or too frequent changes in caretakers, the baby's fear of being left alone interferes with his normal development.

Most psychiatrists recommend that an infant be with its mother for at least the first year of life. They believe that an infant kept all day in a large day care center will be unable to develop the necessary intensity in its relationship with its mother figure and will compensate by developing an unusually strong attachment to the other children in the nursery, resulting in a loss of strong individual identity.

In the 1950s Dr. John Bowlby, president of the International Association of Child Psychiatry, conducted an influential series of studies of children in institutions that concluded: "It is essential for mental health that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction." Since Bowlby's studies were of children in full-time institutions, such as orphanages, it was uncertain just how they would apply to children in day care centers who are with their mothers at night and on weekends.

In the last five years, however, several studies have attempted to update Bowlby's findings. The National

Academy of Sciences asked Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University, an expert in early child development, to evaluate the various new studies on the effects of day care. Bronfenbrenner found that there had been only a handful of studies on the subject and none examining day care children past the age of five. He found that there was positively no difference in intellectual development between children raised in day care centers and those raised at home.

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### Less Able to Cope

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Bronfenbrenner found the studies on emotional differences between the two groups to be inconclusive. As most studies in the field indicate, infants and young children cared for in a group setting tend to develop unusually strong attachments to the other children in the group, and some of the studies showed that day care children were less able to cope with stress while separated from their peers. Bronfenbrenner said:

"It may well be that by three years of age, day care children do display less adaptive responses to stressful situations in which age mates are not present. . . . Accordingly, until researches are carried out comparing the behavior of day care and home-reared children outside the center or other peer group settings, the possibility that children raised in full-day group care may be less adaptive to stress and less secure in relations with adults remains an open one."

These doubts about day care did not come out fully in Congressional testimony because the experts have presented their judgments in a confusing manner. Even those who are strongly opposed to the concept of day care often speak out in its favor because they believe that it can be of value in rescuing the child in extraordinarily bad circumstances, the child who is neglected, abused, or terribly poor. Whatever harm day care may do, the reasoning goes, it is surely better than the environment in which



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these children now live.

A few hours a day in a day care center hardly seems to be the answer for children who are seriously abused, and denying people the right to raise their children simply because they are poor hardly seems just. But even taking the experts on their own terms, the record clearly shows that if government programs designed to help the disadvantaged also have appeal for the middle class, the middle class will find a way to take advantage of them. The list of examples is long: agricultural subsidies, federal aid to impacted areas, the school lunch program, slum clearance, the student loan program, food stamps, and on and on. Indeed, in New York City, where government day care is more advanced than anywhere in the country, a family earning \$16,000 a year can receive a subsidy of \$26 a week to keep a child in a public day care center. People who support day care for the disadvantaged only should realize that there are better solutions for the disadvantaged, and that even if instituted on a limited basis, day care would quickly spread throughout society.

All the day care children in the studies attended so-called "quality" centers. Quality day care means, of course, a clean and safe environment, but it also means a high ratio of adults to children. The currently accepted standards, those adopted by the government, are one adult for each infant under the age of six weeks; one adult per four children from six weeks to three years; and one adult per five children four to five years of age.

Psychiatrists who testified at the hearings on Mondale's day care bill, both those supporting day care for low-income children and those opposing it, were unequivocal in their opinion that day care with a lower adult-to-child ratio would be damaging. In the words of a statement to the committee signed by five child psychiatrists:

"There is considerable evidence that less than 'quality services' would inflict both immediate and long-range

damage to the development potential of vast numbers of children."

I spoke with Professor Jerome Kagan of Harvard University, a leading expert in the field, and asked him why, if misgivings about day care are so widespread, the question of whether or not it is harmful can't be settled by research. Kagan said:

"Up until five years ago the best professional guess was that day care would do harm. Now a few studies, imperfect though they are, find no harm if the day care is of a high quality. But day care has been around only a short time; the damage probably wouldn't show up until later on. It is extremely difficult to prove conclusively that something will be harmful at some time in the future. Take fluoro-carbons. Many experts are now certain that at some point they will damage the ozone layer, but they can't prove it. Another good analogy would be the birth control pill. Early studies showed that it was harmless, but now years later, we find it can indeed be harmful.

"And I must emphasize that quality day care with a high adult-to-child ratio is what we are talking about; anything less would definitely do damage."

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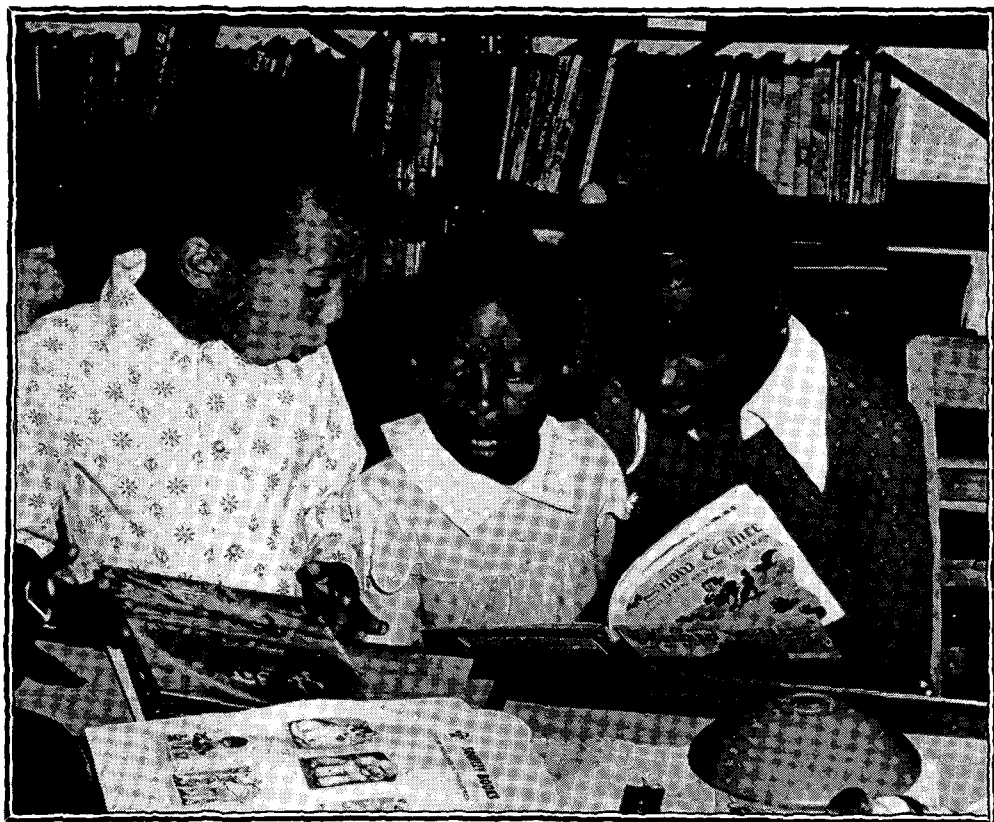
### The Foreign Experience

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Another way to approach the question of how day care affects children is to look at the experiences of other countries. The Soviet Union, Sweden, and Israel have all had many years of experience with group child care, and have all had less than heartening results with it.

In his report to the National Academy of Sciences, Bronfenbrenner said:

"It is of interest that in conversations with American specialists, professionals and parents in the U.S.S.R. and Sweden, two countries in which full-day group care facilities are widespread, have expressed concern about possibly deleterious effects of extended care."



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A U. S. government study of day care in the Soviet Union, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Israel, and France found widespread concern over the effects of day care on children, and the report noted that there was no recorded case where a senior official running a day care center made use of that center for his or her own children. In one country, Hungary, the government is moving away from day care and now pays a day care allowance for each child directly to the mother. And Czechoslovakia recently revised its laws to provide for a six-month paid maternity leave.

Kremlinologists who study official Soviet Union pronouncements have noticed an astonishing reversal by the government from praise for their 50-year-old day care system to concern over the possibility that day care causes "deprivation of psychological stimulation" and "one-sided or

retarded development." And one recent Soviet publication, commenting on day care, talked inspiringly of the importance of each individual developing his own unique potentialities so that he can make an "original or even revolutionary contribution" to Soviet society.

Dr. Benjamin Spock, one of the few outspoken opponents of day care centers, has said of these statements: "The Soviet authorities now realize that they have been producing some drones with their group care in the first two or three years."

Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, in his study of the Israeli children raised in group nurseries in the kibbutzim (*The Children of the Dream*, Macmillan, 1969) concluded that although the children were well cared for and happy, they did indeed form unusually strong attachments to their peer groups. A fight between two children in a kibbutz is a rare occurrence. (At most

kibbutzim, children actually sleep away from home, in a center. Their parents usually visit with them for a couple of hours in the evening and a day each weekend, but it's still a more extreme case than day care, though certainly analogous.)

In studying adolescents and adults who had been raised in a kibbutz (only four per cent of the population of Israel lives in kibbutzim), Bettelheim found they had great difficulty in forming strong personal relationships with others, even in marriage; they were lacking in creativity and individual initiative; and they tended to conform too quickly to group pressures.

An Israeli teacher who had taught in both kibbutz schools and those outside told Bettelheim: "I tried all kinds of methods of teaching them [the kibbutz children] to be spontaneous, to be creative in their writings. The methods that worked in the city schools did not work in the kibbutz. When I encouraged them, the children in the kibbutz wrote eagerly, but they would never read out what they wrote in front of the class, nor would they show it to the other youngsters. . . . Wherever they felt there might be something that would give them away, even if it wasn't personal at all, they couldn't bring it out."

Bettelheim's study is controversial and has been criticized as being subjective, which indeed it is. But as Bettelheim points out, his work is much less critical of the kibbutz method of child-rearing than other more conventional studies using scientific methods have been.

The results of kibbutz scholastic tests make eerie reading. No kibbutz children score in the lower range of the scale, and none score in the upper range. They are all clustered quite close together around the middle, unlike any other comparable group of children. While the kibbutz nurseries have succeeded in eliminating the underachiever, they have also eliminated the scholar, the artist, and the leader.

Aside from all the uncertainties

about how day care actually affects children, it's clear that one *can't* be uncertain about day care that is of less than top quality. Experts agree that anything but quality day care is clearly damaging to a child. And yet most day care centers in this country at present do not meet the widely accepted standards of "quality" because the government has never enforced the standards it adopted in 1968. A recent study by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare of 607 federally funded day care centers in nine different states found that 70 per cent failed to meet federal standards of health and safety and that children's lives were actually endangered in some of them. The study also found that 40 per cent of the centers failed to meet the minimal federal standards for staff-child ratios. Incidentally, no one has yet come up with a way to police a vast system of day care centers to make sure that quality standards are maintained. And it is difficult to see how we could ever be sure that just because the requisite number of adults was on the payroll, a child was indeed receiving quality care. Private day care centers are not required to meet the federal standards and operate under state requirements, which are usually less stringent, because of cost.

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### Faulty Arithmetic

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When quality day care is maintained, or when government programs plan to maintain it, it is tremendously expensive. In some of our larger cities the cost of keeping a single child in a government day care center for a year is more than the annual cost of welfare for a family of four—food, shelter, and clothing. In New York City, the only place where a large network of government-funded day care centers has been established (under Title IV of the Social Security Act) it now costs \$3,750 per child per year for day care, which, as *The Wall Street Journal* has pointed out, is roughly equivalent to the price

charged by Manhattan's swankiest nursery schools.

Congressional advocates of day care centers have paid little if any attention to these costs in formulating their legislative schemes. A recent study of legislation affecting children by Gilbert Y. Steiner of The Brookings Institution said:

"The results of a few simple arithmetic calculations are not flattering to either the House or Senate sponsors [Rep. John Brademas and Mondale] of what both called landmark legislation. In the case of families with incomes under \$7,000, the annual cost of the proposed child development program could amount to \$17 billion . . . . Even a 50-percent participation rate would have meant \$8.5 billion." Brademas' House bill estimated the cost at \$350 million a year and Mondale's bill set it at \$2 billion.

While Steiner attributes these wildly unrealistic cost estimates to the poor mathematical skills of members of Congress, it could be another example of the legislative foot-in-the-door game. Once you get a foot in the door by getting a program authorized at an outrageously low price, a lobby for the continuance of the program immediately springs up and starts to grow—social activists, recipients, employees, and their relatives and friends—all pressuring Congress so that the program will be continued regardless of the cost.

It should be noted that the \$17-billion figure arrived at by Brookings uses a cost per child that would not provide "quality" service. When you use the figure of \$2,000 per child per year, which experts estimate as the *minimum* cost of quality care, you come up with a figure of \$21 billion. Using the actual present-day New York City cost you reach \$33 billion. And this is just for low-income children. Estimating the costs of a universal government day care system is mind-boggling and would surely necessitate a sharp increase in either the federal deficit or taxes.

Day care first came before Congress in 1971, when an informal coalition of day care advocates, consisting of church leaders, social activists, educators, representatives of welfare groups, feminists, and leaders of the AFL-CIO, successfully pushed a day care bill through both houses. The legislation, popularly known as the Mondale day care bill, provided for various health and nutritional benefits for children of low-income families and set up a fairly large-scale system of federally funded day care centers, as well as providing for after-school and summer care. The persuasiveness of the lobby was reflected in the Senate vote of 49 to 12, but the bill was vetoed by President Nixon in December 1971, and Congress failed to override the veto. A new bill was introduced but has been on the back burner because of dampened enthusiasm in the House and the strong probability of a veto by President Ford.

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#### Enter Albert Shanker

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The day care lobby has been awaiting a more favorable climate in which to launch its next offensive, and it would be hard to imagine a setting more conducive than a Carter-Mondale administration.

The day care coalition has kept together even though its members remain divided over the question of who should be eligible for government day care. On one side are the psychologists, psychiatrists, and church leaders who would limit it to children of lower-income families, and on the other side are the feminists and the AFL-CIO, who favor a much grander effort.

The emerging leader of the day care coalition is Albert Shanker, president of the AFL-CIO's Federation of Teachers. He recently told a congressional subcommittee: "We believe very strongly that the time has come for the country to develop a system of universal day care, child care, early childhood education, an entire pack-

age of services, both universal and free." Shanker would have children enter public school at the age of two, and he points out that our declining birth rate, which leaves schools empty and 175,000 teachers looking for jobs, makes day care the answer to teacher unemployment.

Even if other considerations, such as questions about the value of early education and the effects of day care on emotional development, were not involved, the astronomical cost of this plan should give us pause. But Shanker, unperturbed by such matters, is determined to move his 175,000 unemployed teachers en masse onto the federal payroll.

There are signs that his position is gaining support among other members of the coalition. The Brookings study of legislation affecting children said of the day care lobby:

"... a substantial number of the coalition's important participants have moved quickly toward the Shanker position as a practical course....

Shanker seems to represent the most likely path to legislative success."

There are many strong arguments for hesitation on day care: the misgivings of psychiatrists, the evidence that other countries experienced in day care are now seeking alternatives, the difficulty of maintaining quality standards, and the exorbitant cost. To rush into it now would seem foolhardy indeed.

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### Some Alternatives

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But there *are* now 4.5 million working mothers with 5.7 million children under the age of five. Women with children are working outside the home, and there is no chance that we will ever go back to the age when a woman was expected to stay home and bake cookies until her last child graduated from high school. So, if we are to maintain a holding pattern until researchers can determine conclusively just what the effects of day care are on children, we must have alternatives.

Suggestions abound, but they have received little public notice. The plan adopted by Hungary to pay a day care allowance is one. Others are longer paid maternity leaves subsidized by the government and efforts by either friendly persuasion, court action, or legislation to change company and union seniority rules so that women do not lose seniority when they take maternity leaves. And the trend toward shorter working hours, which now seems well established, may lead to more participation by fathers in child raising. Another possibility is part-time jobs. And since psychiatrists believe a mother should care for her infant at least during the first year of its life, she could at the same time care for another woman's two-year-old or three-year-old and be paid a government allowance for each child. Cooperative nurseries and baby-sitting clubs are already in widespread use in some places.

Another alternative was proposed at hearings on the new Mondale bill in 1975. Dr. Susan W. Gray, a child psychologist from Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee made a quiet statement that was quickly lost in the excitement of Albert Shanker's political arm-flexing and feminists' demands.

Gray said:

"I should like to emphasize an aspect of day care which is generally neglected in discussions of the field and certainly in the attention of the public.... This is family day care, that is where a mother in her own home cares for a limited number of young children, typically no more than six or seven.

"At Peabody we have made a systematic study of improving the quality of family day care by working directly with the family day care mother to help her improve the quality of education and social stimulation she provides for the children in her care. It is feasible and not costly.... It does not require the heavy capital investment which constructing day care centers requires. This makes an

attractive option in expanding the number of day care slots available for children who need them.

"Family day care is favored by many parents, because children are in small groups. Often care is provided in the child's own community. This is not only easier from the standpoint of transportation, but the mother knows the family day care worker personally, which helps build trust. Children are in small groups, and the atmosphere is more homelike. A sizable investment in improving the quality of this service would yield large returns."

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### The Obscured Truth

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There's one more alternative to day care that seems these days to be increasingly ignored: staying home and raising your own kids. Work is supposed to be one of the great fulfilling experiences, but for a lot of Americans, perhaps even most, it's just tedium, whether experienced in an office or on an assembly line. For some people, of course, raising children is a tedious waste of time too, and those people probably shouldn't have children. For me, and I suspect most people, it's a pleasant, rewarding, and genuinely meaningful way to spend a few years. It's one of the great flaws of the day care lobby that it has managed to obscure this truth, to imply that time spent raising one's own children is time wasted.

Perhaps one problem with raising children in a capitalist society is that you don't get paid for it; perhaps the reason work is thought of as so universally worthy is that it's universally paid, and people in America too often tie the value of what they do (and even of themselves) to how much money they get for doing it. Proposals to replace day care with direct payments to mothers are attractive because they might well counteract the money neurosis, besides ensuring that child-care money goes to the people who need it instead of being siphoned off in large part by a massive bureaucratic structure.

Yet large-scale day care centers are being presented as the only answer. The alternatives all pale in comparison to the bright vision of a national network of gleaming new day care centers filled with rows of cribs and brightly colored toys.

Solutions often create far worse problems than the ones they solve, and even the best-intentioned people can opt for a seemingly simple solution which will have profound, unintended effects. Bruno Bettelheim learned, in his study of the children of the kibbutzim, that their system of group care for infants and children had not been planned in advance. It had been given no real thought, but had simply grown up in response to a problem. The Israeli women who settled the kibbutzim were the strong survivors of the European wartime ghettos, and they were determined not to have children, but to work alongside men doing heavy farm labor to create their new nation out of the wilderness. But despite their plans, babies were born. The women were reluctant to give up their new job equality to care for the children for even a short time, and since every strong back was badly needed in those early days, a system of group nursery care was hastily adopted as the easiest solution to the problem. Bettelheim, throughout his study, kept coming back to the striking differences between the kibbutz-reared children with their flat personalities and the idealistic and highly individualistic, survivors of the ghettos who are their parents.

The question of day care boils down to this kind of cycle. The women's movement has been concerned primarily with the problems of young and intelligent and creative working mothers who, it seems fair to say, are in large measure the product of the care they received as infants and children, from attentive mothers. In a new era of day care, the next generation could well be the kind that would never struggle, as its mothers have, to make a better world. ■

# Tidbits ar

## ... But Don't Let Us Pressure You

*The National Observer* reports that the Air Force Reserve has a form titled "Privacy Act Statement," which reads in part: "Information is voluntary. Failure to provide information could subject individual to be called to extended active duty when member might be eligible for assignment to the Standby Reserve. . . ."

## Reporters Linked To Koi Scandal

We have from time to time complained that the investigative reporting craze is getting out of hand. Recently in San Jose, California, some poor park attendant apparently neglected to shut off a drain and some valuable fish, called Koi, were killed. The *San Jose Mercury* responded with four-alarm Woodward and Bernstein coverage. Here are some of the headlines:

Valuable  
Fish Left  
To Die

Parks Chief Alters  
Story On Fish Kill

Parasites Found In Koi Fish

Koi Controversy Continues

Heated Session On Koi

Garza Blasts Parks Chief  
In Session On Koi Deaths

Fish Death Censure Stalled

## Breathe Easy, GS-18s

In our September issue we complained that political reporters had failed to say anything about the significance of *Elrod v. Burns*, a Supreme Court decision that severely limited the patronage powers of a Democratic sheriff in Illinois and by implication that of federal, state, and local officials generally, including Jimmy Carter—a case that was bad, bad news for everyone who thinks we have to cut back on the civil service. Only Nicholas Von Hoffman, the columnist, wrote about the case's significance. We found no other story until finally, on November 17, the *Times* put it on page one.

## Closer Touch

"Trade association" is a polite term for lobby. Thus it was with interest that we recently learned from William H. Jones of *The Washington Post* that the American Society of [Trade] Association Executives has 1,500 members based in Washington, who in turn employ 45,000 people. Jones notes that "many large groups have moved here in recent years from New York and Chicago, mainly to be in closer touch with federal government agencies." Forty-five thousand people marching shoulder to shoulder for a better America.

## The Front Lines

You may recall that in our October issue, Dr. Ronald Glasser pointed to evidence that any exposure to carcinogens could lead to cancer. Now David Burnham of *The New York Times* reports that a study of 3,887 atomic workers who died between 1944 and 1972 shows that occupational radiation exposure *well below* present government standards resulted in increased death from cancer. There are now 85,000 employees working in positions of possible exposure in the nuclear industry.