

# Joe Klein



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## Head Start Doesn't Work

### What do you do when a beloved program doesn't produce results?

**B**ARRACK OBAMA HAS BEEN ACCUSED of "class warfare" because he favors closing several tax loopholes—socialism for the wealthy—as part of the deficit-cutting process. This is a curious charge: class warfare seems to be a one-way street in American politics. Over the past 30 years, the superwealthy have waged far more effective warfare against the poor and the middle class, via their tools in Congress, than the other way around. How else can one explain the fact that the oil companies, despite elephantine profits, are still subsidized by the federal government? How else can one explain the fact that hedge-fund managers pay lower tax rates than their file clerks? Or that farm subsidies originally meant for family farmers go to huge corporations that hardly need the help?

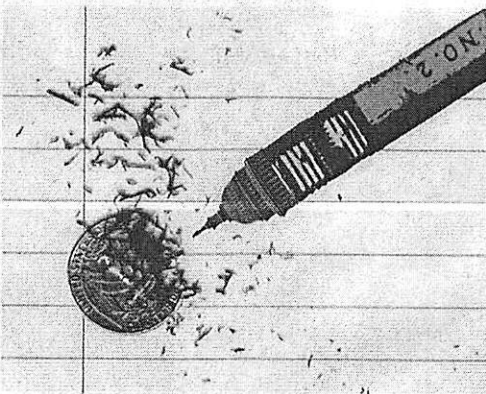
**Actually, there is an additional explanation.** Conservatives, like liberals, routinely take advantage of a structural flaw in the modern welfare state: there is no creative destruction when it comes to government programs. Both "liberal" and "conservative" subsidies linger in perpetuity, sometimes metastasizing into embarrassing giveaways. Even the best-intentioned programs are allowed to languish in waste and incompetence. Take, for example, the famed early-education program called Head Start.

The idea is, as Newt Gingrich might say, simple liberal social engineering. You take the million or so poorest 3- and 4-year-old children and give them a leg up on socialization and education by providing preschool for them; if it works, it saves money in the long run by producing fewer criminals and welfare recipients—and more productive citizens. Indeed, Head Start did work well in several pilot programs carefully run by

professionals in the 1960s. And so it was "taken to scale," as the wonks say, as part of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

It is now 45 years later. We spend more than \$7 billion providing Head Start to nearly 1 million children each year. And finally there is indisputable evidence about the program's effectiveness, provided by the Department of Health and Human Services: Head Start simply does not work.

According to the Head Start Impact Study, which was quite comprehensive,



the positive effects of the program were minimal and vanished by the end of first grade. Head Start graduates performed about the same as students of similar income and social status who were not part of the program. These results were so shocking that the HHS team sat on them for several years, according to Russ Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution, who said, "I guess they were trying to re-run the data to see if they could come up with anything positive. They couldn't."

The Head Start situation is a classic among government-run social programs. Why do so many succeed as pilots and fail when taken to scale? In this case, the answer is not particularly difficult to

unravel. It begins with a question: Why is Head Start an HHS program and not run by the Department of Education? The answer: Because it is a last vestige of Johnson's War on Poverty, which was run out of the old Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The War on Poverty attempted to rebuild poor communities from the bottom up, using local agencies called community action programs. These outfits soon proved slovenly; often they were little more than patronage troughs for local Democratic Party honchos—and, remarkably, to this day, they remain the primary dispensers of Head Start funds. As such, they are far more adept at dispensing make-work jobs than mastering the subtle nuances of early education. "The argument that Head Start opponents

make is that it is a jobs program," a senior Obama Administration official told me, "and sadly, there is something to that."

**This is criminal, every bit as outrageous as tax breaks for oil companies—perhaps even more outrageous, since we are talking about the lives of children.** Happily, the Administration is taking steps to clean up the mess and channel money to the local programs that work most effectively, but a more complete overhaul will undoubtedly be needed.

There are those who argue that this is a fool's errand, that the federal government simply can't run an effective local education program. They are called conservatives, and they have a point. Then there are those who say that even if Head Start isn't working so well, at least it's funneling money to poor neighborhoods that need it. They are called liberals, and they have a point too.

Both are wrong: in these straitened times, we need world-class education programs, from infancy on up. But we can no longer afford to be sloppy about dispensing cash—whether it's subsidies for oil companies or Head Start—to programs that do not produce a return. ■