

Bush's stem cell decision: an attack on medical science and democratic rights

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The decision to ban federal funding for most forms of embryonic stem cell research, announced by George W. Bush in a nationally televised speech August 9, is a reactionary attack on medical science carried out to curry favor with ultra-right elements in the Republican Party.

Bush's action is an attack on democratic rights. It is a blatant violation of the constitutional separation of church and state, directly translating the religious views of the Catholic Church and certain Protestant fundamentalist groups into the policy of the federal government.

The decision will have a devastating effect on untold thousands of people suffering from diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, as well as victims of spinal cord injuries, for which stem cell research offers a highly promising avenue in the search for more effective methods of treatment and eventual cures. It highlights the extraordinary influence of the Christian right on the Republican Party and the US political establishment as a whole—a degree of power entirely out of proportion to the religious right's narrow base of support within the American population.

A large majority of the American people supports federal funding for stem cell research. But the health and lives of hundreds of thousands of people, and the general progress of medical science, are being held ransom to the prejudices of political and social reactionaries who would like nothing better than to become the American Christian counterparts of the Iranian Mullahs.

The policy that Bush announced was the most restrictive he could have imposed short of an outright denial of funding for stem cell research—an action that would have provoked widespread public revulsion. Bush was under pressure not only from scientists and advocates for victims of diseases like Parkinson's and juvenile diabetes, but even from sections of the congressional Republican Party, to provide some support for stem cell research.

Despite Bush's attempt to present his decision as a green light for research that could lead to cures for many diseases and genetic conditions, his move to limit federal funding to the use of existing, already established stem cell lines will have the effect of crippling serious research.

Bush also announced the formation of a presidential council to oversee stem cell research and make future policy recommendations, naming as its chairman Leon Kass, a conservative bioethicist from the University of Chicago. Kass is an opponent not only of stem cell research, but also of in vitro fertilization—the leading source of embryos used to extract stem

cells.

Even if one were to accept Bush's claim that there are 60 existing lines of stem cells available for research—an assertion contested by many scientists in the field, who consider the number 60 to be a gross exaggeration—that number is tiny compared to the needs of research. Many of these stem cell lines do not meet minimum standards set by the National Institutes of Health. Some are too old—which leads to exhaustion of the capacity to reproduce—others are the private property of biotech companies which will not release them, and still more were developed overseas and are not available to US-based scientists.

Sixty stem cell lines are grotesquely inadequate given the complexity of the field of research and the need for genetic diversity to truly reflect the vast range of the human species. There are six billion human beings on the planet today, each with a unique combination of the more than 100,000 genes that make up the human genome. In comparison to Bush's 60 lines, there are 100,000 frozen embryos potentially available to generate new stem cell lines in the US alone.

To limit stem cell research—a scientific discipline still in its infancy—to those stem cell lines already in existence is inherently absurd. How far would the development of antibiotics have proceeded if all research were limited to those molds and fungi available when Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin? How far would astronomy have proceeded if the Catholic Church had banned any new telescope after Galileo's?

For the most part, the American media has presented Bush's policy as a “middle of the road” decision, an almost Solomonic verdict that took into consideration all significant points of view. Such drivel says less about Bush's announcement than it does about the indifference of the media to issues of democratic rights and scientific freedom.

Bush's speech in many ways summed up the cowardice and mediocrity of the man. The president posed what he called “fundamental questions,” above all, whether an embryo should be considered human life. But he failed to answer the question, because to do so he would have been obliged to take a position overwhelmingly opposed by the American people. Indeed, the first three-quarters of his speech could have served equally well as the introduction to an announcement approving full federal funding for stem cell research.

The US president repeatedly referred to morals, and professed his devotion to a “culture of life.” This from a man who as

governor of Texas sent 143 people, most of them poor or minority, to their deaths in the state execution chamber, and who as commander-in-chief maintains the barbaric US blockade of Iraq, which has been responsible for the deaths of as many as 500,000 children since the end of the Persian Gulf War.

The *Washington Post's* television critic Tom Shales noted acidly: "A man purporting to be president of the United States appeared on national television last night to announce and discuss his decision on human embryonic research.... He appeared confident and calm for the most part—but there is deep in his eyes something rather haunted, perhaps even fearful."

Shales added: "Bush's speech seemed like something people might look back on in 50 or 100 years as a quaint sign of simpler times, before cloning became common and stem cell research had helped cure many of humanity's most pernicious diseases."

Such comments, however, are few and far between in the American media, which largely praised the speech, evidently confusing tortuous syntax and apparent stage fright with careful deliberation. Nor was there any suggestion in the press coverage that Bush's posture as moralizing high priest was inappropriate for a constitutional democracy where the president is supposedly elected to make political decisions, not issue religious decrees.

An equally uncritical response came from liberal politicians in the Democratic Party. Senator Edward Kennedy welcomed Mr. Bush's decision as "an important step forward," only complaining that it "did not go far enough." Similar comments came from Senator Tom Harkin, whose committee would handle legislation to extend the scope of stem cell research, and from Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle.

There is, however, mounting dismay in the scientific community and among the advocates of victims of Parkinson's, juvenile diabetes and spinal cord injuries. Nobel laureate Dr. Harold Varmus, the former head of the National Institutes of Health, said placing a limit on the number of cells lines available for study "would be a very poor investment and a very cruel investment." Even if disease treatments were developed from the existing stem cell lines, he explained, many people would be unable to benefit because their bodies would reject implanted cells. Only a broad research program could assure that treatments were available to all.

Arthur L. Caplan, director of the Center of Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania, released a statement that flatly rejected the presentation of Bush's decision as an evenhanded one. "When is a compromise not a compromise?" he asked. "When a president declares a compromise but in actuality takes one side of an issue.... By limiting research to these cell lines, Bush in effect banned federal funding for human-embryo-stem-cell research."

Caplan pointed out that many of the 100,000 embryos now stored in fertility clinics in the US were set aside as deformed or have been frozen more than five years, making their implantation in a womb very unlikely and in some cases even unethical. He continued: "The president declared these embryos to be equal in moral worth to crippled children and those confined to wheelchairs due to spinal-cord injury, traumatic brain injuries, strokes, and Parkinsonism. They are not."

Bush's well-publicized "deliberation" over the stem cell issue

for the past two months was more than just a cynical pretense. It reflected both his administration's subservience to the religious fundamentalists and widening divisions within the Republican Party. On the stem cell issue, there were deep divisions in the administration and among the White House staff, as well as among Republicans in Congress.

These divisions were reflected in the response to Bush's decision. The National Right-to-Life Committee and fundamentalist evangelists like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and James Dobson supported the limited federal funding. The day after Bush's television speech a rival array of far-right representatives, including Gary Bauer, Phyllis Schlafly and Charles Colson, appeared at the National Press Club in Washington to denounce the decision, some of them comparing stem cell research to the medical experiments of the Nazis.

The Catholic Conference of Bishops achieved a similar level of hysteria, reiterating its position that an embryo from the first moment of conception, when it is only a handful of cells, is a human being with the same rights as a child or adult.

Bush's speech was aimed at squaring the circle—endorsing science in general while kowtowing to religious prejudice in the specifics of the decision. By the weekend, the Bush White House was engaged in further efforts to shore up its right-wing base, with repeated pledges to allow no expansion of the number of stem cell lines beyond the approved 60 lines, even if such research produced radical improvements in disease therapy. White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card suggested that, in addition to denying federal funds, Bush would support legislation making it a crime to conduct private research on stem cells derived from newly donated embryos.

See Also:

The new Know-Nothings: US House votes to outlaw therapeutic cloning

[7 August 2001]

Bush, the Pope and stem cell research

[27 July 2001]

Bush preparing to axe vital medical research into stem cells

[13 January 2001]



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