

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Bush's silent war against women

While President George W. Bush has been rattling the saber and trying to convince us that the only way to fight global terror is to squash Saddam Hussein, he has been waging quiet and destructive wars at home.

Within two days of his inauguration in January of 2001, he reinstated the Global Gag Rule against family planning.

The New York Times said "President Bush's assault on reproductive rights is part of a larger ongoing cultural battle. If abortion were the only target, the administration would not be attempting to block women's access to contraceptives, which drive down the number of abortions. His administration would not be declaring war on any sex education that discusses ways, beyond abstinence, to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Scientifically accurate information about contraceptives and abortion would not have begun disappearing from federal government websites."

According to "The Population Press," The Gag Rule denies U.S. Family Planning assistance to health providers who include information about abortion (at their own cost) when counseling women. The rule shows a disdain for freedom of speech and an utter contempt for international family planning programs that prevent hundreds of thousands of infant and maternal deaths each year. The president has refused to release \$34 million earmarked for United Nations family planning programs overseas, an initiative aimed at controlling population and disease.

At a recent UN population conference in Bangkok, the American delegation embarrassed itself in front of an aghast world audience by demanding the deletion of references to "condom use" to fight AIDS and sexual diseases, claiming that condom use causes more sexual activity. One observer said, "Only a person who believes that umbrellas cause rain could believe that condoms cause sex."

"The Bush administration position basically condemns people to death..." said Adrienne Germain, president of the International Women's health Coalition. "And we're talking about tens of millions of people."

The Boston Globe reported on March 28, 2001, only two months after the Bush inauguration, that the White House Office for Women's Initiatives and Outreach was closed. A year later, ten regional offices of the Department of Labor Women's Bureau were shut down. According to the Bureau's mission statement on its website, one of its main duties is the "responsibility to advocate and inform women directly, and the public as well, of women's work rights and employment issues." Bush's action also eliminated the Women's Bureau for Equal Pay Program.

President Bush talks about how the United States liberated women of Afghanistan from the repression of the Taliban. He seems to forget that his father and former president Ronald Reagan provided Osama bin Laden and the Taliban with \$5 million in aid and referred to them as "freedom fighters." Aid to the Taliban was restricted under the Clinton administration but resumed under our current president, who provided the Taliban with \$43 million of our tax dollars in May of 2001.

In early 2002, Bush endorsed the United Nations convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, but in August, Colin Powell notified the Senate that the administration is concerned about the treaty's "vagueness" and "complexity" and has asked for a review by the Justice Department.

Enter our old buddy, Attorney General John Ashcroft. The one who opposed the Equal Rights amendment in the late 1970's and has a history of hostility towards the political empowerment of women. According to the Chicago Sun Times, as governor of Missouri, Ashcroft twice vetoed funding to help victims of domestic violence. He vetoed legislation that would have provided maternity leave to new mothers. As a member of the U.S. Senate,

before he was beaten by a dead candidate, Ashcroft was opposed to the woman's bill of rights.

We are the only industrialized nation that has failed to sign the Woman's Convention and the United States is quickly losing credibility as an advocate for human rights. The convention has been signed by 169 nations. We are joined in our untenable position by the illustrious countries of Afghanistan, Iran and Syria.

If we pay attention, we will find there are other silent wars being waged by the administration here at home. We'd better pay attention. It will already take decades to get back the constitutional rights and equality we have lost in two short years.

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