THE NEW ATLANTIS
A JOURNAL OF TECHNOLOGY & SOCIETY

Looking Back

The Stem Cell President

Five years ago this summer, in his first major address to the nation, President Bush announced his policy on the federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. The fact that stem cells had assumed such a prominent place in our public life seemed a harbinger of things to come—the first great skirmish in the coming age of biotechnology. Of course, only a few weeks later, America would suffer the horrible attacks of September 11. The moral challenges of bioethics seemed far less urgent than the existential threat of terrorism. The need to ensure that scientific progress always served ethical ends by ethical means seemed less important than making the case for political progress abroad, in regimes and regions that yearned to live out their death wish for modernity using modernity's deadliest weapons.

But while we continue to focus largely on the threats from without, it is fitting that, five years later, we have just finished another round in the great bioethics debate within—with Congress calling for increased federal funding for embryo-destructive research, and President Bush defending (by veto) the principle that the federal government should not promote and encourage the ongoing destruction of human embryos.

Very few policies in recent times have been as morally complex—or politically misunderstood—as the Bush stem cell policy. On August 9, 2001, President Bush announced that any embryonic stem cell lines already in existence, where the embryos in question had already been destroyed, would be eligible for federal funding. There are 78 eligible "derivations," but as of now only 21 available and usable "Bush lines." Of course, there is nothing intrinsically sacred about August 9, 2001. But by fixing the date of eligibility, the Bush policy made clear that those who continued to destroy human embryos would not be rewarded with federal funds.

Yet for all the energies spent defending it, the Bush policy was always limited in scope and somewhat problematic in effect. It has done nothing to stop embryo destruction with private dollars or state funds. And it directly rewards those researchers who first destroyed human embryos, including corporations who now benefit from the patents they own on the eligible stem cell lines. True, there are moral grounds for benefiting from past misdeeds, but doing so requires erecting firm boundaries against their continued propagation. Nearly five years later, no such boundaries exist.

In an imperfect world filled with imperfect men, no policy is perfect. Given where we are, the Bush stem cell policy at least offers the tacit moral teaching that some moral boundaries do not move even to accommodate the advance of promising science. To concede this moral line, limited as it is, is to concede the principle that all lines are movable, and that even fundamental principles like human equality and human dignity are contingent on the latest experimental possibilities. But whatever one thinks about the moral merits or hazards of embryo research, the Bush policy finally forced the nation to confront the moral challenges of biotechnology with the seriousness they deserve.