

Ronald Reagan RIP

We salute Ronald Reagan, fortieth President of the United States and victor of the Cold War, who died today.

Some will say that this is not a moment to engage in political controversy, but this is a special case: May the current President listen to reason, as articulated by President Reagan's widow **Nancy** among many others, and reconsider his irrational opposition to the scientific research that would cure terrible diseases such as the Alzheimer's from which Ronald suffered.

Sun, 06/06/2004 - 00:30 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

Religious Morality

I salute Reagan as well.

I'd also like to note that the World often seems to praise Bush's religiousness as a guide to his moral choices. It's important to remember that this is also a source of significant moral errors, too. His position on stem-cell research is a good example of this. It isn't merely Bush's position on this research that's irrational. It's the basis of his entire worldview.

Perhaps it isn't so praiseworthy after all.

Gil

by **Gil** on Sun, 06/06/2004 - 04:49 | [reply](#)

foundationalism

worldviews do not have basis-es.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 06/06/2004 - 06:14 | [reply](#)

Re Religious morality and foundationalism

I agree that world-views do not have bases. Nevertheless I agree with the substance of Gil's comment. I would merely replace 'It's the basis of his entire worldview' by 'Religious thinking pervades his

entire worldview'.

As I wrote [here](#), even the best religions tend to 'entrench a slew of wrong ideas' in the minds of believers, some of which are evil ideas.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Sun, 06/06/2004 - 14:38 | [reply](#)

it makes a huge difference

it makes a huge difference. if something bad was the *basis* of a worldview, it would seem to make sense to conclude the worldview was bad, not praiseworthy, or something like that. this is what Gil did.

but for a mistake to simply pervade a worldview (come up a lot, be common) simply means the worldview has a bunch of errors with a common theme. and it would not automatically follow from this that the worldview shouldn't be praised. further argument and judgment would be required. and in some cases this would conclude that we should praise religious people.

you'll notice [The World's](#) post criticises a religious flaw in bush. so gil wasn't saying to simply be willing to criticise religious flaws when we see them. we do that. he wants more. it seems to me he clearly was asking the world to stop endorsing and praising bush generally, and to instead only do it in a very limited way like "Bush is good on the war".

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Sun, 06/06/2004 - 18:09 | [reply](#)

David, say more

You refer to the article on the Edge. Specifically I am intrigued by this statement: "Why would somebody hate so badly"? And he /George W. Bush/ replied: "my answer is, there's evil in the world. But we can overcome evil. We're good." This is the simple truth — a truth on which all our futures depend —

In almost all senses I agree. We can overcome evil. This is the simple truth - a truth on which all our futures depend -

However, the "We're good." of the address seems a broad brush way of saying the inclusive We, not as a critical rationalist statement, but as a foregone conclusion; right against wrong side. "We", the good guys.

The potential trap here is that in saying We're good, as in "We are the good guys", could become a conclusion, before critical thought. The president may not mean it this way but it is very easy to fall into this trap. Once you have concluded that you are on the "right side" it is easy to continue to conclude rightness before thinking about what constitutes goodness and how to act rightly from it.

It is significant and meaningful here that he is talking to children.

Children especially continue to ask why. Why are we good?

The truth does not take sides. It simply is. The "good guys" are good because they continue to think rationally, critically and act according to to this credo. In that sense, "We" are good too.

by a reader on Sun, 06/06/2004 - 20:22 | [reply](#)

It Makes Little Difference

Religion doesn't "simply pervade" Bush's worldview.

Religion **PERVADES** Bush's worldview.

And, these things don't simply have a common theme. They have a common source: his commitment to mysticism, faith, and allegedly divinely-inspired doctrine, rather than to reason. This is not a reliable path to moral truth. It's more likely to lead to moral errors. It, in fact, leads many others to be wrong on the war, so I think his rightness on this subject comes from knowledge that he has that is independent of his religious faith. I'm happy that he applies this non-religious knowledge to this issue. I wish he would do it to more issues. The fact that he doesn't do it often enough is a flaw.

Yes, I'm very happy that Bush knows that there is good and evil in the world. But, this knowledge is available without all of the irrational baggage of religion. Even a stopped clock is right twice a day.

Elliot is wrong again when he asserts that I object to praising Bush generally. I think it's quite appropriate to praise many religious people generally (Ronald Reagan is a great example). What I object to is praising his religiousness specifically as if it should be considered a badge of honor, and the mark of an enlightened and trustworthy leader.

And, what I noticed was that **The World** did NOT characterize Bush's error as a "religious flaw" but, rather, as an "irrational opposition".

Also, I'd appreciate it if either **The World** would endorse Elliot Temple as one of its official spokesmen, or he would stop giving the impression that it has (e.g. using "we" when referring to **The World's** posts and opinions).

Gil

by **Gil** on Sun, 06/06/2004 - 22:19 | [reply](#)

bush is critical

Bush has certain ideas about what good is. he talks about them all the time. he thinks everyone should be free, woman shouldn't be oppressed, people should not live in fear of their governments, and the list goes on. if our society wasn't like that, he would notice, and stop calling it good.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 06/06/2004 - 22:20 | [reply](#)

we

"we" gives the impression the world endorses me just as much as if i said "i am morally aligned with **The World**". in both cases clearly this is my view.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 06/06/2004 - 22:38 | [reply](#)

religion and the war

According to a survey conducted March 13-16 by the Pew Research Center and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 62 percent of American Catholics support the war, the same percentage as white, mainline Protestants. Religious support was strongest among evangelicals, 77 percent of whom support the war.

Only 36 percent of African-American Protestants favored military action in Iraq. "Seculars" -- respondents who said they were atheists or had no religious affiliation -- divided evenly, with 44 percent in favor and 44 percent opposed. --[source](#)

Gil, you seem to say Bush understands why the war is right *despite* his religion. in light of this view, could you explain the above stats which feature Christians being better on the war than non-religious people?

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 06/06/2004 - 23:17 | [reply](#)

Religion and the War

Those statistics don't require an explanation. They are just correlations.

But, religious communities often share many values that go beyond the contents of the religion. So non-religious correlations are to be expected.

What are the statistics among european christians? If their support for the war is lower, does that mean they're not following christianity as accurately as americans do? Or would it support the notion that the support of the war comes largely from values outside of the religious tradition?

Gil

by **Gil** on Mon, 06/07/2004 - 00:18 | [reply](#)

explanation

your explanation seems to be that more religious communities with

shared values happened to share good values than similar atheist communities. isn't that explaining who is moral by luck or happenstance?

you say an explanation isn't required of you. well, not *by the statistics*. sure. however, i asked for one. if you want to be persuasive that your views are good at explaining reality (*the* criterion for good views, basically), then you should be able to explain things with them when asked. and also, the better your views are, the easier this should be, and the more sense your explanation should make, etc

so if you find it difficult to explain facts in terms of your view, then this suggests your view isn't very good.

"If [European Christian] support for the war is lower, does that mean they're not following christianity as accurately as americans do?"

i would explain it by saying that is a different religious tradition, despite the shared heritage and shared name.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Mon, 06/07/2004 - 01:30 | [reply](#)

Explanation

Elliot,

If we were to find that, as I conjecture, american evangelical christians are more likely than athiests to be NASCAR enthusiasts, would that require an explanation based on religious traditions?

If not, then it seems to me that everything you've written above is nonsense.

Gil

by **Gil** on Mon, 06/07/2004 - 04:48 | [reply](#)

explanation

no one criticises christians for liking NASCAR. it's viewed as a matter of taste, and preferences on the matter aren't taken very seriously. thus they haven't really evolved a lot (though how to make the sport better may have).

the war isn't like that. this is something everyone's thought about, and involves moral issues accessible to everyone. so, say, "my mom took me to a race when i was little and i liked it" won't work for liking the war. it takes more detailed explanation involving people's moral theories.

have i *proven* the explanation for christians favoring the war is a

religious one? no. but that's a possibility, and if you can't think of another one, then my version of events seems the most compelling explanation.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Mon, 06/07/2004 - 05:06 | [reply](#)

Explanation

Ok, here's another possible explanation...

People in communities with lots of christians also tend to be more patriotic and nationalistic than average. They tend to support whatever their national leaders have chosen to do, and to resent those who oppose them. They were, I'd guess, more likely to support the Vietnam war, the draft, and Japanese internment during WWII, too.

Again, this is not caused by their religious faith and tradition, but merely correlates somewhat within the same communities; and has nothing to do with deep moral consciousness or superiority. Like NASCAR.

Gil

by **Gil** on Mon, 06/07/2004 - 05:27 | [reply](#)

"would"?

The above exchange aside, I'm still hung up on (what seems to be) **The World's** assertion that for the U.S. government to fund research which uses fetal stem-cells-from-other-than-existing-lines (as opposed to just adult stem-cells and/or fetal stem-cells-from-those-existing-lines) - which is what Bush actually forbid, you see - "would" cure diseases such as Alzheimer's. (And BTW, although he may "oppose" it on a personal level, AFAIK there is no stem-cell research which Bush has actually forbid.)

If **The World** really knows that such research "would" cure Alzheimer's, or even a disease-such-as-Alzheimer's whatever that might mean, it would be extremely newsworthy and scientifically relevant, and ought to be published in journals and publicized in the media. Such an earth-shaking scientific finding might even perhaps convince Bush to change his mind on this issue, who knows? Please, please don't sit on this finding.

Along these lines, another highly advisable course of action would be to pressure **other** agents than the U.S. federal government (such as European governments, George Soros, Bill Gates etc) to fund fetal-stem-cell-research-which-would-cure-Alzheimer's-or-a-disease-such-as. After all, if the only thing now preventing an Alzheimer's cure is the U.S. federal government not funding research involving fetal-stem-cells-other-than-from-existing-lines, that could be easily remedied. The U.S. government is not the only

potential source of research money in the world; money from other sources is just as good. Certainly it can't be the case that Alzheimer's-or-a-disease-such-as "would" be cured if research is funded using U.S. government money but not other kinds of money, can it?

So again, I reiterate, please publicize your scientific findings regarding this disease that "would" be cured, both in the interest of science and to get other-than-US-funding to do the actual research. What's stopping you?

by a reader on Mon, 06/07/2004 - 23:11 | [reply](#)

Could

The above is amusing. But, I think it's a valid point that Bush has urged discrimination against a particular promising line of research because of the religious symbolism involved. That's a bad thing.

It's hard to tell, but this could have a chilling effect on privately-funded research because there would be fewer researchers who could follow-up on interesting results, and some might fear an eventual legal ban (as with cloning), etc.

Gil

by **Gil** on Mon, 06/07/2004 - 23:36 | [reply](#)

The Prisoners' Conscience

Getting back to Reagan...

I think **The World** readers will probably be interested in **this** short tribute to Reagan from Natan Sharansky.

Gil

by **Gil** on Mon, 06/07/2004 - 23:45 | [reply](#)

lots of things could...

Gil,

But, I think it's a valid point that Bush has urged discrimination against a particular promising line of research because of the religious symbolism involved. That's a bad thing.

1. Governments have, do, and will continue in the future to discriminate against the FUNDING of lines of research. (In fact, they **have** to. Capital is finite. To fund project X necessarily discriminates against the funding of project Y.) I don't know how they "discriminate against research" per se outside of the context of funding, unless you're talking about banning, which is not actually what Bush did and which your alarmism notwithstanding I don't think anyone seriously believes to be in the cards.

2. "Promising" is your, highly informed I assume, opinion. May be

correct. However,

3. whether something is "promising" in and of itself is not very interesting. Even modulo subjectivity, lots of things are promising. It would only be informative as a **relative** statement (see 1, we **must** discriminate), as in, It's **relatively** promising compared to other things. That may be how you meant it, and indeed, that it may be, but,

4. Make sure you understand what you are calling "promising". Again, what Bush has **actually** declined to fund is research-using-fetal-stem-cells-from-other-than-lines-XYZW..., not "Stem Cell Research" in general. Are you **really** saying that fetal-stem-cell-research-from-other-than-those-existing-lines, is promising, and **relatively** so? Why are fetal cells in particular so necessary? Why are other lines so necessary? What's so bad about the existing lines? Have you done the leg work here?

5. Although Bush's religion was undoubtedly involved in his decision (as it is in virtually **all** his decisions I presume), unclear why you use the phrase "religious symbolism" to denote this decision. Religious **principles** perhaps, and understandably if one doesn't believe in any religion than all such principles may seem like mere "symbolism" or incomprehensible as anything other than that, but... Why don't I just go ahead and accuse you of engaging in Scientific Symbolism? Basis for the charge would be the same.

It's hard to tell, but this could have a chilling effect on privately-funded research because there would be fewer researchers who could follow-up on interesting results, and some might fear an eventual legal ban (as with cloning), etc.

But on the other side of the ledger we have **The World's** implicit declaration that this particular research (=research using fetal-stem-cells-from-other-than-existing-lines), if only funded at a higher level, would definitely cure Alzheimer's or some disease like that, and all that is really lacking is money. Your more sober hedging here is duly noted; however, assuming **The World** is correct, why wouldn't some enterprising funding agent/European government/researcher jump at the chance to grab that sure thing? ;-)

Again, apparently an Alzheimer's (or disease like it) cure is out there right now just for the taking, all that is needed is for enough money to be paid to a scientist to manipulate fetal stem-cells from lines other than the crappy useless pathetic ones that are US government approved. If it's such a sure thing then who cares if the US government, being overrun by religious fanatics, puts a (temporary, as it would surely be, since a cure is almost here!) "chilling effect" on future research or even bans it. All the more reason for Euro-gov'ts or George Soros (or hey what about the Chinese?) to fund this research aggressively, quickly pluck that low-hanging disease-cure off the tree, get famous/win Nobel Prizes/distribute the cure around the world, make big profits, and say a big "In Your Face!" to the stupid Americans who would be shown the error of their ways in the most dramatic way possible

since Sputnik.

P.S. I know this is all mostly just an irritating tangent and perhaps I should have just let stand the sloppy use of "would" because the important thing is to allow all stem cell research unfettered in the interest of progressiveness and all that is good and nice. However, IMHO equally irritating was the fact that **The World's** first post about the death of Ronald Reagan was to use it as a flimsy springboard into a virtual non sequitur about Bush's mid 2001 stem cell research decision.

Does the life and death of Ronald Reagan have nothing more pressing to teach us than the need for the U.S. federal government to issue research grants to scientists who want to work with fetal stem cells other than the existing lines already in use?

--Blixia (last one too)

by a reader on Tue, 06/08/2004 - 00:42 | [reply](#)

Should

Blixia,

I'm responding in a somewhat random order...

I called it "religious symbolism", because it's my understanding that there's an adequate supply of embryos that would otherwise be destroyed; primarily from excess in vitro fertilization processes. These embryos would not otherwise have resulted in a baby, and using them would not motivate abortions. These embryos will die anyway. I think that this decision *was* purely symbolic, because it could not save any children, but it's a topic that just makes people *think about* abortions.

I'm certainly not an expert, but I understand that many researchers have claimed that fetal stem cells might have a wider variety of cells that they can become than non-fetal ones, or they can be made to do this more easily, or have some other such advantages. I think that there has been a great deal of recent progress with non-fetal stem cells, so this might not be as important as it was once thought. I don't know. What I do know is that many of these researchers claim that the preliminary results have been promising enough to warrant funding by the existing standards and it is just the religious aspect associated with using human embryos that have blocked it.

I don't claim to speak for **The World**, but I suspect that they meant to say something closer to what I have, rather than to imply that cures are imminent.

Like it or not, politics often works in such a way as to have certain legislative and regulatory changes triggered by peripherally related news events. Take the Brady Bill as an example.

And, it's true that the government should have no obligation to fund

this particular research (as it should have no obligation to fund abortions). I actually would like to see the abolition of all non-defense-related publicly funded research.

But, when the government *does* fund things, I'd like it to base its decisions on the best available knowledge and criteria to get the most value for the money, rather than to sacrifice this quality to appeal to certain constituencies' prejudices. I think that private people should be able to discriminate about how to allocate their own resources using whatever foolish criteria they like; but the government, as trustee for the public, should be held to a higher standard.

Gil

by **Gil** on Tue, 06/08/2004 - 02:04 | [reply](#)

stem cell research

Blixa,

Nice post!

Do you think Bush analysed the issue as you did, and then came to your conclusions rationally, or do you think an irrationality stopped him from giving the idea of funding stem cell research fair consideration (fair judged by comparing it to how much consideration other similar research options get that he has no irrationality about)?

Also, do you think when **The World** said "would" this was meant to communicate an infallible guarantee, or simply that research will cure the disease, and this particular research is part of the correct path to finding the cure?

PS the 'would' thing may have been a picky point, but it was kinda interesting anyway. and i liked your response to gil.

PPS wanna join my email list, chat on AIM (curi42), meet, or email me from an addy you ever check? i don't bite. curi[at]curi[dot]us

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Tue, 06/08/2004 - 02:51 | [reply](#)

Comment Editing

The "edit your comment" feature is great, but it seems to revert back to the original comment if you go back to edit a comment again. This might be useful, but it should be optional since one is more likely to merely want to make a small refinement to the current state of the comment.

Sorry to complain about it here, but another feature that it's missing is the ability to delete extraneous comments entirely; so I had to write *something*.

Gil

Gil, I'll try to be as bri

Gil,

I'll try to be as brief as possible.

The "symbolism" charge still seems unjustified. 1. How do you know Bush (right or wrong) wasn't sincere? Sure seemed so to me. 2. What's the point of "appealing to" a constituency (pro-lifers) he already had in his back pocket? *puzzled* 3. In fact pro-lifers were *not* uniformly happy with the decision, the "using existing lines is ok" part being viewed as a terrible cop-out. The decision was a compromise that irked practically everyone, another reason I believe it to have not been a political ploy. It was not, as you seem to imply, prompted by "news events"; it was only in the news because he made it so in the first place. If it had been about votes or politics it would have been more astute to have made the opposite decision, or at least to have done it quietly on a Friday night, under the radar. Instead, he gave a (highly unusual for him!) prime time, prominent speech explaining his rationale. YMMV but to me these all point to him (however wrong his decision was) having given weighty and sincere consideration to the matter, and taken it quite seriously indeed, rather than some kind of political motives or trying to "appeal to" the "prejudices" of some constituency.

Re: what researchers think, It should be pointed out that *all* researchers think *everything* they're doing deserves funding, the more the better ;), however, obviously I do not doubt the substance of the claim that stem-cell research in general is especially promising, or that embryonic stem-cells in particular can have some advantage or another. But you still haven't said why the advantage is so overwhelming or why adult stem-cells - or embryonic stem-cells from the "lines" which *are* approved - are insufficient to whatever research task you have in mind, if any.

More importantly, it benefits precisely no one - not even the people who want the research approved! - to (as **The World** did) oversell the situation by crying Wolf and implying that there was an automatic-disease-cure in the works if not for Bush's decision. (And to have fed a grieving, agonized Nancy Reagan some fairy tale about how "this would have definitely cured Ronnie's disease, too late for him, but hey" so as to use her as a talking-prop, if that's what people did, is downright distasteful if you ask me.)

Re: it won't be saving lives, because of certain embryos which won't be growing up, and could be used in research, but now won't... Isn't it possible that Bush knows all that, and nevertheless is worried about a slippery-slope? And wouldn't he be correct - i.e. if he *did* allow the use of those particular embryos you're talking about, but not future embryos, or all embryos, or whatever, wouldn't you now be saying, He should be allowing everything!

But if all that's the test of "symbolism" then my earlier "scientific

symbolism" jest may not be so far off the mark after all.. It's not at all clear that you have any concrete idea what's so necessary about the particular research that Bush has decided not to fund (=research using embryonic-stem-cells-from-other-than-some-particular-lines), *but you really really want it to be funded regardless*. I suspect you are far from alone in that regard. The way some people talk, it's hard to escape the conclusion that they want desperately this stuff to be funded *because Bush doesn't want to* (+ *Bush is religious*).

And by "best available knowledge" informing such decisions, you mean to axiomatically exclude all explicitly "Religious" knowledge, correct? Just checking :) Because all sorts of "knowledge" other than (what you would call, I imagine) Purely Scientific informs public-policy. Christians worried about stem-cells is hardly the first or last item; the relative funding of breast cancer and even AIDS research would probably be difficult to justify on objective, quantitative grounds for example. On some such not-purely-scientifically-informed issues, **The World** would probably even share my concerns - why is nuclear power so held back? genetically modified food? (On other matters I may be more alone: why the f**k do carpool lanes exist?)

Can you see any possible bias here in singling out the known-Religious guy and saying he, in particular (because he's Religious) shouldn't be allowed to make decisions informed by his morality, which, in fact, is something that *everyone* does, and in a sense he's just one of the few who admits it? I know this is not what you think, but assuming Bush was sincere, should he have made a decision he believed to be wrong? Or should acknowledged-Religious people just not hold public office? Best,

by a reader on Tue, 06/08/2004 - 19:32 | [reply](#)

oops that was

--Blixa again

by a reader on Tue, 06/08/2004 - 19:32 | [reply](#)

Re: Comment Editing

The "edit your comment" feature is great, but it seems to revert back to the original comment if you go back to edit a comment again.

The blog software doesn't actually keep any earlier version of an edited comment, and the timestamps in the headers look fine, so I think you might merely need to configure your browser to be slightly less enthusiastic in its caching.

Sorry to complain about it here, but another feature that it's missing is the ability to delete extraneous comments entirely

The software doesn't do that yet, so for now, we have implemented

a feature that permits users not to write extraneous comments in the first place.

by **Kevin** on Tue, 06/08/2004 - 19:56 | [reply](#)

not extraneous

lol@kevin

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Tue, 06/08/2004 - 20:11 | [reply](#)

to Elliott

Thanks..

Do you think Bush analysed the issue as you did, and then came to your conclusions rationally, or do you think an irrationality stopped him from giving the idea of funding stem cell research fair consideration (fair judged by comparing it to how much consideration other similar research options get that he has no irrationality about)?

First of all I **haven't** analyzed the stem-cell issue, rationally or irrationally, all I know is what I read in the papers, and heard some other researcher allude to his use of stem-cells (or more precisely, his use of some drug/chemical/Thing which apparently was created using stem-cells) in a science talk or two. Bush has almost certainly given it more thought than I have, I'd bet on it.

Nor do I have any "conclusions". Although I'm (a bit flakily) pro-life, I'm not dogmatically opposed to embryonic stem-cell research on anything like pro-life grounds, but that doesn't mean I don't see any potential moral problems at all, and I'm mostly just kind of agnostic on the urgent need to do the kind of stem-cell research that Bush has declined to fund. (Remember: Bush has **not** declined to fund "Stem Cell Research" en masse!!) I don't actually understand why Bush's (I won't exactly call it "Solomon-like", but still seemingly reasonable to me..) compromise of "as for embryonic stem-cells, ok, but just use the dozen existing lines" [or however many it was] solution was not sufficient to researchers' needs; I'm open to being convinced, of course. Just need more info perhaps; it'd probably take one Google search, but like I said, I **haven't** researched the issue.

or do you think an irrationality stopped him from giving the idea of funding stem cell research fair consideration

I think it's certainly probably that the religious framework through which, we are so often told, Bush views the world, amounted to a bias or template that effectively prevented him from being convinced of the need/benefit of funding this research, by an amount/type of evidence that would have convinced other not-so-Religious (or other-Religious) people, or which would have

convinced him on other matters not so connected to the morality of things his religion tends to focus on. Is that "irrationality"? If so, ok, but I'd just like to also be able to say that anyone who thinks painting a white diamond on the left lane of a freeway, and forbidding solo drivers from driving in that lane, absent any tangible evidence whatsoever that doing this has any salutary effects at all of any kind for society, is also clouded by irrationality. ;-) More generally I'd like to also say that precisely *no one* is free from a bias/template. Some people hide it. Not to say that all biases/templates are created equal but still.

So at the same time, what I have a problem with is *assuming* that Bush came to his decision "irrationally", or at least more than the next guy, because the only real basis for saying so seems to be either *disagreement* with the decision, or our knowledge that he's Religious and didn't somehow excise this portion of himself when making the decision. As far as I know (indeed I remember reading and anyway, came away convinced that) Bush gave it great thought and consulted with many people, not all of whom agreed with him or wore white collars. Now maybe that great thought Bush put into it was worthless, because of Bush being so stupid and all; or maybe the bioethicists etc he talked to couldn't convince him because they used big words or didn't point at a Bible.. but I don't actually know any of that.

And again, the decision - the *actual* decision he made, not the "he banned Stem-Cell Research!!" caricature being bandied around in some quarters - seemed ok to me; I saw no reason to think it unduly messed-up. I don't know all the answers and so I don't know that moral concerns about embryonic stem cells are wrongheaded. But it should be emphasized that pro-lifers *weren't* overjoyed at the decision, far from it. If you ask them, from their point of view what Bush actually did was that he *allowed* stem-cell research, and a debate about it on a more pro-life website would probably look like bizarro-world to people here.

I think part of where I'm coming from here is that I actually respected how he managed to make a decision that ticked off both sides :-). It either took lots of guts, or political stupidity... but it's almost *impossible* for me to interpret it, as Gil seems to, as some kind of political ploy to get votes... *whose votes*??

fair judged by comparing it to how much consideration other similar research options get that he has no irrationality about

The thing is, why would we take that as a control group? There are lots of research areas which Bush not only has no irrationality about, but hasn't considered at all, their funding running on autopilot or at least not touched by his admin. one way or the other, and which I would probably like to call "unfair". "Not having been considered by Bush in his religious mind-set" is not the test of "fairness" to me. Or to put it another way, practically *everything* which gets funded/decided in public policy, probably has been done so with some amount of "unfairness". Part of what I'm saying is,

Why single out Bush and *his* decision, and not all those others?

cuz he's Religious, right?

*Also, do you think when **The World** said "would" this was meant to communicate an infallible guarantee, or simply that research will cure the disease, and this particular research is part of the correct path to finding the cure?*

The thing is, even if it's the latter, I'd still disagree. Who knows that research will cure the disease? We may never find a cure. Who know that this particular research is part of the correct path? We may find a cure but by some other means entirely. (By the same token stem-cell research may cure something *else* or lead to other, unimagined benefits...)

That having been said, you asked me what **The World** "meant". And that's the problem, because honestly it looks like **The World** "meant" to paint embryonic-stem-cell-research-finding-a-cure-for-Alzheimer's-or-something-like-it as if not a sure thing, as close to a sure thing as they could get away with saying. I agree of course that if pressed **The World** would retreat to a more carefully hedged formulation, but IMHO what **The World** "meant" to do in the original post was to state their case as strongly as they thought they could get away with doing... and I didn't want to let them :)

Like I told Gil, it benefits no one to oversell stem-cell or any other kind of research as some kind of panacea. There is a definite "crying wolf" danger here; it is just not good to overstate and sensationalize your case in science, *even* if it leads to short-term gains. Look at the global-warming people as an analogy. Although politically I am squarely on the "anti-Global-Warming-people" side, at the same time I don't dispute that a (lowercase g, w)global warming has occurred in the recent 100-150 years or so, and of course I acknowledge the greenhouse effect is real, and thus that the future climate *may* be worth worrying about, etc., but the danger here is that they've spent so much effort turning it all into a cartoonish armageddon story + political/ideological dogmatism that even if they're *right*, eventually only the True Believers will have believed them.

Suppose that George W. Bush is as we speak perusing the blogs and comes across STWTR, sees this post, and gets convinced that stem-cell research should be funded unfettered because it "would" cure Alzheimer's. And then it *doesn't*. All that happens is that the next funding priority which is potentially impeded by someone's wrongheaded moral concerns, becomes a much harder sell....

P.S. I'll catch up on the private correspondence when I get a chance, i promise :)

by a reader on Tue, 06/08/2004 - 20:33 | [reply](#)

I Agree

Blix,

I agree with you. HOV lane restrictions are worse-than-useless and

should be abolished.

As for the other stuff...

I don't think Bush is insincere such that he doesn't personally agree with limiting this research but is doing it *only* to win votes. I think he does believe in it. I just think he's wrong. If he didn't believe in evolution and was sincere in trying to abolish teaching it in federally-funded schools, I think he'd be sincere and wrong to do that as well.

You're right that all funding decisions are affected by politics, but most at least claim to be based on the objectively determined expected benefits of the research.

And, I don't think Bush is a monster. I think he's a fundamentally decent man who wants to do the right thing. I just think he has a major area of irrationality which leads him to do the wrong things sometimes.

My point was simply that people who are quick to praise him specifically for his religion-guided moral sense should be a little more restrained in their praise, because that knife cuts both ways.

Gil

by **Gil** on Tue, 06/08/2004 - 21:49 | [reply](#)

Gil, I don't think Bush i

Gil,

I don't think Bush is insincere such that he doesn't personally agree with limiting this research but is doing it only to win votes.

I'm glad you don't find him insincere but your political diagnosis still seems on the fritz: How will the decision "win" him any votes at all, in the first place? from whom? The pro-life people (who were already going to vote for him), the people who don't care much about this issue and wouldn't let his stance affect their vote (like me), or the folks who hate him with a vengeance and this is just fuel for the fire to them?

Objectively the actual decision he made was a political loser all around. He **ticked off** (a little bit) the true blue pro-life people with this decision you seem to think was made for them, are you denying this or simply unaware of it? I think many people, for whatever reason, are really underestimating just how much of a political loser this was, not only to make the decision he made, but to give a prime-time speech explaining it.

I think he does believe in it. I just think he's wrong.

As was clear. And perhaps you are right. But I hope you now understand that "he's wrong (in my opinion)" and "it was just religious symbolism" are not the same thing...

You're right that all funding decisions are affected by politics, but

most at least claim to be based on the objectively determined expected benefits of the research.

And all too often that claim is disingenuous... frankly I find honesty more refreshing than pretense myself... YMMV

And BTW it's not that Bush didn't take into account the "expected benefits" AT ALL... remember, he *allowed* the funding of "some" stem-cell research if headlines such as **Bush Allows Some Stem Cell Funding** are any indication. Quote: "...if they're going to be destroyed anyway, shouldn't they be used for a greater good, for research that has the potential to save and improve other lives?" You boil that down to giving no consideration to expected benefits of research? Sounds more like he weighed benefits against the moral considerations he had and sought some compromise. (Which, again, did *not* make pro-life people especially happy!) Ok to disagree with his conclusion if you want, but at least characterize it accurately.

And, I don't think Bush is a monster.

Heh. That's good!

I just think he has a major area of irrationality which leads him to do the wrong things sometimes.

As do we all, my friend. As do we all.

My point was simply that people who are quick to praise him specifically for his religion-guided moral sense should be a little more restrained in their praise, because that knife cuts both ways.

That's a perfectly valid point that, I now see, you'd made earlier in the thread, and I basically agree. You will note that I've not praised Bush "specifically for his religion-guided moral sense" per se, here. (Well, or anywhere. :-) Doesn't make too much sense to me to praise someone "for being religious" qua religious. (I suppose I could sign on to a weaker formulation such as, 'On balance I'd rather have a leader who seems to have some good moral center rather than being adrift, even if at times I disagree with him...' + 'American-flavor Christianity for example provides a good moral center') But really, in practice this just means I'll praise him for his moral sense when I think it's right, and not when I don't. This here happens to be a case where I don't have a firmly held opinion one way or the other, and don't have a big problem with the decision that he made. Obviously YMMV, but of course one would hope a critic'd know what Bush's actual decision *was*, before deciding to lambaste it. ;-) Best,

by a reader on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 00:00 | [reply](#)

stem cell reserach, take 2

Blix,

We call wrong views irrationalities when they are held immune to

criticism (actually this goes for true views too). Is Bush personally irrationally resistant to criticism on this point? Beats me; I haven't ever argued with him. But the tradition he identifies with, and many people who seem to be like him, are entrenched on this issue, and Bush hasn't done anything to show he isn't, so it seems a pretty safe bet he's at least somewhat irrational on the matter. (If he has done something to show he isn't, let me know. I haven't really been paying attention to that.)

Anyhow, most research he doesn't consider a moral issue, so it gets due consideration (usually by aids, or whatever you call the people who do that). But this particular research got special evaluation. And it was evaluated in terms of Bush's wrong, irrational view. This greatly increases the chance for a policy error compared with letting the normal processes handle the matter (but only because he is wrong, simply intervening isn't an error).

Given Bush's views on the matter as premises, he did do the right thing (ie, assuming he doesn't improve his views, what's the next best thing? This is it.)

Moving on, when you persistently defend Bush, with great energy, even when he does have a flaw -- well assuming when Kerry has a flaw that's overplayed, you don't come to his defense with the same energy ... then this shows a partisan bias in who you argue for. Is that bad? Well, some is OK. And I don't see a reason it would be necessarily bad. I wouldn't want to spend my time arguing for Kerry unless he was treated quite unfairly. But if your partisan approach to who you defend is too strong, people are more inclined to stop listening to you and write you off as biased. And the more you do it, the harder you may find it to keep perspective on matters yourself.

I'll be happy to call the people who made carpool lanes irrational. I do frequently call the whole damn environmental movement nuts. They are an amazingly easy target.

I understand your view that many people are far too aggressive in attacking Bush's religiousness; I think this most reveals a flaw in the attackers. And I do think Gil is one of those people. I hope to blog more pro-US-Christian, anti-atheism stuff soon.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 00:54 | [reply](#)

We call wrong views irrational

We call wrong views irrationalities when they are held immune to criticism

But who's to decide whether someone's "immune" to criticism or they just find that criticism wanting for other, perhaps quite good, reasons of their own... to diagnose "immune", at some point you still have to bring "I disagree with him and he won't change his mind and well, I think he should" into play
But the tradition he identifies with, and many people who seem to

be like him, are entrenched on this issue, and Bush hasn't done anything to show he isn't, so it seems a pretty safe bet he's at least somewhat irrational on the matter.

I would only wish to say it weaker: It's not unreasonable to *suspect* he's irrational on the matter. I don't know how safe a bet it is, actually. (Well, "somewhat" irrational is a pretty safe bet - most people are at least *somewhat* irrational about most things - but "irrational" is less safe...)

If he has done something to show he isn't, let me know.

Well, start by asking yourself, Why did Bush allow any stem-cell research at all, in the first place? Remember, ask a pro-lifer to summarize Bush's decision and they might well say "he allowed stem-cell research, the sellout". Doesn't this compromise suggest he's at least *listening to* - heck, *agrees with* - at least *partially* the arguments of non-pro-life-addled people? did you look at the link I showed Gil, where he talks about the lives that can be improved etc? You're still talking as if this decision boiled down to Banning Stem-Cell Research Because I'm Pro-Life. That's, um, totally wrong.

Anyhow, most research he doesn't consider a moral issue, so it gets due consideration (usually by aids ...

You speak of this "due consideration" as if it's necessarily a totally bias-free process because Dubya isn't participating in it. Heh... I disagree, let's leave it at that. Can't the aides have their biases too? Or is it only a Religious person like Bush who infects the sterile, impartial process of public funding?

But this particular research got special evaluation. And it was evaluated in terms of Bush's wrong, irrational view.

I'm surprised you're saying this actually. You're really trying to say that because a decision Bush made was evaluated "in terms of" Bush's wrong, irrational view, that decision is flawed? Couldn't Bush be right, accidentally?

This greatly increases the chance for a policy error compared with letting the normal processes handle the matter (but only because he is wrong, simply intervening isn't an error).

I'm not sure. I'd concede this much, *If* you think that the view Bush evaluates things "in terms of" is Wrong, then when Bush intervenes and evaluates something, it's certainly fair to strongly suspect his evaluation contains errors. However, who's to say that the process of Bush-intervening has *increased* the errors? Maybe when Bush intervenes he just replaces other, different kinds of errors (of the aides, etc., who normally evaluate things) with his own. What's the net, positive or negative? I don't know. But I'm certainly not willing to concede that the normal processes of government-funding-decisions constitute a control group.. LOL

when you persistently defend Bush, with great energy, even when

he does have a flaw

You must have misunderstood because I'm not at all sure I think that his stance on stem-cells constitutes a flaw. Obviously Bush like all people has flaws but in my view, the greater ones lie elsewhere. As things stand, although I could still be convinced otherwise, I kinda *liked* his stem-cell compromise that ticked everyone off ;-)

well assuming when Kerry has a flaw that's overplayed, you don't come to his defense with the same energy

There's no John Kerry-related issue on the table to talk about. If/when I see Kerry being unduly criticized IMO, I say something. (the "medals" thing comes to mind..) Kerry hasn't been President (yet) so I have no real policies to criticize or defend. And in this context there would be no way for me to bring John Kerry into this conversation (I can guess, but I don't actually know what his stem-cell stance is frankly) so I'm a bit puzzled why you take my lack of John Kerry-mention as indicative of something... I also haven't talked about Vladimir Putin or Britney Spears very much here, what does that mean??

this shows a partisan bias in who you argue for. Is that bad? Well, some is OK. And I don't see a reason it would be necessarily bad.

I'll go ahead and concede I probably have a partisan bias (I'd rather see Bush win than Kerry, I'll be voting for Bush, etc., so surely this influences how I talk about them). Still don't understand why you perceived it in this thread but that's ok, you're not wrong or anything :-)

But if your partisan approach to who you defend is too strong, people are more inclined to stop listening to you and write you off as biased.

That's true of course and to some extent that this would happen to me is inevitable. I honestly don't know how someone could start reading my posts here and come away thinking "but why isn't he defending John Kerry with the same energy????" however. I'd like to be able to but please explain to me how the heck I am supposed to defend John Kerry in the context of this conversation.. I could interject "by the way, John Kerry's a nice-looking man" or something, but that's about it...

I understand your view that many people are far too aggressive in attacking Bush's religiousness; I think this most reveals a flaw in the attackers. And I do think Gil is one of those people.

You have understood me more or less correctly on that note. As for Gil, I do understand him to have been making a fair point earlier, about people who "praise Bush's religiousness" en masse, and I agreed with him that that is a bit silly. (I don't know who was actually doing that in the first place, but whatever.. :) My basic point would be to say that much of the criticism against Bush is built, to an uncomfortable extent, on the pillar "..and we know him to be Religious". If Bush weren't known to be Religious some of the criticism would have to vanish. As you say, this leads to errors. A

big one on evidence here is, "since Bush is Religious, if Bush decided X, and his Religion informed that decision, then X must be wrong". Boil it down and you get: I want X to be funded because Bush doesn't. And even worse, at least some of the people saying that here **don't actually seem to know** (1) what Bush's decision actually was, (2) what it is that he declined to fund, (3) why that thing he declined to fund is so important.

Can it **really** be true that research-involving-fetal-stem-cells-from-other-than-existing-lines is desperately worth funding *because Bush decided - "in terms of" his Religion - that it shouldn't be funded???* I could be convinced this stuff needs funding but I'm gonna need a better reason than that.
best,

by a reader on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 16:02 | [reply](#)

News Events

Blixa,

One thing I forgot to mention...

My comment about changes being triggered by "news events" was about re-addressing the decision now that Reagan has died, not about the original decision, as you seem to have inferred.

Gil

by **Gil** on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 16:03 | [reply](#)

I concede

Blixa,

I concede your points about Bush and about partisan bias.

I don't agree with the epistemology of saying Bush might be right accidentally. It's possible, but everything else balanced, **if** he was wrong, and acted on this wrong view, it makes sense to expect mistakes.

Also you say irrationalities come down to "I think X person is irrational". Well, you could add "the speaker thinks" to **all** claims. Therefore, the fact that you can doesn't seem to me an argument against any claim.

I believe the people Gil considers to praise Bush's religiousness objectionably include **The World** and myself. Dunno who else though.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 17:39 | [reply](#)

****if** he was wrong, and acted**

**if* he was wrong, and acted on this wrong view, it makes sense to expect mistakes.*

Fair enough, as I've acknowledged. However, for the most part people in public office are wrong and act on wrong views, like, a lot. Why are some people so mad about this **particular** kind of mistake (if that's what it is)? Cuz he's/it's Religious. no? They can tolerate all other kinds of mistakes not known to come from a Religion (that's just "normal") but the obviously or admittedly Religious kind, must be immediately weeded out with high priority.

I believe this is an error.

Also, if it's not ok to say Bush could be right accidentally, then I'm gonna hafta say that neither are **The World** or Gil right accidentally. That is, they've been trying to make a point about X needing to be funded, but they don't know all that much about X (at least it's not evident that they know much more than I do.), they distorted Bush's actual decision, they (well **The World** did) deliberately overstate the benefits (painting potentialities as sure things), and their reasons for thinking it should be funded (for objecting to Bush's decision not to fund it) contain a heavy dose of anti-Religion stuff (it's **almost** as if they want it to be funded **because Bush doesn't wanna due to his Religion** isn't it?). So why can't I say, When approaching the issue "should stem-cell research be federally funded with no restrictions?", **The World**/Gil used a wrong view. So even if it's **true** that "stem-cell research should be federally funded with no restrictions", an epistemology granting **The World**/Gil credit for being "right" about that is flawed, and thus the claim is open to question.

*Also you say irrationalities come down to "I think X person is irrational". Well, you could add "the speaker thinks" to **all** claims. Therefore, the fact that you can doesn't seem to me an argument against any claim.*

Remember though that the claim was "Bush is irrational". I wasn't trying to argue against that claim in the first place let alone use this as a reason to argue against it. Bush may be irrational, in fact I'm sure he is on many many things if not most things.

But on stem-cell in particular? You'd explained "irrational" to me in terms of, being "immune" to counterarguments (basically). As we both agree apparently, that requires a judgment call. By identifying that judgment call I do not mean to say that this constitutes a proof that Bush is **not** irrational on this. All I mean to say is that it remains a judgment call, and I'm still left with no (for lack of better term) "objective" means of declaring (or anyway being forced to concede) Bush is "immune" to counterargument.

And while apparently you believe Bush is immune to counterargument (and thus irrational) on this subject, on reflection, I do not. (He is certainly **resistant**, presumably, to counterevidence but I don't believe he is "immune" especially given that his decision was **not** in line totally with the pro-life dogma.)

So he's not irrational here, I say. Your move...? "is too"?

by a reader on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 18:35 | [reply](#)

Gil, That clears it up, ye

Gil,

That clears it up, yes. Thanks. Best,

by a reader on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 18:49 | [reply](#)

Bush's Irrationality

Blixa,

The reason that *I* think Bush is irrational on this subject is that I think his position is strongly influenced by the idea that killing a human embryo is very similar, ethically, to killing a born human.

It's not merely that I think he's wrong about this. I think that idea is one that is the accepted doctrine of his religion and is not subject to criticism in his mind. I don't think that there are any new facts or arguments that could convince him that he's wrong about this. So, if this idea is false, he has no way of being right about a policy that depends upon his knowing that it is false.

Gil

by **Gil** on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 19:49 | [reply](#)

*light bulb goes on in Blixa'

light bulb goes on in Blixa's head

I now see your point, Gil. The claim being that Bush is irrational *about embryos being morally very similar to born human life*, *not* that he's irrational *about whether stem-cell research involving new embryos ought to be funded*. Got it. Thanks for the clarification and the light-bulb, and sorry for being dense there (to you too, Elliot).

Yes, I agree completely that Bush is irrational on *that* - about his notion of the moral status of embryos.

However, I don't agree that that makes his stem-cell decision wrong ("he has no way of being right"). Being right on whether new-embryo stem-cell research ought to be funded does *not* depend on knowing that "the moral status of embryos is very similar to that of born humans" is false. One can know it's false but at the same time think that the moral status of embryos is *not* completely vacuous or irrelevant*, or that other derivative ethical or unintended-consequence issues may arise, and thus still end up agreeing with Bush's decision, because it was a compromise and did allow the funding of some research, but on a limited, controlled basis. (And there's still that whole issue of, Research *can* actually

happen without the US taxpayers funding it, so one could even

agree with Bush's decision on a grumpy libertarian "the gov't doesn't have to fund a damn thing so who cares, if he's withholding funds, I'm fer it" rationale which makes no reference to morality or Frankenstein horror stories whatsoever...)

In short there are people (I am one) who agree with Bush's decision without totally sharing his views on the moral status of an embryo. How can that be? Well, one resolution is to say that although we didn't start from wrong premises as Bush did, we simply must be wrong in our conclusion, because in agreeing with the conclusion of a Religious person who (therefore) "has no way of being right", we're just automatically wrong anyway, whatever that conclusion was.

In other words, if a Religious person comes to conclusion X and Religion played a known role in that conclusion, X is wrong.

That is precisely the reasoning I've been objecting to.

by a reader on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 20:33 | [reply](#)

Meeting of Minds

Great.

I think we're on the same page now.

I have NOT been making the argument that you've been objecting to.

I'm actually one of those grumpy libertarians who is against this funding anyway.

But, what I'm leery of is a president who may make numerous policy mistakes (e.g. gay marriage amendment, Supreme Court nominations with an eye toward overturning legal abortions, FCC censorship, etc.) because the policy involves areas of irrationality that he has due to his religion.

It's true that everybody has areas of irrationality, and I'm leery of those other areas too! Religious irrationality is just one that's easy to identify, and one that I consider to be under-estimated by some.

Gil

by **Gil** on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 22:39 | [reply](#)

If Religious-guy's irrational

If Religious-guy's irrationalities lead him to make X policy good-thingies (what's opposite of "mistake"? ;) and Y policy mistakes, and X is greater (and Y smaller) than for typical non-Religious guy (with *his* associated irrationalities, whatever they are), couldn't we come out ahead w/the Religious guy? Perhaps (I dunno) that's what people (which people BTW?) mean by the "praising religion" stuff you've perceived and are arguing against. I'm not saying that this applies to Bush, but hey. The point is that "it's good his religion

guides him morally" (who said this BTW?) isn't refuted by observing one or seven errors that result. If Bush's religion based worldview still guides him correctly *more than average*, or *more than the next guy*, or *on certain important things*, or whatever (relative!) metric you want to use, the claim can still have merit.

I'm glad you're not making the argument I object to, but then you're still left needing to explain why Bush's was a "policy mistake" in the first place. And hint: you can't use "because it was based on his flawed thinking about morality of using embryos". Remember, you're not making the argument I object to.

I agree that Religion is one of the most visible/easy to spot sources of irrationality but it seems whack to claim that it's underestimated as such. If anything it's easy-to-spot'ness would lead to it being *overestimated* as a source of irrationality, it seems to me. Which was kinda my point actually.

Best,

by a reader on Wed, 06/09/2004 - 23:47 | [reply](#)

To anyone still here.

Interesting article

"PEOPLE NEED A FAIRY TALE," Ronald D.G. McKay, a stem cell researcher at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, told Washington Post reporter Rick Weiss, explaining why scientists have allowed society to believe **wrongly** that stem cells are likely to effectively treat Alzheimer's disease. "Maybe that's unfair, but they need a story line that's relatively simple to understand."

[...]

Researchers have apparently known for some time that embryonic stem cells will not be an effective treatment for Alzheimer's, because as two researchers told a Senate subcommittee in May, it is a "whole brain disease," rather than a cellular disorder (such as Parkinson's).

Nancy Reagan has cruelly been told a fairy tale, and is being used. The death of her husband is being used, including here on STWTR, and it is cruel.

by a reader on Thu, 06/10/2004 - 19:58 | [reply](#)

Stem Cell Research

President Bush is irrationally hostile, not to stem cell research but to experimentation on human embryos, just as his coreligionists in the 19th century were irrationally hostile to experimentation on human corpses. Although there are no doubt alternatives to both types of experiment, it is wrong to be hostile to them and harmful to use the force of law to discriminate against them compared with

any other scientific research. Science makes better progress, including progress on curing Alzheimer's, if it uses scientific criteria and genuine morality, not ancient taboos, to choose what lines of research to pursue.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Fri, 06/11/2004 - 13:24 | [reply](#)

It's the hyperbole

President Bush is irrationally hostile, not to stem cell research but to experimentation on human embryos, just as...

Another "just as" you could've written is, "just as many people nowadays are irrationally hostile to experimenting on live human beings". But you didn't. I don't think it makes sense to paint all irrational opposition to all things as equally harmful or draw analogies which obscure important differences.

it is wrong to be hostile to them and harmful to use the force of law to discriminate against them compared with any other scientific research.

He is not using the "force of law" to discriminate against embryonic stem-cell research. There is no law in the US against conducting embryonic stem-cell research of which I am aware.

He is declining to fund stem-cell research with public monies. Not the same thing. Alternatively, yes you could say (if a bit awkwardly) he is "using the force of law to discriminate against" the FUNDING of such research, but again, discrimination is inevitable (in fact necessary) when deciding what to fund with public monies, and the "force of law" part of that equation is redundant, he wouldn't *have* this money to dish out if not for the "force of law" in the first place. To dish out public monies to a research scientist is, inherently, to use the "force of law" so if you accept publicly-funded research you can't take the "force of law" part out of it.

Another thing left out of this discussion was that the decision not to fund embryo research was originally made by Congress, it springs out of a law passed back in the '80s IIRC. (Aren't any of you the least bit curious why a U.S. President can unilaterally make such a decision? Because he is issuing a judgment about how he will enforce an **act of Congress**.) To wish/wait for a US President who will just, golly, interpret that law to bring about the result you want, may be a Pyrrhic victory if you get it. (Could lead to a counter-reaction - as perhaps Bush has done in his Presidency after Clinton had been "interpreting" the law more loosely...). A much, much better way would be to seek to change the **public's** minds so that they, through their Congress, would authorize this funding less restrictedly, as you think (or assume anyway) makes more scientific and moral sense. This would legitimize the decision in the public's mind - we do have a democracy, after all. So the people you ought to be making your pitch to are the voters, not Bush.

However, in making your case, if you engage in hyperbole and tell

fairy tales to grieving widows to use as spokesmen-props, this (rightfully!) lessens the force of your argument and you just might find yourself back where you started - or worse - if/when people find out about the dishonesty.

Science makes better progress, including progress on curing Alzheimer's, if it uses scientific criteria and genuine morality, not ancient taboos, to choose what lines of research to pursue.

Do you have any good reason to use the word "Alzheimer's" in this discussion?

Does science make good "progress" if its advocates lie and exaggerate and trick the public in order to get their hands on the public's money?

I would be much more interested in a discussion of why Bush's embryo stance (which, again, I don't really agree with) is not "genuine morality" and, what is. Presumably such a discussion would not employ hyperbole about Alzheimer's in an effort to score points off of Ronald Reagan's death.

by a reader on Fri, 06/11/2004 - 16:25 | [reply](#)

Presumably

Presumably presidential hyperbole, if it is in fact a presidential stand on stem cell research, would not make a specific issue about stem cell research unless there is some specific scientific objection to stem cell research, or rather, question public funding of scientific research in general. But that's politics for 'ya.

As to religion:

How many angels can dance on the head of a stem cell?

41?

by a reader on Fri, 06/11/2004 - 18:15 | [reply](#)

Hyperbole

It must be because it is human embryo stem cells that the president is involved. Not human hair follicles or human dna. Hence the hyperbole:

Save The Human Stem Cells! Or was that, Discard The Human Stem Cells!?

Next those nasty scientists will be digging up graves in the night, or even experimenting on microscopic embryos trying to figure out stuff.

Correction, human stem cells, not human embryos, please disregard the hyperbole.

by a reader on Fri, 06/11/2004 - 18:37 | [reply](#)

A good thing

This is a good thing: **UK to clone human cells.**

Opposition to it is bad. Opposition to it by politicians, such as Anne Widdecombe and George Bush, is especially bad. All opposition to it is irrational.

The UK team seeking the go-ahead for the controversial experiment is led by Dr Miodrag Stojkovic, of Newcastle University. He plans to create dozens of cloned embryos using the same nuclear transfer technique that was employed by the scientists who created Dolly the sheep.

The cloned embryos will initially be exploited as sources of stem cells for treating diabetes patients.

'This is a great opportunity,' Stojkovic told The Observer last night. 'We are focusing on diabetes, but believe our work could lead to cures for other diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Our intention is not to create cloned humans, but to save lives.'

I don't think he's lying or exaggerating.

by **David Deutsch** on Sun, 06/13/2004 - 02:28 | [reply](#)

Force of Law

'President Bush is irrationally hostile, not to stem cell research but to experimentation on human embryos, just as his coreligionists in the 19th century were irrationally hostile to experimentation on human corpses.'

'Another "just as" you could've written is, "just as many people nowadays are irrationally hostile to experimenting on live human beings". But you didn't. I don't think it makes sense to paint all irrational opposition to all things as equally harmful or draw analogies which obscure important differences.'

It is irrational to be hostile to experimentation on live human beings who give their consent. However, the reason why that particular just as was appropriate is that both corpses and embryonic stem cells are not thinking human beings, they are lumps of organic material that happen to be useful. Experimentation on live human beings brings up different issues.

'it is wrong to be hostile to them and harmful to use the force of law to discriminate against them compared with any other scientific research.'

'He is not using the "force of law" to discriminate against embryonic stem-cell research. There is no law in the US against conducting embryonic stem-cell research of which I am aware.'

He is, by legally banning the use of public money for stem cell research. If the government is going to extort money from people in the form of taxes, by making people pay it using the law (hence

force of law) the only way this can be even slightly legitimate is if they don't block lines of research because of an irrational 'feeling in their water' or whatever Bush's current excuse of the week happens to be.

by **Alan Forrester** on Sun, 06/13/2004 - 15:09 | [reply](#)

A Flaw Is A Flaw

Alan,

I haven't checked (but it seems you haven't either). But if I had to guess at Bush's "excuse of the week" (which hasn't I bet hasn't changed for decades), it is: he thinks the embryos are partially human. Much like many people think animals are partially human. Would you say PETA's rationale is a "feeling in the water"? I wouldn't.

PS Wanna source that legal ban you mention? I tried Google and didn't spot any obvious headlines of that nature.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 06/13/2004 - 20:14 | [reply](#)

source plz, dd

David,

got a source on bush's opposition to that cloning thing?

also, even taking some proposition as true as a premise, it's possible to oppose it rationally, by simply being mistaken.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 06/13/2004 - 23:17 | [reply](#)

Re: source plz, dd

Remarks by the President on Stem Cell Research.

Read it and weep.

by **David Deutsch** on Mon, 06/14/2004 - 00:08 | [reply](#)

Alan Forrester, If the go

Alan Forrester,

If the government is going to extort money from people in the form of taxes, by making people pay it using the law (hence force of law) the only way this can be even slightly legitimate is if they don't block lines of research because of an irrational 'feeling in their water' or whatever Bush's current excuse of the week happens to

be.

Policy makers are going to block lines of research for irrational reasons no matter what. Every single funding decision they make contains a healthy dose of irrationality as (at least) a part of its justification, and blocks the funding of some other line of research. (Even in cases where you think funding X is perfectly rational and can make a good rational argument for funding X with precisely the priority that they do, chances are the key vote for making that funding decision was swung by promising to build a highway in some Congressman's state or whatever.)

I suppose all this icky irrationality being part of the process could be part of an argument for why using public monies to fund scientific research at all is unjustifiable. (That is not my view BTW.) To single out for criticism the irrationality influencing one funding decision and not all the others, however, is odd to me.

Is the obsession with this decision anything other than "Because Bush Used Religion"? If not - if there were some objective reason to focus on this irrational funding decision to the exclusion of all others - one would think you, or someone anyway, would have ready answers to questions such as:

- why are embryonic stem cells in particular so necessary?
- what is wrong with the existing lines of embryonic stem cells, i.e. what research needs cannot be met by them?

Since this research is so urgently pressing and all to people here, said people presumably have these answers at the ready in their minds. Yet no one has shared those answers. I cannot easily explain why. Best,

by a reader on Mon, 06/14/2004 - 18:47 | [reply](#)

some answers to the questions in the above comment

are here [Dean Fischbach's Testimony Before Congress](#)

by a reader on Mon, 06/14/2004 - 19:15 | [reply](#)

Why We Care

We are not upset because the irrationality is religious.

We're upset because Bush is our leader, and we do not have a better leader, and we wish Bush was better.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Mon, 06/14/2004 - 19:26 | [reply](#)
