

Benjamin Spock dead at 94

Martin McLaughlin
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Dr. Benjamin Spock, the world-renowned pediatrician who was a prominent opponent of the Vietnam War, died March 15 of respiratory failure at his home in San Diego. He was 94 years old.

Dr. Spock is best known for his book *Baby and Child Care*, first published in 1946, which has gone through six editions, sold 50 million copies worldwide and has been translated into 42 languages. It was the first popular guide for parents that prescribed treatment of children based on affection and respect for them as human beings, and opposed to harsh regimentation and frequent physical punishment, which were then the norm.

A well-established 39-year-old New York pediatrician at the time he was approached to write the book, Dr. Spock used his training in psychiatry to enhance parents' understanding of child development, emphasizing the intellectual and emotional needs of children, as well as their physical requirements. In an interview in 1972 he paid tribute to Sigmund Freud and the philosopher John Dewey as the inspiration for his conception of a more humane approach to child rearing.

It was this humanitarian standpoint that led him to oppose American nuclear weapons testing and then the war in Vietnam. He served as chairman of the liberal peace group SANE, from 1962 to 1967, then moved to the left, breaking with SANE's perspective of pressuring the Democratic Party and undergoing what he later called a "conversion to socialism."

Spock took part in a series of nonviolent protest activities, including a 1967 march on the Pentagon, and he became the target of political attacks and outright repression by the Nixon administration. Vice President Spiro Agnew denounced him as the "father of permissiveness," claiming that Dr. Spock's child rearing principles encouraged lawlessness among young people in the 1960s. Agnew himself was subsequently forced to resign from office after his

indictment on charges of bribe taking and corruption.

In 1968 Spock was convicted in Boston on charges of conspiracy to aid and counsel draft evasion. He was sentenced to two years in prison, but the charges were overturned on appeal. In 1972 he refused to support Democrat George McGovern, who was backed by most liberal antiwar activists, and ran as the candidate of the People's Party, a third party which received 75,000 votes. He ran again in 1976 as the group's vice presidential candidate, at the age of 73.

Spock continued his activity as a liberal pacifist into his eighties, arrested for the last time in 1989 in a protest against US testing of the Trident nuclear weapon. He wrote two books in those years, one an autobiographical memoir, the other criticizing the shift to the right in American social policies, and the continuing refusal to provide better conditions for the development of children.

The doctor's last years were a demonstration of another intractable social problem, the lack of adequate long-term care for the elderly. Despite the earnings from his books, it became increasingly difficult to pay the estimated \$16,000-a-month cost of the specialized medical and housekeeping care which he required. His wife issued a public appeal for financial assistance rather than send Spock to a nursing home, where she feared his rapid decline and death.



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