

'An Unknowable Atom of Human Flesh'

Henry Hyde and Joe Barton on the Ethics of Stem Cell Research

On May 24, 2005, the House of Representatives voted on legislation related to stem cell research—including H.R. 810, the Castle-DeGette bill, which authorizes federal funding for research involving the destruction of IVF embryos left-over in fertility clinics.

Several hours of debate preceded the vote on H.R. 810. Among the final speakers were two Republicans on different sides of the issue—Henry Hyde of Illinois and Joe Barton of Texas. Representative Hyde's remarks were a paragon of dignified moral rhetoric; Representative Barton's were a muddle, packed with factual inaccuracies and astonishing moral incoherence. We reproduce both men's comments below, excerpted from the Congressional Record.

Rep. Hyde: Mr. Speaker, the reason this vote is so important is simply because the embryo is human life. It is not animal, it is not vegetable, it is not mineral, but a tiny, microscopic beginning of a human life.

Everyone in this room was an embryo at one time. I, myself, am a

982-month-old embryo. The question we face is how much respect is due to this tiny little microscopic human life. If we are truly pro-life, we should protect it rather than treat it as a thing to be experimented with.

Lincoln asked a very haunting question at a small military cemetery in Pennsylvania. He asked whether a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal can long endure. And that question has to be answered by every generation.

What is wrong with this legislation? The motives of its sponsors are so noble. Well, I will tell you two things that are fatally wrong with this legislation. The first one is, for the first time in our national history, taxpayers' dollars are going to be spent for the killing of innocent human life. That is number one. And number two, this bill tramples on the moral convictions of an awful lot of people who do not want their tax dollars going to be spent for killing innocent human life.

Americans paid a terrible price for not recognizing the humanity of Dred Scott. We are going to pay a terrible price for not recognizing the humanity of these little embryos. We should not go down that road.

In World War II, 1940, before America got in the war, there was a publication called the *Yearbook of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. And Dr. Joseph DeLee wrote in that yearbook something that applies to us today. Here is what he wrote:

“At the present time, when rivers of blood and tears of innocent men and women are flowing in most parts of the world, it seems almost silly to be contending over the right to life of an unknowable atom of human flesh in the uterus of a woman.

“No, it is not silly. On the contrary, it is of transcendent importance that there be in this chaotic world one high spot, however small, which is safe against the deluge of immorality and savagery that is sweeping over us.

“That we, in the medical profession, hold to the principle of the sacredness of human life and the rights of the individual, even though unborn, is proof that humanity is not yet lost.”

I believe humanity is not yet lost, and this vote will tell us the answer to that question.

Rep. Barton: Although I am going to vote for Castle-DeGette, I do not necessarily speak as an advocate for its passage as much as I want to speak about why I have decided to vote for it.

I respect Members on both sides of this issue. I made sure that members of

the committee I chair, the Committee on Energy and Commerce, regardless of their position, had an opportunity to speak and put their comments on the record.

I come at this as a 100 percent pro-life, lifetime, voting member of Congress. As I said earlier, this will be my second vote this year where I have not adopted the pro-life position. So I am not quite 100 percent any more—but I would think that 99.8 percent over 21 years qualifies me as a pro-life Congressman.

I have also voted numerous times for our defense bill, where we have voted hundreds of billions of dollars to defend our nation and put our young men and women at risk, some of them that might have to give up their lives. I have voted for many bills for our law enforcement officials, where again they may have to give up their lives to protect the common good.

Now, you might say, “Yes, but in those instances they were adults and they had free will and they voluntarily made a choice that they might have to sacrifice their lives.” Well, I accept and support that an embryo is a life. I agree with the gentleman from New Jersey [Republican Rep. Mike Ferguson] that we were all embryos once. I understand that. And, obviously, at seven days or fourteen days, embryos do not have consciousness. They do not have free will. They do not have the neural cells or brain cells to make a decision whether they want to voluntarily make a sacrifice. I understand that.

But I would say this: If they *did*, out

of the 400,000 that we think may be in existence, if you narrow that down to the 2.8 percent that the gentleman from Texas [House Majority Leader Tom DeLay] talked about that are probably not going to be used for reproductive purposes—if they did, would not *some* of them, knowing the stakes, volunteer? It only takes one, the right one, that magic silver bullet embryo that creates that magic stem cell that can be replicated into any of the 200 cell lines that make up the human body.

If I had that opportunity, might I not take advantage of it? Somebody would. And since they cannot, because they do not have consciousness, under a traditional law in this United States of

America we give custody to the parents. A parent will make a decision at some point in time, or a family member will make a decision at some point in time that perhaps they do not want to put up for adoption, which is the decision I would make.

Why not? In addition to the cord blood bill that we have just passed, why not make it possible for some of these under the conditions in the Castle-DeGette bill for some to be used for research purposes. It does not take many. I respect those who say, no, you cannot do it at all. But I also say given a choice, let us err on the side of opportunity. That is why I am going to vote “yes.”