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REAGAN LEGACY TARNISHED BY ADVOCATES OF EXPERIMENTATION

Lawmakers, Columnists, Ethicists, and Reagan's Eldest Son Speak Out

by Douglas R. Scott

Upon the death of former President Ronald Wilson Reagan, it became clear that the issue of embryonic stem cell experimentation would be discussed more widely and loudly. Out of respect and care for the Reagan family, experimentation opponents waited until the funeral for the late president had concluded before making public statements on the subject. Proponents, however, wasted no time in taking advantage of the beloved president's fight with Alzheimer's disease. Refusing to allow the media, unethical scientists, and congressional supporters of such experimentation to stain the legacy of President Reagan and continue misleading the American people, many notable citizens have now spoken out.

Michael Reagan

Capturing the most attention has been the late president's eldest son. Michael Reagan's commentary, titled "I'm With My Dad on Stem Cell Research," was published in *Human Events*:

I'm getting a little tired of the media's insistence on reporting that the Reagan "family" is in favor of stem cell research, when the truth is that two members of the family have been long time foes of this process of manufacturing human beings—my dad, Ronald Reagan during his lifetime, and me.

The media should keep in mind that we are also members of the Reagan "family" and my father, as do I, opposed the creation of human embryos for the sole purpose of using their stem cells as possible medical cures.

Reagan did not stop at chastising the media for ignoring his and the former president's position on embryonic stem cell experimentation. Reagan also exposed what he referred to as "junk science." He criticized the media and experimentation proponents for suggesting that had the "research" been done a long time ago, President Reagan "might have avoided the ordeal he endured." Michael Reagan said this constitutes junk science "at its worst."

According to Reagan, fans of embryonic stem cell experimentation have "embarked on a campaign of disinformation, claiming that there are scientific reasons for believing that their research can be expected to lead to a cure for Alzheimer's disease." Reagan referenced a comment by Ronald D. G. McKay, a stem cell "researcher" at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. "People need a fairy tale," McKay said, explaining why scientists have allowed society to believe that stem cells are likely to effectively treat Alzheimer's and other diseases and maladies. He added, "Maybe that's unfair, but they need a story line that's relatively simple to understand."

In other words, people are too stupid to comprehend the truth—or they do not want to hear it—so a lie is told. Reagan summarized McKay's comment as, "A story line that is a flat out lie."

Michael Reagan trumpeted the use of *adult* stem cell research which, unlike the "hyped" embryonic stem cell experimentation, is already "paying dividends." Reagan quoted Michael Fumento, whom he referred to as "one of the nation's most skilled debunkers of junk science," to prove the point:

Over the horizon are so-called adult stem cells, extracted from people of any age and from umbilical cords and placentas. Not only don't they carry the moral baggage of embryonic stem cells, but research with them is much further along. Unfortunately, embryonic stem cell researchers have so powerful a...[public relations] machine that many influential people don't even know there's an alternative.

Reagan ended his commentary with some advice for the media. "Next time you write about the 'family' remember both dad and me. It's our family too." Yet it is clear that the media has other plans—and agenda.

Wesley J. Smith, Esq.

Authoring a piece for *The National Review* titled, "The Reagans' Suffering and Hyped Promises," ethicist Wesley J. Smith wrote that foes of cloning and

federal funding of embryonic stem cell experimentation are “being fast marginalized by a myth that cloning will be an immediate panacea to the ravages of degenerative disease and disabling injury.”

Smith, a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute and a special consultant to the Center for Bioethics and Culture, wrote that, “The intensity of belief in science as savior, combined with a desperate desire that it be so, has become so fervent that faith in this research has come to resemble a secular religion.” He noted that “supporters of cloning for biomedical research are using the death of Ronald Reagan from complications of Alzheimer’s disease as a bellows to blow the political winds in their favor.” Smith pointed to a piece by *New York Times* political columnist William Safire as just one example:

This week, in a column he named “Reagan’s Next Victory,” Safire urged President Bush to open the federal-funding spigots to embryonic stem cell research and, more ominously, to legalize research into human cloning as a medical treatment (while still outlawing the creation of cloned children). In doing so, he summarily dismissed the prospect for cures being derived from adult stem cell and related research—as cloning proponents almost always do—writing: “Some argue that we should see if adult stem cells may someday do the regenerative trick. But ‘someday’ doesn’t help today’s victims.”

“Safire has it completely backwards,” Smith wrote. “Cloning is in its embryonic stage. Even if it could be used as an efficacious treatment (though that is a gargantuan ‘if’), its success would be a decade or more away.”

Smith pointed out that adult stem cell and related tissue therapies are “already treating human maladies”—a fact that is being ignored by Safire and other advocates of embryonic stem cell experimentation. The science involving adult stem cells “is moving forward at an exhilarating pace both here and abroad in animal and human studies,” Smith wrote. “Early human trials have commenced for conditions such as heart damage, multiple sclerosis, corneal injury, spinal injury, and Parkinson’s disease...generally with very encouraging results.” Smith offered an example from Portugal:

Dr. Carlos Lima has helped restore some muscle and bladder control in paralyzed human patients using their own olfactory tissues. At least one patient regained the ability to stand with the aid of braces. Meanwhile, mice at the end stage of juvenile diabetes were cured using human spleen cells, a feat that no embryonic stem cell experiment has come close to matching. And it was just announced that bone-

marrow stem cells have successfully regenerated liver tissue. The list goes on and on. Thus, if our goal is to create effective treatments for degenerative conditions in the quickest possible time, pursuing non-embryonic approaches would seem to be our best bet.

Smith reported that therapeutic cloning and embryonic stem cell experimentation face “daunting challenges” that may keep them from ever becoming a regular part of medicine’s arsenal, including:

Tissue Rejection: According to an article in the May 2004 *Scientific American*, a major hurdle to the use of embryonic stem cells in regenerative medical treatments taken from leftover in-vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments is the likelihood that the body would reject them as it would a transplanted organ. One suggested way out of this dilemma is tissue typing, but according to the article, that could require “hundreds of thousands of ES [embryonic stem] cell lines...to establish a bank of cells with immune matches for most potential patients. Creating that many lines would require millions of discarded embryos from IVF clinics.” If true, this would doom embryonic stem cells as a viable medical treatment.

The Need for Tens of Millions of Human Eggs: The authors’ way out of the rejection conundrum is therapeutic cloning, because the embryonic stem cells derived from cloned embryos of each patient would likely not be rejected. But therapeutic cloning would be even more wildly impractical than making hundreds of thousands of embryonic stem cell lines. Human cloning, also known as somatic-cell nuclear transfer..., requires an egg for each try. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) claims there are more than 100 million Americans who could benefit from regenerative medicine. A NAS report last year also suggested that based on mouse studies, it could take about 100 human eggs per patient just to derive one cloned embryonic stem cell line for use in regenerative therapy. (South Korean scientists recently announced that they managed to create one human cloned embryonic stem cell line using 242 eggs.) If true, there is no prospect of bringing therapeutic cloning to your local clinic, because we will almost surely never be able to accumulate the billions of human eggs that widespread therapeutic cloning would require. (One suggested way out of this dilemma would be to use animal eggs, but that would introduce animal mitochondrial DNA into human patients, with unknown consequences.)

The Probable Expense: Even if developed, such treatments would be prohibitively expensive. Human eggs used in infertility treatments are sold by young women of childbearing age today for about \$1000 to \$2000 apiece. If it would take 100 eggs per therapeutic-cloning treatment, that is about \$200,000 per treatment, just for the eggs used by one patient!

And this price doesn't take into account the wild inflation in egg prices that therapeutic cloning would cause, owing to the sharp spike in demand. Thus, even if the biotechnology could be developed, it would either be available only to the super rich or so costly that it would have to be stringently rationed.

Tumors: In animal studies, embryonic stem cells cause tumors, making them unsafe for use in human patients at this time. Using cloned embryos to derive stem cells would not solve this difficulty.

Smith called Safire's desire to legalize human cloning for use in experimentation while barring the technology's use in reproduction "dangerously naïve." Smith wrote that human cloning is a "dual-use technology," meaning that "going in for an inch is going in for a mile." He explained further:

The same procedure used to create a cloned human embryo for research could also be used to bring about the birth of the first cloned baby. Indeed, attempts are already underway to make this dreaded prospect a reality. Giving such research the imprimatur of U.S. law would only legitimize cloning, open the spigots of private and taxpayer funding for the research, and thus hasten the day when a rogue scientist will take the knowledge derived from the research to accomplish what Safire called "an abyss of unrestricted human cloning."

The problems with embryo stem cell experimentation and therapeutic cloning are "fundamental and complex," Smith concluded. "Some may be intractable. In contrast, adult therapies are making tremendous strides. But apparently, these facts don't count for much in a society that increasingly looks to science as a religion and biotechnologists as its new high priests. In such a milieu, empirical analysis is trumped by the hyped promise of cures every time."

Hon. William P. Clark

One of President Ronald Reagan's closest and trusted friends was William P. Clark, who served as his national security advisor. In a commentary titled, "For Reagan, All Life Was Sacred," published by the pro-abortion *New York Times*, Clark complained that Reagan had not been dead for even 48 hours before proponents of embryonic stem cell experimentation "began to suggest that such ethically questionable scientific work should be promoted under his name."

Clark wrote that supporting embryonic stem cell experimentation in the name of the late president could only be accomplished if one ignored President Reagan's own words and actions. Clark continued:

Ronald Reagan's record reveals that no issue was of greater importance to him than the dignity and sanctity of all human life. "My administration is dedicated to the preservation of America as a free land," he said in 1983. "And there is no cause more important for preserving that freedom than affirming the transcendent right to life of all human beings, the right without which no other rights have any meaning." One of the things he regretted most at the completion of his presidency in 1989, he told me, was that politics and circumstances had prevented him from making more progress in restoring protection for unborn human life.

Still, he did what he could. To criticize the *Roe v. Wade* decision on its 10th anniversary in 1983, he published his famous essay "Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation" [which was later released in book form]... "We cannot diminish the value of one category of human life—the unborn—without diminishing the value of all human life," he wrote. He went on to emphasize "the truth of human dignity under God" and "respect for the sacred value of human life." Because modern science has revealed the wonder of human development, and modern medicine treats "the developing human as a patient," he declared, "the real question today is not when human life begins, but, what is the value of human life?"

Clark, who also served in the Reagan Administration as secretary of the Department of the Interior, noted that the president "expressly encouraged continued support for the 'sanctity of life ethic' and rejection of the 'quality of life ethic' in *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation*." Writing about the value of all human life, Clark continued, Reagan quoted a statement from the late British writer Malcolm Muggeridge: "However low it flickers or fiercely burns, it is still a divine flame which no man dare presume to put out, be his motives ever so humane and enlightened." And in the *Roe v. Wade* decision, Reagan insisted, the Supreme Court "did not explicitly reject the traditional American idea of intrinsic worth and value in all human life; it simply dodged the issue."

Even in the "Evil Empire" speech in March 1983, which is primarily remembered for his assail of the Soviet Union, Reagan "spoke strongly against the denigration of innocent human life," Clark wrote. "Abortion on demand now takes the lives of up to one and a half million unborn children a year," Reagan said in the famous speech. "Unless and until it can be proven that the unborn child is not a living entity, then its right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness must be protected."

“His actions were as clear as his words,” Clark continued. Reagan supported the Human Life Amendment, which states that “the paramount right to life is vested in each human being from the moment of fertilization without regard to age, health or condition of dependency.” Reagan also supported legislation that would have given *every* human being protection as a “person” under the Fourteenth Amendment.

“Aside from the moral principle,” Clark wrote, “President Reagan would also have questioned picking the people’s pocket to support commercial research. He understood the significance of putting the imprimatur of the nation, through public financing, behind questionable research.” Clark noted that Reagan had consistently opposed federal funding of abortion.

Clark pointed specifically to Reagan’s opposition to embryonic stem cell experimentation:

After the charter expired for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare’s ethical advisory board—which in the 1970s supported destructive research on human embryos—he began a de facto ban on federal financing of embryo research that he held to throughout his presidency.

As for today’s debate, as a defender of free people and free markets, he would have asked the marketplace question: if human embryonic research is so clearly promising as the researchers assert, why aren’t private investors putting money into it, as they are in adult stem cell research?

“Mr. Reagan’s suffering under Alzheimer’s disease was tragic, and we should do everything we can that is ethically proper to help others afflicted with it,” Clark concluded. “But I have no doubt that he would have urged our nation to look to adult stem cell research—which has yielded many clinical successes—and away from the destruction of developing human lives, which has yielded none. Those who would trade on Ronald Reagan’s legacy should first consider his own words.”

Rick Weiss

Washington Post correspondent Rick Weiss has reported that while useful abstract information might be gathered about Alzheimer’s through embryonic stem cell experimentation, “stem cell experts confess...that of all the diseases that may be someday cured by embryonic stem cell treatments, Alzheimer’s is among the least likely to benefit.” But people like Nancy Reagan have been convinced that such experimentation will surely lead to a treatment, if not a cure for Alzheimer’s and other debilitating diseases.

Weiss said the distortion of the truth is not being corrected by scientists because the false story line helps generate public support for their biotech political agenda. As Weiss noted, Nancy Reagan’s support of embryonic stem cell experimentation is “the kind of advocacy that researchers have craved for years, and none wants to slow its momentum.”

Rep. Dave Weldon, M.D.

Speaking on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, Congressman Dave Weldon, M.D., R-Fl., spoke of President Ronald Reagan in glowing terms. The Congressman said that Reagan had “led our Nation through a turbulent period of time.” Weldon credited Reagan’s policies for successfully dealing with many issues facing America during his tenure.

Weldon turned his attention to the press and advocates of embryonic stem cell experimentation. He said these men and women who raise this issue “as it relates to Ronald Reagan’s Alzheimer’s disease” are “holding out the absurd hope that embryonic stem cells could somehow be used one day to treat Alzheimer’s disease.” Weldon continued:

Indeed, many people were implying by their comments and words that the policies pursued by George Bush limited access to embryonic stem cells out of a desire to avoid destroying human embryos. And that is really the essence of the controversial issue here, because to do human embryonic stem cell research you have to destroy a human embryo, a human life, in order to gather the cells...*The Washington Post*, even editorialized that if George Bush were to allow the destruction of human embryos, this would be a fitting tribute to the life of President Reagan. In that same newspaper, the very next day, was an article reporting how embryonic stem cells are unlikely ever to be useful in the treatment of Alzheimer’s disease.

Weldon said that “embryonic stem cells have never been used to treat any human being for any disease ever.” Nevertheless, he said, “You will hear people repeatedly say that they [embryonic stem cells] hold great promise...But as a matter of fact, they have never been used to treat anything.” Weldon said that “even in animal models, where you use mouse or rat embryonic stem cells, they do not even have a good animal model to treat an animal disease with embryonic stem cells.” He pointed to adult stem cells as a substitute to “destroying a human embryo” to take its cells. The Congressman offered details:

Adult stem cells have been used in humans to treat Parkinson’s Disease, to partially restore vision to

someone who is legally blind, relieve systemic lupus, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, cure severe combined immunodeficiency disease, treat several types of cancers, such as leukemias, solid tumors, neuroblastomas, non-Hodgkins lymphoma, and renal cell carcinoma. Adult stem cells have been used to treat multiple sclerosis, treat children with the bubble boy syndrome, and treat heart failure in humans. Indeed, the FDA just recently approved a protocol to use adult stem cells in treating heart failure in humans.

Weldon noted that embryonic stem cell experimentation is legal in the United States. “There are no laws preventing it from being done,” he said. “Every lab in America could do embryonic stem cell research. The issue here is who is going to pay for it, and the facts are that industry does not want to pay for it. They want the Federal Government to pay for it. The Federal government should not. It is unnecessary research and it is unethical.”

Laura Bush

Laura Bush’s views on abortion are well known. The First Lady has made it clear that she opposes the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. But speaking on the CBS “Early Show,” Mrs. Bush said she opposes relaxation of her husband’s restriction on federal funding of embryonic stem cell experimentation.

Mrs. Bush, whose father died with Alzheimer’s disease in 1997, said that Mrs. Reagan was an excellent role model for families struggling to cope with the illness. “I know how very difficult it is for the patient, obviously, but also for the caregiver. It requires unbelievable strength of character to take care of the person you love as you see them slip away like that—‘the long goodbye’ they call Alzheimer’s.”

The First Lady would not back Mrs. Reagan’s call for taxpayer funding of embryonic stem cell experimentation. “There are stem cells to do research on and...we have to be really careful between what we want to do for science and what we should do ethically,” she said. “Stem cell [experimentation]...is certainly one of those issues that we need to treat very carefully.”

Rep. Christopher H. Smith

Another person who has come to the defense of President Reagan’s legacy is Congressman Christopher H. Smith, R-N.J. Smith authored a statement called, “Let us Honor President Reagan with an Increased Commitment to Life-Affirming Research to Cure Alzheimer’s disease.”

“Throughout his long and incredible life, President Reagan endured many hardships including a troubled early family life, challenging times during the Great Depression, an assassination attempt, and a bout with cancer,” Smith began. “Even during his final battle with the dreaded Alzheimer’s disease, President Reagan persevered with honor and integrity. Throughout his decade-long battle with Alzheimer’s, President Reagan and his family helped bring the horrors of Alzheimer’s disease—which are currently endured by more than 4.5 million Americans and their families—to light.”

Smith said that a decade before being diagnosed, Reagan “took the initiative to call greater attention to the condition and the needs of both patients and caregivers by declaring the first Alzheimer’s disease Month in 1983.” Smith credited Reagan for his “leadership” that led to “significant advances in biomedical research that have helped bring pharmaceutical products to market and have advanced the overall understanding of the pathology of this disease.”

It is estimated that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) will invest more than \$660 million into Alzheimer’s disease research this year alone. But Smith said this figure will fund only “one of every four qualified research initiatives.” He called on Congress to increase spending to \$1 billion in order to “prevent the number of Americans who suffer from Alzheimer’s from quadrupling in less than 50 years.”

“It is unfortunate, and I believe in very bad taste, that some are attempting to use the passing of President Reagan to advance the small subcategory of stem cell research that involves the killing of human embryos,” Smith wrote. He said this is especially appalling because “research destroying human embryos has not shown any promise in developing treatments for Alzheimer’s—or any other disease or condition.”

Smith said he agrees with Reagan when the late president said in a 1988 Presidential Proclamation that everyone has the right to “unalienable personhood” from “the moment of conception until natural death.” Smith wrote that he looks forward to joining his congressional colleagues “in promoting President Reagan’s legacy by continuing to fight for additional funding for Alzheimer’s research and for adult stem cell and related tissue therapies that are already treating human maladies including heart damage, multiple sclerosis, corneal injury, spinal cord injury, Parkinson’s disease, and other conditions.”

Smith is one of the best known and active pro-life members of Congress. He articulated the pro-life position as co-chairman of a bipartisan congressional task force on Alzheimer's disease.

Independently Documented Media Bias

One need not rely solely on the opinion of individuals. A media watchdog group has publicly accused reporters covering the death of President Ronald Reagan of exploiting his passing in order to promote embryonic stem cell experimentation. A Media Research Center (MRC) report stated that news agencies used Reagan's death to "fuel a rift between President George W. Bush and former first lady Nancy Reagan" over such experimentation.

MRC's Brent Baker said "leading media figures" see the former president's death as "just another way to bash Bush." For example, *Washington Post* television reviewer Tom Shales complained about how "Bush has refused to reconsider his opposition" to providing taxpayer funding for embryonic stem cell experimentation. Showing his bigotry, Shales also said the President "thinks he hears Jesus giving him orders."

On the ABC talk-show "The View," Barbara Walters said that Nancy Reagan is "going to change the lives of millions of people" by fighting for taxpayer funding of the experimentation. "This is a woman who was not pro-choice and after her husband became ill...she realized what stem cell research could do," Walters added. This comment suggests that the tragedy shook Mrs. Reagan out of her pro-life ignorance. It also suggests that, having had her eyes opened, Mrs. Reagan now fully supports the "pro-choice" position on every issue. (Actually, Nancy Reagan never supported her husband's stand on abortion.)

The CBS "Evening News" devoted an entire segment to Mrs. Reagan's advocacy of embryonic stem cell experimentation. "Ronald Reagan eloquently told the nation he had Alzheimer's disease a decade before his death," said pro-abortion anchorman Dan Rather in introducing the segment. "Today, in a letter, 58 U.S. Senators added their voices to that of Nancy Reagan, appealing for controversial stem cell research to try to find a cure for the disease." Not surprisingly, Rather has never been known to employ even the most basic rules of journalism when it comes any life issue.

Correspondent Sandra Hughes began the CBS segment with these words:

Out of her isolation, she found her cause: fighting for a cure. Recently, that's meant supporting stem cell research, putting her at odds with her own party. She started out quietly writing letters to the White House and other anti-abortion conservatives who oppose federal funding. And last month, for the first time, she stepped out publicly to support stem cell research.

"Leading journalists are exploiting Ronald Reagan's death to push for wider embryonic stem cell research," Baker concluded. In doing so these so-called journalists emphasize that President Bush is "out of step with Nancy Reagan on the issue."

Another common media tactic is the omission of information that is critical for understanding this issue. It is routinely implied that every kind of experimentation involving embryonic stem cells is unlawful. This is completely untrue. The issue is whether American taxpayers should fund such grisly experimentation. And it should be noted that such experimentation is taking place in other countries—with funding from their respective governments.

Reporters refuse to address the larger funding question of embryonic stem cell experimentation. Why is taxpayer funding wanted? Other than the fact that more money is always considered a good thing, why are pharmaceutical corporations and private investors largely unwilling to put their money into this supposed sure thing? After all, they would stand to make billions of dollars. It is simple. They know it is not such a sure thing. The financial risk is enormous and they do not want to throw their money down a drain. However, corporations and private investors are behind *adult* stem cell research.

Major Battles Lay Ahead

Opponents of embryonic stem cell experimentation face a daunting task. Public opinion clearly supports it, including federal funding. This is largely due to the failure of the media to report the truth. But it is also because people have been convinced that there is at least a glimmer of hope in such experimentation. After all, no one wants to see people suffer from Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and other diseases.

For proponents of abortion this is one more way to dehumanize unborn children. For scientists this is a way to make a lot of money, so they clearly have a vested interest in fighting hard for federal funding. It does not matter if successful treatments or cures are ever discovered because it can always be argued that they are "just around the corner," so let us not stop now.

Life advocates need to keep in mind that this controversy is a symptom of a larger issue. Most people see nothing wrong with using a newly created human being for scientific purposes. And what if such experimentation did eventually lead to a treatment or cure? Will the Pro-Life Movement have lost the war since it has emphasized that such a thing will never happen. Using the body of a human being without his or her consent is inherently wrong. This is the bottom line. And let's face it. That is going to be a hard sell.

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