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Senator Frist Shifts Position on Stem Cells

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Senator Bill Frist (R-TN), the Senate Majority Leader, has broken with the White House and will support wider use of tax dollars to support embryonic stem-cell research. In a lengthy speech delivered yesterday to the Senate, Sen. Frist announced that he would support the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2005, even as President George W. Bush has promised to veto the bill.

Sen. Frist's shift on this important issue is very disappointing. Until now, he had supported the guidelines set down by President Bush in 2001 — guidelines he had helped to develop. In explaining why he now backs a move to force a change in the President's policy, Sen. Frist said that he had been disappointed in the total number of stem cell lines made available under the policy.

In his speech [see text], Sen. Frist said, "While human embryonic stem cell research is still at a very early stage, the limitations put in place in 2001 will, over time, slow our ability to bring potential new treatments for certain diseases. Therefore, I believe the President's policy should be modified. We should expand federal funding (and thus NIH oversight) and current guidelines governing stem cell research, carefully and thoughtfully staying within ethical bounds." Obviously, everything depends on the exact nature of these "ethical bounds" and the effectiveness of oversight. The bottom line is that Sen. Frist believes that using additional stem cells derived from human embryos fits within the "ethical bounds" he would both propose and accept. He claims to believe that life begins at conception, but he also supports the use of stem cells that would necessarily involve the destruction of human embryos. At one point in his speech he referred to human embryos as "nascent human life." Just how does he understand "nascent" in this context? How does this differ in ethical considerations from *non-nascent* human life? Senator Frist's shift is inconsistent and his new position is ethically untenable.

COVERAGE: The New York Times, The Washington Post [editorial praising Sen. Frist], Chicago Tribune, The Boston Globe [editorial praising Sen. Frist], The Denver Post [yet another positive editorial], The Boston Globe [political analysis], Los Angeles Times, The New York Times [political analysis], Reuters, The Washington Post [analysis], Baptist Press, The Weekly Standard.

RESPONSES: Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity.

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