

Science Warrior

Hillary Clinton Leaves the Facts Behind

Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton chose October 4, 2007, the fiftieth anniversary of the launch of Sputnik, as the occasion for laying out her presidential campaign's science agenda. Her speech at the Carnegie Institution for Science began with much elevated talk of America's leadership in science and technology, and the promise of new frontiers in human knowledge. But her key theme was a pledge to rescue American science from the fierce and brutal grip of the Bush administration. It was a stark rehearsal of the Democratic litany against President Bush's science policy—and as usual for the genre, it was sorely lacking in proof, logic, clarity, and sense.

"Instead of fostering a climate of discovery and innovation," Clinton told the assembled audience of researchers and supporters, "the Bush administration has declared war on science." Rather than letting facts shape policy, she argued, "they've tried to turn Washington into an evidence-free zone." But, perhaps as ironic proof of that very proposition, the Senator's own remarks were themselves blissfully free of reliable evidence.

She spoke, without detail, of "muzzled experts" and "suppressed reports," of packed scientific panels and wicked schemes to contaminate children's lunch boxes with lead. But when she got down to particulars, her charges just didn't hold up. She accused

President Bush of "banning the most promising kinds of stem cell research," when in fact he has banned *no* kind of research and has, on the contrary, offered federal funding for embryonic stem cell research for the first time, albeit under rules that avoid the use of taxpayer dollars to encourage the further destruction of embryos.

Continuing at some length on the question of stem cells, she argued that

Within these cells may lie the cures for Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, spinal cord injuries, diabetes, Huntington's and more. One hundred million Americans live with these conditions—and their families live with them, too.

It is difficult to understand how so many seemingly serious people in the past few years could repeat this ludicrous figure—that one third of all Americans have a deadly or debilitating condition—but it is not difficult at all to show the claim has no basis in fact. Indeed, the very scientific community that Clinton sees herself defending has regularly dismissed these figures as unfounded. Last year, in a written exchange following a congressional hearing, Representative Mark Souder (R.-Ind.) asked Dr. James Battey, then director of the NIH task force on stem cells, about this number:

Rep. Souder: A common figure tossed around regarding the

promise of embryonic stem cell research is that it can provide cures for 100 million people. Is there any scientific evidence to actually support that claim?

Dr. Battey: It is unclear where this statistic came from. Human embryonic stem cell research is a relatively new field of science, having been first reported by James Thomson at the University of Wisconsin in 1998. More basic research needs to be conducted in the laboratory before the full potential for treating diseases is clear.

Senator Clinton apparently decided not to wait for the evidence. And her speech also included patently dishonest distortions of some evidence that *does* exist on stem cell research. She said,

One report recently found that the percentage of research papers on embryonic stem cell science authored by researchers in the United States has dropped from more than a third of all published to roughly one quarter in just three years. And that negative trend may continue.

Actually, as we have discussed before in these pages, the report (published in *Nature Biotechnology* in April 2006) showed a massive American lead in the field, and significant growth in the number of embryonic stem cell publications every year since 2001—when Senator Clinton insists the

research was “banned” in America. Moreover, a more recent paper (in the October 2006 issue of the journal *Stem Cells*) found that America’s lead is not only enormous but holding steady. Between 1998 and 2005, this paper shows, 40 percent of human embryonic stem cell publications came from the United States. The rest were divided among twenty other nations, with the next nearest competitor (Israel) claiming only 13 percent of the papers. Hardly dark days for American stem cell researchers, and surely not a “negative trend.”

Candidate Clinton’s distortions did not end with stem cells. Among other claims, she asserted that President Bush does not have a science advisor, which must come as news to Dr. John Marburger, the president’s science advisor. And she promised to increase funding for the National Science Foundation and have “new fellowships at the National Science Foundation to allow math and science professionals to become teachers in high-need schools”—both of which are ideas President Bush proposed in his State of the Union address in 2006.

In fact, despite Senator Clinton’s claims to the contrary, research funding has risen under President Bush. Overall funding for science by this administration, adjusted for inflation, has been roughly double that of President Bill Clinton’s administration. It has also risen during the Bush administration as a percentage of the nation’s GDP, after having declined in the Clinton years.

Concluding her lengthy train of accusations, Mrs. Clinton quoted a comedian. “To paraphrase Stephen Colbert,” she told the audience, “this administration doesn’t make decisions on facts.” Well, as it happens, Mrs. Clinton appears not to make speeches on facts.

Beyond inaccuracy, moreover, there was also a healthy dose of hypocrisy in the speech. Senator Clinton accused the Bush administration of “overruling doctors and the FDA on emergency contraception,” a reference to the so-called “Plan B” drug approved for over-the-counter use by adults in 2006. In reality, the only political pressure exerted over that controversial decision came from Clinton herself. When the FDA, assessing the consequences of making the powerful drug available without a prescription, took what she considered too long to make its decision, she pursued a form of political blackmail. Together with fellow Democratic Senator Patty Murray, Clinton threatened to hold up the nomination of a new FDA Commissioner—leaving the agency in a state of limbo for many months—until the FDA reached a decision to their liking. Only when such a decision was made did they allow Dr. Andrew von Eschenbach to be confirmed.

The most interesting parts of Clinton’s speech, though, were her notions of the proper relationship between science and politics. “Ending the war on science and once again valuing the ever-skeptical but always

hopeful scientific enterprise is about more than our economy,” she said, “it’s about more than our security; it is about our democracy.” But how, exactly?

Surely science can and should inform democratic decision-making, but should science replace it? Should the FDA act alone to make decisions about whether the federal government should endorse the easy availability of emergency contraceptives to young girls? Is the NIH suited to deciding solo if taxpayer dollars should fund the destruction of human embryos for research? Does climate science by itself tell us what tradeoffs are worthwhile in the effort to address global warming?

A few years ago, in a congressional hearing on FDA oversight, Democrat Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District of Columbia’s delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives, bemoaned just as Clinton did “the unmitigated politicization of the one area that Americans always held off from politics, and that is science itself.” Referring to some recent controversies, Norton continued: “Whether Schiavo or creationism, renamed Intelligent Design, or stem cell research or, God help us, global warming itself, there are views floating around this Congress that essentially reach conclusions on these matters of huge scientific moment, based on their own personal beliefs.”

The question for Clinton, and for Democrats more generally, is whether their science policy aims simply to put

science above policy and keep “personal beliefs”—about ethics, economics, prudence, and indeed even politics—out of democratic decision-making in areas that touch somehow on scientific questions. Clinton’s speech and past

behavior offer cause for serious concern on this front.

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