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Once Upon a Time: The History of Republican Support for International Family Planning and Contraception (Part II)

Much has transpired since the first installment of our retrospective on the evolution of Republican support of U.S. involvement in international family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) and a governmental role in providing contraceptives — most monumentally, the decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* on June 24 that ended the constitutional right to abortion and overturned the landmark ruling in *Roe v. Wade* that was the law of the land for nearly a half century. All six Supreme Court justices that formed the majority in *Dobbs* were appointed by Republican presidents whose records on birth control are considered below, the longest tenured being Justice Clarence Thomas, appointed by President George H.W. Bush in 1991.

It is Justice Thomas’ separate concurring opinion, which he went out of his way to write, that signals where the current Supreme Court majority may be preparing to go in the future. His opinion offers a backhanded invitation to reexamine other topics, including the *Griswold* decision establishing the right of married couples to use contraceptives, along with *Lawrence* declaring sodomy laws unconstitutional and *Obergefell* on the right to same-sex marriage. While some predicted that the *Loving* decision on interracial marriage could also be impacted by this ruling, perhaps it’s not surprising that this element was noticeably absent from Justice Thomas’ opinion.

But back to our fractured fairy tale of days of old when some Republican policymakers in Washington still supported birth control.

Republican Presidents on Birth Control: Reagan to Trump

Ronald W. Reagan

The tenure of President Reagan ushered in the ongoing policy battles in Congress, dating back to 1984, and established the position on those issues for Republican presidents ever since — namely, enforcement of some iteration of the Global Gag Rule (GGR) and defunding of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

At the 1984 International Conference on Population held in Mexico City, the U.S. delegation announced that foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) would henceforth be denied U.S. family planning assistance if they performed abortions in cases other than threat to the pregnant woman’s life, rape or incest; provided counseling or referral for abortion; or lobbied to make abortion legal or more available in their own country (even if these activities were performed with funding from other, non-U.S. government sources). Under what was then called the Mexico City Policy, by 1985, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) suspended all financial support to the International Planned Parenthood Federation, one of the largest recipients of USAID family planning grants at the time.

Regarding UNFPA, the Reagan administration initially cut the U.S. voluntary contribution by \$10 million and withdrew all funding from UNFPA in 1986 after passage of the [Kemp-Kasten amendment](#) by Congress, which was interpreted to preclude funding to UNFPA due to its presence in China and its alleged complicity in human rights violations by the government in its implementation of its “one-child” policy. The Reagan-era USAID also attempted to make concessions to religious conservatives on natural family planning which were thwarted by Congress, and informed consent and referral protections were restored. U.S. expenditures on bilateral family planning programs also dropped during these years.

For an interactive look at trends in international FP/RH funding, including the low budget requests of Republican presidents since Reagan, visit PAI’s [Cents and Sensibility](#) page.

George H.W. Bush

Despite his earlier activism in support of domestic and international family planning programs as a Congressman from Texas between 1967 and 1971, President Bush carried on the legacy of his predecessor for whom he had served as vice president for eight years, leaving the Mexico City Policy in place and continuing the U.S. funding boycott of UNFPA.

In 1989, Bush went so far as to veto a \$14 billion foreign aid bill over a new \$15 million congressional earmark to reestablish a U.S. contribution to UNFPA. The offending provision was removed, and the bill, sans the UNFPA earmark, was quickly signed. An irony pointed out at the time was that Bush, as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in the early 1970s, penned the foreword in former PAI Executive Director Phyllis Piotrow’s [World Population Crisis: The United States Response](#), a definitive history of the early years of U.S. government involvement in overseas family planning, published in 1973. Bush loftily observed: “Success in the population field, under United Nations leadership, may, in turn, determine whether we can resolve successfully the other great questions of peace, prosperity and individual rights that face the world.”

On the domestic front, the Bush administration implemented the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

The Bush family as a mirror of the GOP’s evolution on birth control

As George H.W. Bush recounted in his foreword to Phyllis Piotrow’s 1973 history of U.S. government involvement in overseas family planning, his “first awareness of birth control as a public policy issue came with a jolt” during the U.S. Senate campaign of his father, Prescott, who lost the 1950 election in Connecticut by several hundred votes out of nearly a million cast after nationally syndicated columnist Drew Pearson outed him as a Planned Parenthood supporter on the Sunday before election day. Political observers thought that it might have swayed enough voters to have cost him the election. (He subsequently won a special election in 1952 and served in the Senate until 1963.) Prescott Bush had been the treasurer of Planned Parenthood’s first national fundraising campaign in 1947. Not only his father, but his mother, Dorothy Walker Bush, was a lifelong birth control backer and a faithful donor to the local Planned Parenthood affiliate near her winter home in Florida.

As a two-term U.S. Representative from Texas from 1967 to 1971, George H.W. Bush carried on the family legacy and was one of the biggest champions of family planning in Congress of either party as the lead Republican sponsor of the legislation creating the Title X domestic family planning program that has furnished essential reproductive health services to tens of millions of low-income Americans over the last 50 years. While in Congress, he also served as chairman of the special Republican Task Force on Population and Earth Resources. His activism and enthusiasm for birth control even earned him the moniker “Rubbers” among some of his colleagues.

But as the Republican party moved to the right in the 1980s and his presidential ambitions grew, he was compelled to move as well, embracing the GOP’s anti-abortion platform as Ronald Reagan’s vice president for eight years and carrying on the anti-birth control policies of his predecessor both at home and abroad when he succeeded him. His eldest son, George W. Bush, reinstated the Reagan-Bush era GGR and cut off funding to UNFPA once in office, reversing the pro-birth control policies of President Clinton.

His other son Jeb, as Governor of Florida from 1999 to 2007, cut state funding for family planning services and Planned Parenthood and signed legislation banning late-term abortion and mandating parental notification for minors seeking abortions. But even after all he had done, Jeb Bush struggled to convince the right wing of the GOP and evangelicals of his anti-choice credentials during the 2016 Republican presidential primary that selected – in an act of cosmic irony – Donald Trump.

The microcosm of the Republican party on birth control that is the Bush family culminates with Jeb’s son George P. Bush, who embraced Senate Bill 8, the radical Texas abortion law, and dutifully courted the endorsement of former President Trump in his recent, unsuccessful Republican primary challenge to the incumbent Texas attorney general.

Throughout the generations, however, the Bush women have remained steadfast in their support for access to abortion and contraception – from the family matriarch through pro-choice former First Ladies Barbara and Laura Bush, to Barbara Pierce Bush, George P.’s cousin and founder of the Global Health Corps, an organization that has partnered with Planned Parenthood affiliates to train future women leaders.

regulations promulgated at the end of the Reagan administration — also dubbed a “gag rule” by pro-reproductive health critics — which prohibited recipients of [Title X](#) family planning funds from advocating, counseling or referring patients for abortion, even if requested and done with nonfederal funds. In May 1991, Bush’s Supreme Court appointee David Souter joined the 5-4 majority in the *Rust v. Sullivan* case in affirming the constitutionality of the regulations, finding them not in violation of the First Amendment right to free speech of federally funded clinics. Again, Bush hamstrung a program to improve contraceptive access that he had a major role in creating years earlier.

In this instance, congressional Republicans took the lead in attempting to roll back the domestic gag rule. In the Senate, a free-standing bill to block the regulations, authored by Senator John Chafee (R-RI), was adopted by voice vote to avoid embarrassing the president after an attempt to uphold the rule failed 64 to 35. In the House, Representative John Porter (R-IL) successfully attached a one-year ban on the use of funds by the secretary of HHS to enforce the rule to the popular Labor-HHS appropriations bill that landed on the president’s desk. Left with little room to maneuver by his pledge to the religious right to oppose any pro-choice legislation, Bush [vetoed](#) the bill. Despite the warning of Rep. Bill Green (R-NY), a senior appropriator, that Republicans could “do George Bush no greater political favor than to override this and put this sorry issue behind us,” the override failed by a dozen votes, with 222 Democrats, 53 Republicans and one independent voting to override his veto.

The Bush administration’s budget request for bilateral and multilateral FP/RH programs hovered between about \$250 and \$300 million annually, which Congress always topped off with an increase in the final bill, sometimes sizable.

Republicans in Congress during the Clinton administration

During the first two years of the Clinton administration, discussion of the FP/RH funding policy was limited as family planning opponents had neither the votes in either house or a friend in the White House. After President Clinton rescinded the GGR, old nemesis Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) attempted to reinstate it legislatively in July 1994, just prior to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. His amendment to the fiscal year (FY) 1995 foreign operations appropriations bill sought to prohibit the use of foreign aid funds to change abortion law or policy in other countries or to endorse international agreements that address abortion as a public health issue. His amendment was soundly rejected on a vote of 42 to 58, with eight Republican senators joining most Democrats in opposing the Helms amendment.

The revolutionary change in Congress — resulting from the 1994 election in which Republicans gained control of both houses for the first time in 40 years — caused a profound historical shift for U.S. family planning assistance policy and unleashed a torrent of Republican legislative attacks for the remainder of the Clinton presidency.

During the 104th and 105th Congresses, family planning opponents sought repeatedly to legislatively reimpose the GGR and to cut off a U.S. contribution to UNFPA. The Clinton administration and pro-family planning members on both sides of the aisle in both chambers, especially the Senate, successfully beat back House Republican attempts to place additional policy restrictions on family planning programs. While harsh Republican critics were emboldened and empowered, a number of Republicans in influential positions expended their political capital to limit the amount of damage that could be inflicted by their fellow Republicans. But that success came at a high price, both in terms of the amount and the conditions attached to funding for family planning programs.

The goal of family planning opponents was the codification of the GGR into law, championed by its principal proponent Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), the leader of House anti-choice forces for the last 40 years. The GGR amendment — or variations of it that were introduced — would bar organizations from receiving U.S. family planning funds if, with other non-U.S. funds, they provide legal abortion services or engage in any activity or effort to alter the laws or governmental policies of any foreign country concerning the circumstances under which abortion is permitted, regulated or prohibited. In some of its incarnations, the amendment’s provisions were even more expansive than the restrictions contained in the prior executive branch versions of the policy under Reagan and Bush, for example by applying them to both U.S. and foreign NGOs, as well as to multilateral organizations.

While the GGR amendment did not become law, severe restrictions were placed on the release of family planning funds in the four fiscal years following the 1994 election (FY 1996-FY 1999). For example, the

FY 1996 foreign aid legislation allocated just \$356 million, a 35% reduction from the previous year, and enacted restrictions delaying the release of any of the money for months and then only doling out small increments on a month-to-month basis in a tortuous process called “metering.” The funding level recovered only marginally, stagnating at \$385 million for the next four fiscal years (FY 1997–FY 2000).

In 1995, no fewer than nine floor votes took place in Congress on amendments that in whole or in part dealt with the issue of the GGR — two in the House on a combined FY 1996–97 foreign aid and State Department authorization bill and seven on the FY 1996 foreign operations appropriations bill, of which five occurred in the House and two in the Senate. The anti-family planning forces led by Rep. Smith that sought to impose the GGR legislatively prevailed on all seven votes in the House, while family planning champions led by Appropriations Committee Chair Mark Hatfield (R-OR) and Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT) won both votes in the Senate rejecting the policy. This stalemate over the GGR amendment delayed passage of the foreign ops bill for months, contributed to two government shutdowns and resulted in the House Republican leadership’s insistence on the funding cuts, delayed release and “metering” that were incorporated in a continuing resolution finally passed in January 1996.

During the FY 1997 appropriations process, international FP/RH policy was the subject of what must be one of the most convoluted and complicated legislative compromises ever negotiated, resulting from the escalating insistence by House Republicans that the GGR be imposed legislatively as a condition of their support for foreign aid funding. Under the omnibus spending bill for FY 1997, signed into law on September 30, 1996, no new policy restrictions were imposed, but the funding level for bilateral FP/RH funding was capped at \$385 million. Funds would not become available until March 1, 1997 — six months into the fiscal year — unless there was a presidential determination that the funding delay was having a negative impact on the functioning of the program and both chambers voted in agreement with the president’s finding. If either house voted to reject President Clinton’s determination, FY 1997 funds would not be released until July 1, 1997. Regardless of the vote outcome, the funds would be metered out at a rate of 8% of the total over the following 12-and-a-half months. The House approved a joint resolution on February 13, 1997, on a vote of 220 to 209. The Senate followed suit on February 25 by a margin of 53 to 45, and bilateral FP/RH funding began trickling out in small tranches on March 1.

Since family planning opponents were successful in including the GGR amendment in committee-reported bills in the House, no floor votes occurred again until 1997 when Rep. Smith attempted once more to attach the GGR amendment along with a ban on a U.S. contribution to UNFPA to both the FY 1998–99 State Department authorization bill and the FY 1998 foreign operations appropriations bill. Rep. Smith prevailed on all four House floor votes, both in beating two pro-family planning substitutes offered by Rep. Tom Campbell (R-CA) and International Relations Committee Chairman Ben Gilman (R-NY) and in passing his two underlying amendments.

The Senate versions of the foreign operations appropriations bills for each fiscal year between 1996 and 2000 included language co-authored by Sen. Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS), a key Republican champion during the 1980s and 1990s, designed to block the imposition of a GGR-type policy, setting up the disagreement between the House and Senate that resulted in the continuation of the restrictions on the amount of funding and its availability. The amendment required that the funding restrictions applied to NGOs and multilateral organizations can be no more restrictive than those applied to foreign governments (which were exempt) in determining eligibility for U.S. family planning assistance.

After four years of resisting House Republican legislative initiatives to impose the GGR, the Clinton administration was maneuvered into accepting a modified version of the policy in 1999. In order to reach an agreement on the payment of nearly \$1 billion in back dues owed to the United Nations, the White House and the House Republican leadership agreed to impose significant restrictions on international family planning programs in an omnibus spending bill for FY 2000, signed by the president in November 1999.

For the first and only time, the agreement legislatively imposed a GGR on foreign NGOs and multilateral organizations receiving U.S. family planning assistance, preventing them from using their non-U.S. government funding sources to either advocate for or against legal abortion or to perform legal abortions in their own countries. The president was allowed to partially waive the bans on the performance of abortion and abortion lobbying, but only against not more than \$15 million of total USAID funds, which might be provided to groups that could not or would not agree to abide by the policy restrictions. When the president

exercised his waiver authority, the funding level for bilateral assistance of \$385 million was subjected to a \$12.5 million cut and the funds were reprogrammed to child survival programs.

In 2000, after an unsuccessful attempt to amend in committee the draft House version of the FY 2001 foreign operations appropriations bill, which included the 1999 modified, “waive-able” version of the GGR, pro-family planning members were allowed to offer a “motion to strike” on the House floor. While the vote failed 206 to 221, the effort, led by Reps. Jim Greenwood (R-PA) and Nita Lowey (D-NY), indicated a much higher degree of support than family planning opponents had expected. Meanwhile, language to overturn the 1999 gag rule — a precursor to the Global Democracy Promotion Act and its current incarnation, the Global Health, Empowerment and Rights (Global HER) Act — was included in the companion bill in the Senate.

By October 2000, the White House, after months of noncommittal statements regarding the GGR, began to unequivocally say that they would veto any bill that included it. As a result, Chairman Sonny Callahan (R-AL) and Ranking Member Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations met and forged a deal. The final bill included no gag rule, an increase in funds of up to \$425 million and a delay in disbursement of funds until February 15, 2001, allowing the new president time to establish his own policy governing international family planning programs. That is exactly what newly inaugurated President George W. Bush did in reinstating the GGR on January 22, 2001.

George W. Bush

After President Clinton’s two-term tenure in office, George W. Bush followed in his father’s path to the White House. In what has become a tradition for Republican presidents to restore the GGR as one of their first official acts after being inaugurated — just as Democratic presidents rescind the GGR when they take office — President Bush reimposed the GGR by executive action. And other than his first year in office, when a \$21.5 million contribution to UNFPA somehow snuck through, Bush continued to deny congressionally earmarked funds to UNFPA, usually about \$34 million per year.

To his credit, when President Bush reinstated the GGR, there was an understanding that population funds should be at or around \$425 million. This “understanding” was upheld and enforced by Secretary of State Colin Powell, and presidential budget requests remained between \$425 million and \$450 million for his first five years in office. However, budget request levels dropped precipitously the last three years during Condoleezza Rice’s tenure as secretary of state. Congress, on the other hand, routinely increased this amount with FP/RH funding climbing to \$545 million in the FY 2009 omnibus spending package.

One positive action that Bush took was rejecting calls from conservative religious supporters to extend GGR restrictions to HIV/AIDS programs, funding that had exploded under his signature President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). (In the same memorandum, Bush also explicitly ruled out application of the GGR to multilateral organizations.) In this instance, pragmatism and programmatic sense carried the day. Unfortunately, good public health practice did not prevail later during the Trump administration when the GGR was applied to all U.S. global health assistance, including HIV/AIDS.

Republicans in Congress during the Obama administration

The last floor vote on the GGR in either the House or Senate occurred shortly after the newly inaugurated President Obama rescinded the GGR on January 23, 2009. During the floor debate on a bill to reauthorize the unrelated State Children’s Health Insurance Program, Sen. Mel Martinez (R-FL) offered an amendment that would have restored the GGR by nullifying the presidential memorandum rescinding the policy and prohibiting U.S. FP/RH assistance to “any private, nongovernmental or multilateral organization that performs or actively promotes abortion as a method of birth control.” His amendment was roundly rejected 37 to 60, with four Republican senators opposing GGR reinstatement.

On UNFPA, the last floor vote in either chamber also occurred only a few months after the arrival of the Obama administration in March 2009 when Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) offered an amendment to the FY 2009 omnibus spending bill to delete a provision to allow a U.S. contribution to UNFPA, notwithstanding a negative Kemp-Kasten decision, for a list of six specified reproductive health activities in any of the other countries where UNFPA worked, except China. The Wicker amendment was rejected 39 to 58, with three Republicans voting to support a UNFPA contribution.

For the final seven years of Obama’s presidency after Republicans regained the House majority in the 2010 midterm election, battles over FP/RH funding, the GGR and UNFPA were waged in the Appropriations Committee during markups and negotiations on the annual spending bills. That dynamic has persisted to this day, when, in the negotiation over the final spending bill for the last 12 fiscal years, House and Senate negotiators have defaulted to the status quo on the constellation of FP/RH issues to be resolved — level bilateral funding, a U.S. contribution to UNFPA with restrictions and no reinstatement or permanent repeal of the GGR or other new policy “riders,” either positive or negative.

Donald J. Trump

The destruction wrought by the Trump administration on international FP/RH programs is so fresh in our minds that it is probably unnecessary to chronicle. If interested in the down and dirty details, there are multiple [Washington Memos](#) on PAI’s website detailing the vandalism.

But the Trump-Pence administration managed to find new and creative ways to wreak havoc, most notably, by expanding the GGR to apply to all U.S. global health assistance, increasing the amount of funding impacted 15-fold and rebranding the GGR as “Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance” (PLGHA). The administration also rallied other anti-choice governments at the United Nations to support the so-called “Geneva Consensus Declaration,” which promoted a regressive, alternative vision of women’s health and human rights and was neither an official U.N. declaration nor a consensus negotiated in Geneva.

Trump’s elimination of all international FP/RH funding in his first budget request for foreign assistance for FY 2018 is [unprecedented](#). Since the inception of the USAID population assistance program in 1965, the only similar historical episode was an aborted proposal by the Office of Management and Budget to eliminate all funding for international FP/RH programs for FY 1983, not a full year into President Reagan’s first term in December 1981. The gambit by executive branch anti-contraception activists was quickly beaten back by career officials at the State Department and USAID. But never before had such a radical proposal to slash the budget completely advanced to the final budget proposal sent to Congress. For the remainder of his term, Trump’s budget requests came up to Capitol Hill at a level roughly half the amount that Congress had appropriated for FP/RH in the preceding years.

Blocking an international family planning funding increase was a top priority of the White House and Senate Republicans in the FY 2020 omnibus in late December 2019. International family planning funding was [literally the last issue to be resolved](#) in the negotiations over the final deal and was tied to the resolution of White House demands on building a wall on the southern border with Mexico. The specific issue was even highlighted in the president’s [signing statement](#):

“We continue to defend America’s most vulnerable, the unborn. The legislation preserves all pro-life protections like the Hyde Amendment; rejects Senator Jeanne Shaheen’s anti-life amendment that could have increased funding for pro-abortion organizations; and rejects all anti-life riders in the partisan versions of these bills that originally passed the House, including one that would have undermined my Administration’s pro-life Title X rule.”

At home, the Trump-Pence administration also revived a more onerous version of President George H.W. Bush’s domestic Title X gag rule. It, along with the PLGHA-branded expanded GGR, UNFPA contribution cut-off and “Geneva Consensus Declaration” were summarily disposed of in President Biden’s January 28, 2021 [memorandum](#) on “protecting women’s health at home and abroad.”

In 2022, this is not your father’s — or grandfather’s — Republican party.

Stay tuned for Part III on the collapse of Republican support in Congress for international FP/RH programs — coming soon.