



DAVID SARASOHN

Better to be a consultant than a kid

It's a great time, these days, for people who want to refight the Vietnam War.

It's not such a great time for people who are too young to remember Vietnam — or even a Rambo movie.

Today, more than two dozen prominent pediatricians, including six former presidents of the American Academy of Pediatrics, gather in Washington, D.C., to criticize the Bush administration's policies on children. Considering current levels of health coverage and poverty among American children, it's a long and discouraging diagnosis.

Thursday, \$1 billion in unspent federal funds for children's health care, not yet matched by state budgets, will lapse, and the administration now opposes keeping the money available.

Last week, Children First for Oregon issued its annual report card on how children are doing around here. Looking at conditions of health, financial stability, education and safety, the group came up with an overall grade of D+.

Rotten kids never do their homework.

Except the grade's not for them, but for us — for how we treat Oregon kids.

Yet you can listen to the language of this election here, there and all over and hear a lot more about 1970 Cambodia than 2004 kids.

No child left behind?

We're closer to no child in mind.

In D.C., the baby doctors are talking about 8 million American kids without health insurance and more than three times that many uncovered at some point in a given year. They're talking about the pitched battle the administration has fought with Head Start providers, which may connect to the Washington Post's projections of budget cuts for the program next year. They're discussing lack of progress on prenatal care and basic maternal and child health services.

None of that is likely to be helped by the administration's taking a billion dollars for children's health coverage off the table.

And if the 8 million uninsured kids won't be getting much help, the 3 million who show up abused or neglected each year shouldn't count on interesting any political consultant much, either.

While John Kerry sometimes talks about Head Start and after-school programs, says Philip Coltoff, CEO of The Children's Aid Society of New York City, "The presidential candidates are not defining strategies to help poor children in their campaigns."

Not even poor children who live in swing states.

In Oregon, the Children First report card was dragged down by 148,000 Oregon children living in poverty, a whopping rate of food insecurity and a number of insured kids high above what the state declared as its goal. Some people have suggested that, graded on a generous curve, Oregon's treatment of its kids might actually soar to some kind of C, but Tina Kotek of Children First pointed out that the goals we're not reaching are the state's own benchmarks.

"We didn't define the benchmarks," says Kotek, "the state did."

And the state is missing them.

In Oregon and in the country at large, children are looking at even bigger cuts to their programs next year. The major thing that they get in this political era is a series of unprecedentedly massive deficits, which someday they'll get to pay off instead of doing something they might want to do for themselves.

But what are kids for, if not to pay off their parents' debts?

"A campaign year is a reflection of what's important to the public. I don't think there's really an emphasis on what's important for children," says Donna Lawrence, vice president of national field operations for the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C.

"We're not seriously addressing the fact that children are suffering in this country."

Instead, we're snickering about wind-surfing when millions of kids are getting blown away. And with all the surgical, subtle efforts to craft a political message, the message to American children takes no thought at all:

Kid, it's not your year.

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