

Religious backwardness trumps science as Bush vetoes stem cell bill

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Bush used the third veto of his tenure on Wednesday to reject a bill that would expand federal funding of some stem cell research. Once again, Bush is seeking to promote right-wing religious conceptions by opposing scientific research that could help millions of people and is supported by the vast majority of the US population.

In rejecting the bill, Bush repeated his “ethical” concerns with stem cell research. In a statement from the White House, Bush declared, “America is also a nation founded on the principle that all human life is sacred. And our conscience calls on us to pursue the possibilities of science in a manner that respects human dignity and upholds our moral values.”

He insisted that embryonic stem cells are “created as the result of destruction of human life,” and that “destroying human life in the hopes of saving human life is not ethical.”

The administration’s statements not only display a complete contempt for democratic rights—holding that the president has the right to determine what “our Nation” will support based on his own medieval religious conceptions—they also involve a deliberate promotion of ignorance and backwardness.

Embryonic stem cell research, a relatively new field of medical science, involves the extraction of stem cells from a fertilized egg that has just begun the development process. At that stage, the embryo—or, more accurately, the pre-embryo or blastocyst—consists of a handful of undifferentiated cells. The research is critical because the cells have the capacity to develop into any other cell type (that is, they are “pluripotent”). Scientists hope to develop technologies that could, for example, regenerate nerve tissue for patients suffering from Alzheimer’s disease.

In no rational or scientific sense can the embryos in question be called “human lives.” A blastocyst can be considered a human life only according to the religious notion that a human soul is imparted by God at the moment of conception.

Bush issued an executive order restricting stem cell research in August 2001, prohibiting federal funding of this

research except on pre-existing stem cell lines. This immediately affected scientific research, because the federal government is the most important source of funding and existing stem cell lines were inadequate.

The bill Bush vetoed Wednesday would override the 2001 order, allowing funding for stem cell lines developed from embryos that would otherwise be discarded by fertility clinics. It failed to achieve the two-thirds support in Congress necessary to override a veto. It passed in the House by 247-176 in June and in the Senate by 63-45 in April.

Two of Bush’s three vetoes now involve stem cell research. The first veto rejected a previous attempt, in 2006, to pass a similar bill extending federal funding. His only other veto was to reject a war-funding bill that included a nonbinding timeline for the withdrawal of some US troops from Iraq. While that bill would not have ended the war, Bush’s choice of vetoes does help highlight the utter hypocrisy of the administration’s concern for “human life.” Though the administration will not allow the expansion of federal support for stem cell science, it fully supports the destruction of real human lives—including some 750,000 Iraqis and more than 3,500 US troops—to advance US domination of Middle Eastern oil fields.

At the same time as he vetoed the stem cell bill, Bush issued an executive order to encourage “alternative methods” for developing pluripotent cell lines. These methods are considered by the administration to be “ethically responsible” because they do not involve the use of embryos. The executive order also renames the “Human Embryonic Stem Cell Registry” the “Human Pluripotent Stem Cell Registry,” to include any pluripotent stem cell lines developed by the alternative methods.

None of these methods, though promising in themselves, can take the place of embryonic stem cell research, and most of them are far from the stage where they could be used on human cells. They are being pushed by the White House in an attempt to placate overwhelming public support for stem cell research, while at the same time catering to the Christian right.

One of these methods involves the use of stem cells that are not embryonic, but are extracted from umbilical cord blood, bone marrow, or other fluids. However, these types of cells are difficult to isolate and are not as flexible as embryonic stem cells. Another method involves the potential transformation of ordinary skin cells into pluripotent cells. Research published this month documented the successful use of this method on mouse cells, but it is a long way from use on human cells.

In a June 20 article, the *New York Times* reported that two leading stem cell researchers it interviewed said the methods were “no substitute for embryonic stem cell research.” The newspaper quoted Douglas Melton, a stem cell scientist at Harvard University, as arguing that the new methods “should be pursued just as actively as we pursue human embryonic stem cell research.... All we’ve ever asked is let human embryonic stem cell research vie for public funding like all other research,” he said.

The whole campaign to find “ethically acceptable” stem cell research is a fraud and an abuse of science. There is in fact no valid dispute on the question of federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. There is a dispute only if one accepts the unconstitutional notion that religious conceptions should form the basis of government policy and should determine what is a valid form of scientific research.

Both the media and the Democratic Party have worked to legitimize the debate over stem cell research, repeating the language of the Bush administration. To cite just a few examples, the *Washington Post* referred in its article of June 20 to the development of “ethically acceptable stem cells,” while the *New York Times* has on a number of occasions referred to the possibility that new methods could “sidestep the ethical controversies surrounding embryonic stem cell experiments.”

The bill vetoed by Bush contains reference to “ethical requirements,” including the requirement that the stem cells be derived from embryos donated to fertilization clinics and which would have been otherwise discarded. In an attempt to placate the Christian right, the bill also calls for promoting alternative methods of developing pluripotent cells.

In a statement issued earlier this month urging Bush not to veto the bill, Democratic Senate majority leader Harry Reid insisted that the bill “acknowledges the important ethical issues at stake and enacts stronger research guidelines than exist in the President’s current policy.”

In her attempt to accommodate religious irrationality, however, House majority leader Nancy Pelosi took the prize, declaring, “Science is a gift of God to all of us and science has taken us to a place that is biblical in its power to cure. And that is the embryonic stem cell research.”

The determination of Bush to veto the stem cell legislation

in the face of enormous public support (polls put the figure at between 60 and 70 percent) must be understood in its political context. Bush’s approval ratings continue to plummet in the face of growing opposition to the war in Iraq and increasing social inequality in the US. The administration hopes to shore up some measure of support for its right-wing policies by promoting religious issues—including abortion, gay marriage, and stem cell research.

The Democrats and sections of the Republican Party support expanding stem cell research, particularly given concern that the US could fall behind other countries that have no restrictions. Despite these concerns, however, the Democrats have repeatedly sought to accommodate the same religious conceptions promoted by the Bush administration.

In this sense, the stem cell issue is not unique. The Democrats helped confirm Supreme Court justices (Samuel Alito and John Roberts) who they knew would work to overturn abortion rights—a process that has already begun with the Supreme Court decision earlier this year upholding the federal ban on so-called partial-birth abortion. They also accommodated themselves to the Republicans during the sickening intervention into the Terri Schiavo case.

For the Democrats to mount a serious exposure of the administration would require that they explain the aim behind the promotion of religious fundamentalism. However, the Democrats support the same basic policies that the Bush administration is seeking to salvage by promoting religious fundamentalism—including the war in Iraq and the unrelenting attack on democratic rights in the US. To carry out a campaign against religious fundamentalism would require an appeal to the real interests of masses of people, an appeal that the Democrats are determined to avoid. Rather than seeking to counter the theocratic tendencies within the administration, therefore, the Democrats try to accommodate themselves to these tendencies.



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