

Stem Cell Muddle

By Richard Cohen

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From what you have heard or read, you could be forgiven for believing that Laura Bush delivered a speech this week on stem cell research. She did not. She actually gave a speech on all sorts of medical topics -- liability reform, women's health, etc. -- in which, toward the end, she merely touched on stem cell research. It was just as well. For the life of me, I can't figure out what she said.

I have the text before me, and it is a muddle. In general, the first lady offered spousal support for her husband's policy on stem cell research, which, bluntly speaking, is to wish it would all go away. George Bush, you may recall, limited federal funding for research to the 78 lines of stem cells then in existence. Of these, most proved not fruitful at all, but the White House has turned away pleas for more money and more research on moral grounds. For stem cells to be created, a fetus must be destroyed -- in other words, abortion.

The first lady did not say whether she agreed with that. She did not say, either, if she disagreed. She did say that stem cells raised "an issue with moral implications that must not be treated lightly." As for the promise of stem cell research, Mrs. Bush was optimistic. "I hope that stem cell research will yield cures and therapies for a myriad of illnesses," she said. But she did not say what we should do if the original 78 lines prove insufficient to the task, as many scientists fear. What then?

The first lady did say, though, that her father had died of Alzheimer's disease. This apparently gave her the credentials to tangle with Ron Reagan, who spoke at the Democratic National Convention in favor of funding stem cell research. "The implication that cures for Alzheimer's are around the corner is just not right," she said.

If the normally articulate Laura Bush seems a bit incoherent on this topic, who can blame her? Her husband's policy is morally inconsistent. Rather than reject the fruits of what it deems murder, it accepts the *fait accompli* -- those destroyed fetuses -- but insists on no more. It hopes to squeak by, find the scientific jackpot on the moral cheap. It's not likely to happen. Science, ever reliant on federal funding, is probably going to need more stem cell lines. In fact, as Mrs. Bush knows perfectly well, it is not Alzheimer's that is mentioned most when it comes to stem cells but Parkinson's. Here the question is more immediate: Do we sacrifice an embryo, this 5-day-old collection of cells, to relieve the pain and helplessness of a Parkinson's sufferer? Are we morally permitted this triage?

Most Americans say yes -- or so the surveys tell us. They, though, are not the ones who would march to the polls on this single issue. Religious conservatives might -- and they

strongly oppose stem cell research as just a fancy term for abortion. The fetus is a life. It is as simple as that.

Milly Kondracke was a life also. She died July 22 at 64 of complications from Parkinson's, a phrase that cannot begin to describe what she had been through. Her husband, the journalist Morton Kondracke, chronicled her suffering in the book "Saving Milly." I wrote about this book more than three years ago, and if you will permit me, I will quote myself:

"I read about Milly's unstoppable decline -- how at first she had trouble signing her name, then walking, then talking, eating, turning over in bed, standing, drinking, controlling her bowels. I read, in both shock and wonder, of Mort washing her, changing her, feeding her, clearing food out of her clogged throat and, through it all, loving her -- completely, physically. I read an account of a love so huge that I shrank before it: Could I do the same?"

I don't know. I hope I never know -- and while I am confessing ignorance, let me say also that I don't know for sure when life begins. But I recognized life in Milly -- oh, what gusto she once had! -- and I don't see it in the earliest of fetuses. Milly died of a disease we may someday be able to cure with stem cells. That, not some straw man about Alzheimer's, is the choice before us -- and Laura Bush, from every indication, knows it.

Now, Mrs. Bush, go home and tell your husband.

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