May 30, 2005 Medical and scientific ethics issues are in the news again, as Congress narrowly passed a bill last week that funds controversial embryonic stem cell research. While I certainly sympathize with those who understandably hope such research will lead to cures for terrible diseases, I object to forcing taxpayers who believe harvesting embryos is immoral to pay for it. Congressional Republicans, eager to appease pro-life voters while still appearing suitably compassionate, supported a second bill that provides nearly $80 million for umbilical cord stem cell research. But it's never compassionate to spend other people's money for political benefit. The issue is not whether the federal government should fund one type of stem cell research or another. The issue is whether the federal government should fund stem cell research at all. Clearly there is no constitutional authority for Congress to do so, which means individual states and private citizens should decide whether to permit, ban, or fund it. Neither party in Washington can fathom that millions and millions of Americans simply don't want their tax dollars spent on government research of any kind. This viewpoint is never considered. Federal funding of medical research guarantees the politicization of decisions about what types of research for what diseases will be funded. Scarce tax resources are allocated according to who has the most effective lobby, rather than on the basis of need or even likely success. Federal funding also causes researchers to neglect potential treatments and cures that do not qualify for federal funds. Medical advancements often result from radical ideas and approaches that are scoffed at initially by the establishment. When scientists become dependent on government funds, however, they quickly learn not to rock the boat and stick to accepted areas of inquiry. Federal funds thus distort the natural market for scientific research. The debate over stem cell research involves profound moral, religious, and ethical question-- questions Congress is particularly ill equipped to resolve. The injustice of forcing taxpayers to fund research some find ethically abhorrent is patently obvious. When we insist on imposing one-size-fits-all social policies determined in Washington, we invariably make millions of Americans very angry. Again, the constitutional approach to resolving social issues involves local, decentralized decision-making. This approach is not perfect, but it is much better than pretending Congress possesses the magical wisdom to serve as the nation's moral arbiter. Decentralized decisions and privatized funding would eliminate much of the ill will between supporters and opponents of stem cell research. Government cannot instill morality in the American people. On the contrary, rigid, centralized, government decision-making is indicative of an apathetic and immoral society. The greatest casualty of centralized government decision-making is personal liberty.