

Smarm and the country

Is the National Institutes of Health nuts? Goofy? Downright depraved? You might think so if you've been watching the X-rated docudrama playing out over allegations by the Traditional Values Coalition that the world's premier medical research agency is inappropriately funding "smarmy" sex grants. The "smarm" accusations have prompted ongoing congressional inquiries and a hit list of almost 200 grants to some of America's finest universities. Taking much of the heat are studies on sexual arousal, gender orientation, the transmission of disease via truck-stop prostitution, and the sexual behavior of older men.

As a former NIH director (full disclosure) I know that research on sexuality has been federally funded for years. Where do you think information on the "cuddle" hormone oxytocin comes from? Or the non-PC findings that men are genetically programmed to seek youth and beauty in their mates, and women to look for power and resources? How about the current issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine* with three reports on sexual identity? Fighting those sexually transmitted diseases that the president mentioned in his State of the Union address relies on sexual-behavior research. Federal funds contributed to hot new drugs like Viagra and Levitra. And Sen. Robert Dole made the medical treatment of erectile dysfunction a veritable Washington Monument, no less a traditional value for millions of aging men.

The sexual behavior grants now on the griddle are nonetheless juicy morsels. Prudes and prurients alike perk up at images of prowling prostitutes at truck stops or volunteer research subjects wired up with sex arousal meters. Let's face it: You could create a wicked image of colonoscopy if you took it out of context. But one still wonders why a group like this has both the legitimacy and the legs to keep the NIH sex flap going (they're also accusing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of "promot[ing] homosexual sex acts"). Indeed, they've incited a flood of media stories and even an amendment to the current NIH appropriations bill to specifically de-fund four sex-behavior grants. It was barely defeated by a vote of 212 to 210. After a while the public can only wonder, maybe there is a problem.

Let's be real. But the real "problem" is hidden. The flap is not about the medical research, NIH's scientific review process, or even the money involved. Rather it's about a social agenda that has made the sex grants a lusty foil—a veritable fire-and-brimstone opportunity to sledgehammer their views that sex is out of control in America, undermining traditional values, corrupting kids, fostering homosexuality, and ruining marriage.

The real diagnosis is a rabid case of "pseudo-event-itis." Historian and former Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin introduced us to this disease in his 1961 treatise, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. Pseudo-events are not spontaneous conditions but carefully planned and often planted happenings, scripted to advance a particular social or political creed. In a veritable Kabuki theater, righteous stewards of public morals are slaying evil dragons of depravity before our very eyes. Such theater is based on facts, but the facts are skillfully and vividly spun out of context to draw an audience of pundits and policymakers.

Pseudo-events require drama but also ambiguity. The audience is enthralled by the sexy topic but has a hard time figuring out what's real or right. Stacked up against lurid hyped images, facts are dull: like the fact that behavior contributes mightily to human disease, whether it's smoking, drug use, violence, reckless driving, or reckless sex. Even duller in translation is that all NIH grants are rigorously reviewed for scientific quality and relevance to human health by several expert groups. The pseudo-event purposefully drowns out such boring facts with eye-catching images that distort reality.

The diagnosis of pseudo-event lets us concentrate on the real issues in the real world. Human behavior, including sexuality, happens to be one of them. Perhaps NIH should get a smooch, not a smear, for taking on this so-called smarm.