



Ellen Goodman

Cutting off Women to Spite China

by Ellen Goodman

OVER THE YEARS I thought my mind had become boggle-proof. It's a side effect of journalism. Sooner or later, we just lose the ability to be astonished by anything the government says. We lose the capacity to be overwhelmed by even the most nimble political spin.

But the Bush administration challenged all my insulation this week when it withheld \$34 million in family planning funds designated for the United Nations. The stated reason—and I use the word “reason” loosely—is that the United Nations Population Fund works in China. Any money to the agency, it said, helps the “Chinese government to implement more effectively its programs of coercive abortion.”

abortion overseas. I know this, and so do the folks in the Bush administration. Worst, and here's the clincher, they also know that the UN isn't part of the problem of China's coercive policies; it's part of the solution.

Nevertheless, Colin Powell, acting as front man for the White House, wrote, “If there is a single principle that unifies Americans with conflicting views on the subject, it is the conviction that no woman should be forced to have an abortion.” True enough. But Powell failed to mention that this single principle also unifies the United Nations.

The UN is on record all over the place as opposing the forced sterilizations and abortions that have too often accompanied China's one-child policy. It spends only \$3.5 million of a \$270 million budget in the People's Republic, but it is spent in 32 counties in China in a deliberate effort to show the Chinese government that voluntary family planning works.

“Here are the horrible things we've done in China,” says the Fund's Sarah Craven with a good deal of restraint. “We've published materials letting the Chinese know the rights they have under UN human rights treaties. We've contracted to train family planning workers on quality care and informed consent. We've paid so Chinese family planning workers can go to other countries and see how it works. And we have a

women's empowerment initiative to work on literacy and health care.”

Indeed—here comes another boggle—the rate of abortion has decreased in the places where the UN has worked. “We're there to give the women of China hope,” she concludes.

Remember last year when the secretary of state praised UN Population Fund's “invalu-



In Morocco, a health worker explains various contraceptive methods to a patient as she examines an IUD. Photo: Lauren Goodsmith, JHU/CCP

Well, allow me to explain the circuit breaker on outrage. None of the money we give to the Population Fund goes to the Chinese government anyway. It's against the law. It's also against the law for any U.S. money to fund



able work” around the world? Since then, a team of British parliamentarians, including an ardent pro-life leader, went to China and concluded that UN fund was a force for positive change. Since then, a three-member team sent by our government also gave the UN a clean report card.

But in an act of public humiliation worthy of Mao’s Red Guard, Powell was forced to recant publicly and deliver the party line of the right wing.

No one is making light of coercion in China—certainly not those who believe in a woman’s right to decide. But it’s fair to ask whether we change policy best by engaging or disengaging with another government.

Just last month, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson proudly announced that we would work with China—indeed, with the same Health Ministry that administers population policies—on issues of HIV/AIDS. Meanwhile, we sign trade agreements and explore closer military ties. Has the old two-China policy morphed into a new two-China policy? One for family planning and one for everything else?

The Bush administration says it will give the family planning money to our own Agency for International Development. Fine. But let’s remember that US AID operates in 84 coun-

tries, compared with the UN’s 140. It operates unilaterally. And why, by the way, do we need to replicate programs in, say, Afghanistan?

This is the story. In an effort to punish China, the same China that we engage with every day, we are going to withhold money, which wouldn’t go to China anyway, from the rest of the world’s women.

As Amy Coen of Population Action International says: “This is the man who supports women’s rights? This administration is placating and throwing red meat to a political base that doesn’t believe in family planning.”

Follow the bouncing boggle: In an effort to punish a UN operation that “gives hope to women in China,” we are going to withdraw \$34 million that pays for midwives and hospitals, birthing kits and contraceptives. And to appease the domestic “right-to-life” lobby, we are going to withhold enough money to prevent 2 million unwanted pregnancies, 4,700 maternal deaths, and more than 77,000 infant and child deaths.

If Bush gets away with this one, I’m definitely gonna take myself in for some new boggle-proofing.

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Correction: The Earth’s population in 1960 was 3,000,000,000 not 3,000,000,000,000 as reported in The Reporter’s Spring/Summer 2002 edition.

WELCOME to all who have recently joined Population Connection and are receiving The ZFG Reporter for the first time. And thanks again to all of our members; we deeply appreciate your concern, your participation in Population Connection’s ongoing projects, and your financial support. You make our work possible and effective.