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For Nancy, back stem cells

I swore I wasn't going to do yet another "Reagan column" this week, but here I am writing about what could be a perpetual legacy for the former president. That is, of course, if the keepers of the conservative revolution he spawned will listen to the staunchest defender of his legacy, his wife.

Former President Reagan was both an idealist and a pragmatist. He believed in America's ability to do just about anything, and he was pragmatic enough to know that the conservative beliefs professed by some get in the way of our ability to achieve our goals. He did, after all, run up deficits, raise taxes and reach out to Mikhail Gorbachev to achieve greater goals. And he succeeded.

For several years, former first lady Nancy Reagan has quietly opposed restrictions on stem-cell research and advocated a more aggressive pursuit of cures for Alzheimer's, spinal-cord injuries, diabetes, Parkinson's, heart disease and potentially dozens of other devastating ailments. A few weeks ago, as noted here previously, Mrs. Reagan first went public with the message that administration policy should change. Her poignant reference to watching her husband slowly slip away to a place she could no longer reach him made clear the pain that is felt in every American family.

There is someone suffering in all our families who could be helped by stem-cell-based cures. She knows that this is one time when abstract religious or political theory should not stand in the way of progress.

President Bush and his advisers have hewn close to the orthodoxy of the religious right with their opposition to stem-cell research, the single most important therapy with the potential to cure the Alzheimer's disease that finally defeated former President Reagan. Not only has Bush fashioned a false "compromise" that greatly restricts the stem-cell lines available to federally funded researchers, he is actively supporting a dangerous treaty proposal in the United Nations that would stall research worldwide. This in spite of

the fact that the president's own director of the National Institutes of Health has acknowledged that administration policy is slowing development of therapies in the United States.

Last week, a historic scientific panel gathered at the United Nations to argue that the treaty submitted by Costa Rica and enthusiastically supported by the Bush administration threatens to stifle research into stem-cell therapies worldwide. This comes at a time when researchers in Australia, Korea, the United Kingdom and here in America are making tremendous progress in using both adult and embryonic stem cells in finding cures for disease.

To listen to these panelists, organized by the Genetics Policy Institute (GPI) and the U.N. Asian Group of Legal Experts Meeting, one is consistently struck by two parallel themes: Everyone is opposed to human cloning. Everyone believes that stem-cell research (sometimes called therapeutic cloning) can save or improve millions of lives. (In the interest of full disclosure, GPI is a client. We helped organize the U.N. event but had no control over content.)

An international ban on human cloning is easy to achieve and relatively easy to enforce. Just as the international community has controlled recombinant-DNA procedures and regulated in vitro fertilization, multinational cooperation can protect us against human cloning projects. They are immoral, impractical and the stuff of charlatan claims, not real science.

Embryonic stem-cell research simply uses a small cluster of cells that could be used to implant in a womb but have been scheduled for destruction because the donors have already conceived children through in vitro fertilization and have no further use for the cells. This seven-day-old grouping of cells has the ability to form any cells in the human body. Thus, the cells can potentially replace damaged spinal-cord cells, grow healthy heart cells and recreate the neural connections in brain cells damaged by Alzheimer's.

Nancy Reagan has spent a decade living with the effects of a devastating illness that these stem cells have the potential to cure. There could be no more fitting legacy to her loyal and steadfast support of her husband than for all Americans, conservatives included, to rally round her support of this research. And there certainly could be no more fitting tribute to the president who lost the memory of all he accomplished than to find a cure so no other American would have to enter that dark, empty room.

It is the kind of pragmatic conservatism he would have embraced in life. Let's embrace it for Nancy Reagan in hers.

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