The twentieth-century history of federal involvement in children's health affairs has followed an interesting pattern: from little concern to deep commitment and then to reluctant participation. Ann Wilson has shown how between 1906 and 1912 Theodore Roosevelt's administration prodded Congress to establish a Children's Bureau to determine children's and parents' medical and other needs; how Congress backed away from that commitment in the 1920s; how, during the Depression of the 1930s, President Franklin Roosevelt and Congress joined together to pass social legislation to help those in need, including children; and how the current Reagan administration, despite such actions as the "Baby Doe" regulations, has sought to reduce federal involvement in health care financing, Congress' wishes notwithstanding [5]. Though the three presidents mentioned - Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan - engineered these changes in government policy, they did not act in a vacuum. The general mood of the country, economic conditions, and political philosophy all played a role. To some extent, the medical profession also influenced public policy in this area.

Let us first go back to the late nineteenth century, before Theodore Roosevelt, to see what attitudes prevailed to keep government out of children's health problems. This post-Civil War era was one of rapid economic growth, especially for business and industry. Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, J. P. Morgan, and Leland Stanford are familiar names from the period. The federal government interfered little in individual citizen's business affairs, adhering to the prevailing laissez-faire philosophy of the time. The pursuit of individual self-interest was best for the country, according to this law of political economy, and government could promote that goal best by permitting free and unfettered competition among members of society. One historian has characterized this practical interpretation of Charles Darwin's then-recently-promulgated theory of evolution in the following manner:

All men, the theory read, applied themselves in the search for wealth and found rewards according to their ability. A few, the highest types of their race, discovered more effective ways to combine land, labor, and capital, and drew society upward as the rest reorganized behind their leaders. The large majority, possessing no more than

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ordinary talent, divided a fund that was fixed by the requirements of the dearer resources, land and capital. The weakest simply disappeared. Meanwhile, government maintained order, conducted some public services at minimum cost, and above all did nothing to disrupt the laws of free competition. The society that abided by these principles slowly and steadily progressed, enjoying an ever superior utilization of its resources and an ever improving race winnowed by competition ([4], p. 135).

But this _laissez-faire_ system did not always operate according to plan. Corporations sometimes abused their power and hurt individual citizens or, as they got more powerful, stifled free and fair competition. Local, state, and eventually even national government found it necessary to interfere in railroad, labor, and immigration issues, ostensibly in order to preserve _laissez-faire_. Changing social and economic conditions in the late nineteenth century forced legislators, judges, and politicians to reassess their “Social Darwinian” view of American political economy. They and an ever larger group of vocal citizens chose to abandon _laissez-faire_, even in social matters. They saw what rapid industrialization and the sudden large influx of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe brought to burgeoning cities: overpopulation, poverty, crime, and an overload on local social services. The community, previously able to extend a helping hand to those in need, found it difficult, if not impossible, to care properly for all those wanting assistance. The greatest sufferers, yet with the smallest voices, were children. The plight of these children left to fend for themselves while parents worked, or forced to work at dangerous, physically demanding jobs, or sent to school underfed and in ill health eventually attracted widespread attention.

To end human suffering and to preserve a national resource – the nation’s future adults – child welfare groups began looking beyond overtaxed local sources of support to the federal government. The “Progressive Era” of early twentieth-century America, with its positive vision of improving society through involved government and concerned citizens, thus opposed the Social Darwinism of the earlier “Gilded Age.” According to one historian of the period, a central focus of these Progressives was the child, the one who would fulfill the Progressives’ vision of an ideal society, if properly nurtured and educated ([4], p. 169). Here then was one source of support for the Children’s Bureau legislation of 1906–1912, pushed by a leading Progressive of the era, President Theodore Roosevelt.

Most of the objections to the Children’s Bureau and later to the Sheppard-Towner Act arose out of the “survival-of-the-fittest” philosophy of limited government the Progressives were trying to overthrow. Social Darwinism had served the era of big business well, but times were changing and the argu-