



# *Special Reports*

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## **BUSH POLICY ON STEM CELL EXPERIMENTATION**

**A Commentary by Penny Pullen**

In a nationally televised speech on a Thursday night, President George W. Bush tried to strike a fine line in the debate over embryo experimentation. In eleven minutes, the President explained to the public all the arguments he had heard during his lengthy consideration of whether to enforce current law or whether to venture into the illegal, unethical territory where his predecessor blazed a thorny trail a year ago.

Mr. Bush made some clear statements embracing protection for innocent human life and ruled out—he thinks—federal funding of experiments on embryos who have not yet been sacrificed, prompting such pro-family leaders as Focus on the Family's James Dobson to respond with obvious relief.

The clamor had been great for the President to target embryos “left over” from in vitro fertilization procedures. Two unnamed sources involved in the President's deliberations, according to CNN and Reuters, leaked the words on the Wednesday before the speech that he would direct federal funding to such destructive experimentation. Yet Mr. Bush seems to have grasped that these little ones are endowed with the right to life, even, helpfully, mentioning in his speech that “a few [frozen embryos] have been implanted in an adoptive mother and born, and are today healthy children.”

The trouble, as we see it, is that Mr. Bush has not appreciated the ethical pitfalls in using tainted tissue. His decision authorizes, for the first time, federal funding of experiments on embryonic human babies who have already been sacrificed to the god of medical promise.

“As a result of private research,” the President said, “more than 60 genetically diverse stem cell

lines already exist. They were created from embryos that have already been destroyed and they have the ability to regenerate themselves indefinitely, creating ongoing opportunities for research. [Note: Some researchers have questioned their “indefinite” regeneration.] I have concluded,” Mr. Bush told the nation, “that we should allow federal funds to be used for research on these existing stem cell lines, where the life and death decision has already been made.” Akin, some could say, to marketing only the human-skin lampshades already in the warehouse.

In trying to straddle the ethical question, President Bush, perhaps unwittingly, has resolved nothing. Mr. Bush has not, thank God, met the demands of such cell-thirsty characters as Senator Arlen Specter, R-Penn., who, according to the Associated Press, is already threatening to attach his no-holds-barred embryo experimentation project to various appropriations measures next month. Nor has he satisfied the entreaties of dollar-hungry biotech firms and researchers.

What Mr. Bush has done is agreed to drag taxpayers into complicity with the tainted fruit of inhumane brutality. Whether the issue was ever framed to Mr. Bush in that manner by the many “ethicists” he consulted—or whether the ethical breach in such a policy ever occurred to him in his own thinking—is open to speculation. The day following the speech, an interviewer on ABC's “20/20” news magazine program ask the Mr. Bush a basic question: “Don't you think that using those [already harvested] cells for research condones the destruction of those embryos?” What was the President's response? “Not at all. Otherwise I wouldn't have made that decision.”

Legally, Mr. Bush may be unaware of the doctrine which Family Research Council president Ken Connor later identified as “the fruit of the poisonous tree. Courts have long held,” said attorney Connor in a statement critiquing the President’s decision, “that to allow government to benefit from a wrongful act provides an unhealthy incentive to persist in such acts.” The President did just that with a straight face and we are willing to believe he actually thinks the genie will stay in the bottle after the cork has been pulled. But whatever his sincerity, his decision holds great risk.

We have asked the question before and we will ask it again now. What happens if the scientists hit pay dirt? How can the compassionate conservative—or a successor a decade from now—resist pressure for more embryo sacrifice if the experiments pay off, if a cure is found in embryonic stem cells for one or another disease?

The one silver lining we see in the decision is that the bone the President has tossed to the utilitarians might take the steam out of mounting congressional efforts to overturn his decision, had it been absolute. Research fanatic Mary Tyler Moore seemed as relieved Thursday night as Dr. Dobson, and embryo experimentation enthusiast Senator Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, reportedly told reporters, “Let’s give it a chance.” Those positive reactions from the two spokesmen for the kill-the-embryos clique might mean Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., and Mr. Specter himself will fail to muster the votes to bust the genie bottle altogether—at least for the time being.

One point that seems to have escaped notice during the discussions leading up to the Bush declaration is the law itself. The Christian Legal Society will file a lawsuit, reports the Republican National Coalition for Life, challenging the authority of the Bush Administration to issue taxpayer grants in violation of the Dickey Amendment, which bars federal funding of experiments in which preborn human beings are destroyed.

The Knights of Columbus has adopted a resolution scoring embryo sacrifice as a pro-life

issue in congressional voting records and urging the United States government to “terminate all federal funding for such research.” The resolution declared that, “Destroying human life at any stage of development in order to improve the quality of human life is intrinsically evil.” Equally important—and more refreshing—was the second target of the huge pro-life group’s resolution, which urges “researchers and physicians to reject experiments and treatments that destroy human embryos.”

Now is the time—while stock prices in biotech companies are see-sawing at best, while politicians are nervous about growing public awareness that embryo experimentation is uncivilized, while their dark practices are suffering exposure through the spotlight of controversy—for campaigns to be mounted to end embryo experimentation altogether, whether publicly sponsored or privately funded. As with legislation to ban human cloning, mere restraint through barring taxpayer funding is a faint response indeed.

If we are shocked by Advanced Cell Technology’s drive to clone human embryos as research fodder, if we are distressed that Virginia’s Jones Institute is already using in vitro fertilization to produce embryos for the sole purpose of harvesting their cells, then it is time—past time, really—to put pressure on the private sector players in this inhuman drama. Resolutions urging them to stop their ghastly trade are a good start toward the social ostracism this Mengelean meddling merits.

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