

Jeff Smith on Reproductive Rights

As a lifelong sympathizer with the struggle to win social, economic, and political justice for women, I unequivocally support women's rights to exercise control over their bodies. While I understand that good people disagree on this issue, the women facing an unwanted pregnancy should have ultimate authority over that decision without government intervention.

Unfortunately, the current administration is doing all it can to interfere with this right. George W. Bush has been pushing to appoint ultra-conservative justices to Federal Courts since he was elected. Fortunately, the hard work of a Democratic Senatorial Minority has blocked his efforts so far. But even on the less controversial issue of contraception, Bush's ideology falls far right of the norm. Right now, Bush and his radical, right-wing ideologues are trying to prevent access to a drug that actually prevents abortions. The FDA is considering approval of the emergency contraceptive, PlanB® ("the morning-after pill"), for over-the-counter distribution. The vast majority of experts on the FDA's exploratory committee have recommended increased access to PlanB®, but four Bush appointees to the committee are dissenting loudly. It is clear from Bush's pandering to the radical right and his statements in an Oct. 28th 2003 press conference that he will move to ban abortion as soon as he believes it is politically feasible.

We also face erosions of women's reproductive rights at the state level. In Missouri, existing law requires that all women undergo an extensive informed consent process prior to receiving an abortion. Women see counselors, receive a medical assessment, and are informed of the risks associated with their procedure. Then, they must wait another full day.

The delay is especially burdensome to the most disadvantaged women who earn little income, live in rural areas, raise their families alone, lack transportation, or live in abusive relationships. Today, there are only 3 abortion providers in MO, so many patients must travel over 200 miles to reach a Planned Parenthood clinic. The mandatory waiting period often results in delays that increase costs, time away from family and work, and need for childcare. And worse, the delay actually causes an increase in later and second trimester abortion, actually increasing the risk of harm to the mother's health. In Mississippi, there was a 53% increase in second trimester abortions in the year after a waiting period law was enacted.

The Missouri law is being challenged in court and a judge has issued an injunction barring its enforcement during the challenge. As a candidate and as Congressman, I will do everything in my power to ensure that misguided paternalism does not affect a woman's right to control her reproductive life.

Sex Education

Though I distrust government interaction in the area of reproductive rights, there is something we can do together to prevent unwanted pregnancies: offer realistic and comprehensive sexual education.

But the Bush Administration has instead chosen to keep our youth in the dark. This fiscal year, the Bush administration proposed a \$33 million increase in funding for abstinence-only education, despite copious evidence that such programs fail to produce positive results - and, in fact, may lead to more teen pregnancies.

One quarter of STD infections occur among people aged 15-19. One half of HIV/AIDS infections occur among people under 25. And, of the 900,000 teen pregnancies that occur every year in America only $\frac{1}{4}$ are planned. Meanwhile, in Europe -- where most industrialized countries teach comprehensive sexual education including information on the proper use of contraception -- the pregnancy rate for teens is much lower than the rate in the U.S. (The rate is 50% lower in the United Kingdom 75% lower in France and Sweden.)

In Washington, I will fight to prevent abortions not by infringing upon the due rights of women, but by educating our youth about all the steps they can take (including but not limited to abstinence) to prevent unplanned pregnancy in the first place. Unwanted pregnancies and STDs have profound effects on the lives of our youth. We cannot put our heads in the ideological sand, ignore human behavior, and hope that our youth will abstain from their instincts. And we should not turn a personal issue into a political football.

Paid for and printed in house