

README

Taking Bush Personally

By Michael Kinsley

Conservatives wonder why so many liberals don't just disagree with President Bush's policies but seem to dislike him personally. The story of stem-cell research may help to explain. Two years ago, Bush announced an unexpectedly restrictive policy on the use of stem cells from human embryos in federally funded medical research. Because federal funding plays such a large role, the government more or less sets the rules for major medical research in this country.

Bush's policy was that research could continue on stem-cell "lines" that existed at the moment of his speech, in August 2001, but that otherwise, embryo research was banned. Even surplus embryos already in the freezer at fertility clinics—where embryos are routinely created and destroyed by the thousands every year—could not be used for medical research and would have to be thrown out instead.

Bush's professed moral concern was bolstered by two factual assumptions. One was that there were more than 60 stem-cell lines available for research. Stem cells are "wild card" cells. They multiply and evolve into cells for specific purposes in the human body. A "line" is the result of a particular cell that has been "tweaked" and is multiplying in the laboratory. The hope is to develop lines of cells that can be put back into human beings and be counted on to evolve into replacements for missing or defective parts. The likeliest example is dopamine-producing brain cells for people with Parkinson's disease. The dream is replacements for whole organs or even limbs. But each line is a crapshoot. So the more lines, the better. And it turns out that the number of useful lines is more like 10 than 60.

Bush also touted the possibility of harmlessly harvesting stem cells from adults. He said, "Therapies developed from adult stem cells are already helping suffering people." This apparently referred to decades-old techniques such as removing some of a leukemia patient's bone marrow and then reinjecting it after the patient has undergone radiation.

As for finding adult stem cells that could turn into unrelated body parts, that was just a dream two years ago, and now it is not even that. A new study, reported last week in *Nature*, concluded that when earlier studies thought they saw new specialized cells derived from adult stem cells, they were really seeing those adult cells bonding with pre-existing specialized cells. There's hope in this bonding process, too—but not the hope researchers had for adult stem cells, and nothing like the hope they still have for embryonic stem cells. Since Bush's speech, scientists have used embryonic stem cells to reverse the course of Parkinson's in rats.

Put it all together, and the stem cells that can squeeze through Bush's loopholes are far less promising than they seemed two years ago while the general promise of embryonic stem cells burns brighter than ever. If you claim to have made an anguished moral decision, and the factual basis for that decision turns out to be faulty, you ought to reconsider, or your claim to moral anguish looks phony. But Bush's moral anguish was suspect from the beginning because the policy it produced makes no sense.

The week-old embryos used for stem-cell research are microscopic clumps of cells, unthinking and unknowing, with fewer physical human qualities than a mosquito. Fetal-tissue research has used brain cells from aborted fetuses, but this is not that. Week-old, lab-created embryos have no brain cells.

Furthermore, not a single embryo dies because of stem-cell research, which simply uses a tiny fraction of the embryos that live and die as a routine part of procedures at fertility clinics. And actual stem-cell therapy for real patients, if it is allowed to develop,

will not even need these surplus embryos. Once a usable line is developed from an embryo, the cells for treatment can be developed in a laboratory.

None of this matters if you believe that a microscopic embryo is a human being with the same human rights as you and me. George W. Bush claims to believe that, and you have to believe something like that to justify your opposition to stem-cell research. But Bush cannot possibly believe that embryos are full human beings, or he would surely oppose modern fertility procedures that create and destroy many embryos for each baby they bring into the world. Bush does not oppose modern fertility treatments. He even praised them in his anti-stem-cell speech.

It's not a complicated point. If stem-cell research is morally questionable, the procedures used in fertility clinics are worse. You cannot logically outlaw the one and praise the other. And surely logical coherence is a measure of moral sincerity.

If he's got both his facts and his logic wrong—and he has—Bush's alleged moral anguish on this subject is unimpressive. In fact, it is insulting to the people (including me) whose lives could be saved or redeemed by the medical breakthroughs Bush's stem-cell policy is preventing.

This is not a policy disagreement. Or rather, it is not only a policy disagreement. If the president is not a complete moron—and he probably is not—he is a hardened cynic, staging moral anguish he does not feel, pandering to people he cannot possibly agree with, and sacrificing the future of many American citizens for short-term political advantage.

Is that a good enough reason to dislike him personally?