

JAY AMBROSE

Trying to child-proof the entire nation

Under the Clinton administration, a rather extraordinary venture is underway. It's simply this: The government is attempting to child-proof America.

I'll confess that it has been some years since child-proofing was required around my home, but I recall the ordeal. Poisonous items were put up high, along with breakable items. Barriers were put across places where children could tumble to disaster. All kinds of drawers and doors and more were locked. The chief point was to make sure there was no way a child could hurt himself, even if the house was thus made unliv-

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able for adults.

It may seem like quite a stretch to child-proof a whole country, and quite irrational, really, considering that the chore is most appropriately done in the particular quarters where children abide. But if you doubt that the Clinton administration is focused on so grand and goofy a scheme, ponder the following initiatives.

- TV broadcasters have been told they have no choice, under penalty of law, but to produce three hours of children's programming every week. They have also been required to introduce a ratings system aimed at protecting children. The makers of TV sets have orders to begin installing so-called V-chips to enable parents to block scandalous sights from the view of the innocent young.

- The administration wishes to establish rules censoring the Internet in order to protect children. The administration is seeking to restrict tobacco advertising in magazines, on billboards and at sports events that might be seen by teen-agers. It is also trying to prohibit liquor advertising on TV and radio on the grounds it might influence young people to drink.

- President Clinton is aiming to establish a new and unaffordable health insurance entitlement for children in relatively low-income families.

This isn't all, but it's enough to give you the idea. What it comes down to is that the president, in defending and advancing those propositions to which he is wedded, has discovered that you can get away with just about anything if you do it in the name of children.

After all, who among us dislikes children, would want to see them hooked on tobacco or drink alcohol, would subject them to pornography or would allow them to be sick without recourse to medical care? Almost none of us, that's who, and the clever folks in the White House know as much. It's difficult to respond to their programs without inflicting political self-damage.

The thing is, it's phony. The good society is constructed for adults, who, in their families, their churches and other private institutions, provide for and safeguard the young. Public institutions have a role, too — public schools, for instance. But the federal government should not shape its laws so as to supplant the wisdom and responsibilities of the immediate guardians of children. The objective of wise governments is to enable adults to carry out their responsibilities without undue interference. That's scarcely what the Clinton administration is about, perhaps because it doesn't really trust any of us.

What you have to suspect, too, is that this administration is cynical, knowing full well that it wants to establish programs for adults or inhibit adult activities, not just serve children. Even if the administration harbors no such purpose, it is in fact circumscribing adult activities in its pointless child-proofing of the country.

Jay Ambrose is chief editorial writer of the Scripps Howard News Service.

COMMENTARY