

# Bush's veto: Stem cell research and the rise of American theocracy

Joe Kay  
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The decision by President Bush on Wednesday to use the first veto of his tenure to oppose a bill loosening restrictions on stem cell research is a cruel, inhumane and utterly backward act. It is yet one more indication of the extraordinary decay of democratic forms in the United States.

On Tuesday, the US Senate, by a vote of 63-37, passed a bill that would reverse a policy order issued by Bush in 2001 limiting federal funding of research using embryonic stem cells to already existing stem cell lines. The 2001 decision immediately put severe constraints on the ability of scientists to pursue the new and very promising avenue of research, which could help develop treatments for many diseases. The Senate bill was the same as a House bill passed in 2005 by a vote of 238-194.

The votes in both houses of Congress fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to override a presidential veto, and the House held a similar vote Wednesday which failed to overturn Bush's action.

Research in embryonic stem cells, derived from a fertilized egg when it is in one of its earliest stages of development, is critical because the cells have the potential to form any of the many different cells that make up the human body. It is hoped that by manipulating these cells, scientists can develop ways of, for example, regenerating nervous tissue in patients suffering from Alzheimer's Disease or regenerating insulin-producing cells in patients suffering from diabetes.

It has been less than 10 years since scientists first developed the capacity to isolate human embryonic stem cells. The stem cells that had been isolated and developed into self-generating lines by 2001 are not ideal for scientific research, meaning that the decision of the Bush administration has had a direct impact on

the ability of researchers to carry out their work. This has prevented the development of treatments that could benefit or save the lives of thousands if not millions of people.

On what grounds has Bush decided that he will severely crimp this research? In the course of his remarks announcing the veto, Bush declared: the bill would cross a "moral boundary that our decent society needs to respect"; we must never abandon our "fundamental morals"; we must respect "the fundamental ethical line"; must not "allow our nation to cross this moral line" and the bill fails to meet "this ethical test."

He went on to say that the bill would "support the taking of innocent human life in the hope of finding medical benefits for others." Each of the embryos used in embryonic stem cell research is "a unique human life with inherent dignity and matchless value," he said. To illustrate this claim, Bush corralled a number of children who had been born through the artificial implantation of frozen embryos such as those that could be used for developing stem cell lines. "These boys and girls are not spare parts," he declared.

By themselves, the embryos under discussion—and it is more appropriate to call them pre-embryos—are merely a handful of undifferentiated stem cells enclosed in a spherical wall about .15 to .20 mm in diameter. They are far from developing anything resembling organs or other tissues, let alone a nervous system.

These cells differ from any other collection of human cells (many times more of which are "killed" every day in the normal process of human life) only in that, under certain conditions, they can divide into all the different cells that make up a human embryo.

The claim that the embryos represent a "unique

human life” rests entirely on the assumption that they have been implanted with a human soul at some point within five days after the female egg has been inseminated. In other words, Bush—an intellectual incompetent who knows nothing about science—has made the *religious* determination that stem cell research is immoral, while it is moral to deny funding to develop medical treatments that can save human lives and improve the conditions of life for millions of people.

The ignorance and hypocrisy of Bush’s statements extended even further. He declared, “Human beings are not raw material to be exploited or a commodity to be bought and sold.” This from a president who has sought to ruthlessly eliminate social programs and facilitate the destruction of jobs and living standards for millions of Americans who are routinely exploited for the profit interests and personal wealth of the social layer for which Bush speaks.

He later declared that the bill he vetoed “would support the taking of innocent life in the hope of finding medical benefits for others.” Neither the Bush administration nor any section of the political establishment in the United States has shown any concern for the innocent lives being destroyed in Lebanon on a daily basis, the victims an Israeli military supplied by the United States. Most of those who have been killed have been civilians, many of these children.

The bill itself is actually fairly limited, allowing funding for research only on stem cells derived from embryos that would otherwise be discarded. Tens of thousands of such embryos are currently stored in fertility clinics across the country, the byproduct of attempts by many couples to have children through in-vitro fertilization.

Bush has made the decision to sharply restrict funding for research on these embryos in the face of overwhelming public opposition to his position. Opinion polls indicate that 60 to 70 percent of the population supports federal funding of embryonic stem cell research, while only 20 to 30 percent oppose it. The development of the research is so widely supported—propelled no doubt by the hope of many people that the new technologies could be used to save the lives of loved ones—that a section of the Republican Party voted for the bill, in part for fear of a political backlash.

Those who support Bush’s position—and to whom the

president is appealing by vetoing the bill—are generally those who believe that political decisions in the United States should be guided by the Bible and the conceptions of Christian fundamentalism. They believe that evolution should not be taught in schools, the rights of homosexuals should be eliminated, and abortion should be proscribed.

In the United States today, these backward and medieval religious conceptions are promoted by the political establishment and, through the person of the president, given veto power over the entire country.

The development of the fundamentalist tendency in American politics is rooted in deeper social processes. Bush’s veto must be understood within the context of a government that is carrying out a brutal and unpopular occupation of Iraq—and is planning for further military aggression in the coming months and years—and is overseeing a massive increase in social inequality, as resources are redistributed from the majority of the population in the United States into the hands of the top 1 percent. Both the Democrats and Republicans have contributed to these policies, which have been demanded by their backers in the American ruling class.

Politics has a definite logic. The growth of inequality is inextricable bound up with the attack on democratic rights, and the integration of church and state is one aspect of this attack. As the American ruling class abandons even the most limited programs of social reform, as it demands that thousands of young people go off to kill and be killed in wars of aggression, it will increasingly seek to actively build a base of support on the basis of religion, promoting the idea that the actions of the state express the demands of God. Such are the makings of a theocracy.



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