



Condom Nation

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ABSTINENCE MAKES THE HEART GROW FONDER 1989–2008

Masturbation is a part of sex education and should perhaps be taught.

SURGEON GENERAL JOYCELYN ELDERS (ATTRIBUTED), 1994

Let's face it, sex makes people crazy.

WARD CATES, DIRECTOR OF THE SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED
DISEASE PROGRAM, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL, 1990

The blogosphere went wild. John McCain's choice of Sarah Palin, a religious conservative and the relatively unknown governor of Alaska, as his vice-presidential nominee sparked almost nonstop rumors as pundits and the general public assessed McCain's choice across the worldwide web. Among the many rumors swirling both in the tabloids and on the Internet were whispers about Palin's oldest daughter. In an attempt to quash the rumors, the Palin family issued a formal statement: "Our beautiful daughter Bristol came to us with news that as parents we knew would make her grow up faster than we had ever planned." Bristol's pregnancy was, Palin's supporters argued, "evidence that they are a normal American family with all the joys and problems." A Republican delegate explained to the *New York Times* that Palin's situation had "every single person . . . thinking 'Oh my gosh, that has happened to me or to someone I know or I am afraid it will.'"¹

In many ways this delegate was correct. Even as Bristol Palin's pregnancy sparked a major debate in the press and on the Internet about the merits and drawbacks of abstinence-only sex education, pundits found echoes of recent and similar stories of high-profile teens who had also become pregnant. Just nine months before the story about Palin broke, the 2007 Christmas season had

wound to a close with the announcement that one of America's cherished teen idols was pregnant. In Concord, Massachusetts, teenagers had gathered around the cafeteria lunch tables to discuss Jamie Lynn Spears' surprise announcement. "There's no excuse for not using contraceptives," one student grumbled. Her classmates agreed. It was, they all pointed out, "unrealistic to think that sixteen-year-olds would not have sex." Someone, they insisted, "should have talked to Ms. Spears about contraception."² But who? Nine years before Spears' pregnancy made the news, a small federally funded organization in Louisiana had cheerfully stated that "December was an excellent month" for preaching abstinence as "we were able to focus on the virgin birth and make it apparent that God desire[s] sexual purity as a way of life."³ A year before Spears' pregnancy, a similar media frenzy had developed around the pregnancy of another sixteen-year-old actress. Keisha Castle-Hughes had not only become pregnant as an unwed teenager, she was also slated to play the Virgin Mary in an upcoming film, *The Nativity*. The pope and many on the Right expressed indirect and direct disapproval.⁴

The very public struggles of these teenage girls led to heated debates across the Internet and in the media. The press was for the most part sharply divided over whether these teenage pregnancies presented an opportunity to teach abstinence or the importance of using birth control. Many of the more famous pundits, whose fortunes rested on their close association with either the Left or the Right, chose the simple route. For Bill O'Reilly on the Right, this meant condemning Hollywood and those associated with it (Jamie Lynn Spears and Keisha Castle-Hughes) while providing support for the Palins.⁵ For Bill Maher on the Left, it meant establishing a website designed to "free Levi," the boyfriend of Bristol Palin. But more thoughtful pundits and columnists used these events to force a conversation about abstinence-only education, its effectiveness, and the need to speak candidly to teens about contraception.

Pundits charged that no one had spoken to Spears, Palin, or Castle-Hughes about contraception, a charge that was not particularly surprising. During the 1980s the Public Health Service had mounted a successful sex education program that included candid discussions about the use of contraceptives to prevent both unwanted pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. In the short term the PHS had won the battle for a comprehensive sex education campaign. But after the election of President George H. W. Bush in 1988, it became clear that the Public Health Service had lost the war. During the two decades that followed the presidency of the first President Bush, comprehensive

sex education programs did not completely disappear, but they declined in number across America. In their place, schools and a variety of other organizations implemented programs advocating abstinence only.

Rooted in Abstinence

In the 1950s, Prescott Bush, the father of George H. W. Bush, lost a Senate seat when his support of Planned Parenthood became public knowledge. Early in his career the younger Bush had followed in his father's footsteps by supporting and advocating the dissemination of information about birth control. George H. W. Bush had even been an avid supporter of Title X, which had ensured the distribution of contraceptives at federally funded clinics. But by the 1980s, George H. W. Bush found himself in a bind. The mood of the country had shifted to the right, and a growing and very vocal movement condemning both birth control and comprehensive sex education had emerged. Because the proponents of this movement constituted a substantial voting bloc, winning the presidency now required gaining the support of this group.⁶ In the 1980s, Bush publicly repudiated his former views on sex education and birth control.

In 1989, when President George H. W. Bush was looking for a new surgeon general, his primary goal was to find one who would please his new constituents on the Far Right. Learning from his predecessor's mistake, Bush was eager to ensure that his nomination was the opposite of the very outspoken and completely uncontrollable former surgeon general C. Everett Koop.

Like Koop, Antonia Novello, a career officer in the Public Health Service, was a pediatrician. But the similarities between the two physicians ended there. As a relatively young officer in the middle of her career, the soft-spoken Novello was characterized in the media and by her peers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) as "a good soldier who doesn't squawk."⁷ Novello did not consistently toe the conservative line on issues relating to sex education, but her tenure did usher in a new age in which the Public Health Service ceased to "squawk" loudly about the necessity of comprehensive sex education.

The government's shift to the right and the implications for federally funded efforts to promote sex education became evident within the first year of Novello's tenure. In 1990, just one year after her appointment, a major survey on Americans' sexual behavior that Congress had wanted was derailed. As the most detailed study of American sexual habits since Alfred Kinsey's work in the 1940s and 1950s, the survey would have determined which Americans were most at

risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease or becoming pregnant unintentionally. Using this information, public health experts could create a sex education program that directly targeted those who were most in need of it. Selling the survey to the American people, however, proved to be trickier than its proponents had imagined. When news of the survey became public, religious and conservative broadcasters took to the airwaves charging that the survey was both an intrusion into the private lives of Americans and an invitation to a more permissive society. In the wake of this barrage of publicity, callers besieged radio and television stations protesting the study. Representative William Dannemeyer, a conservative from Orange County, California, typified the opposition. A sex survey, Dannemeyer complained, would “sway public opinion to liberalize laws regarding homosexuality, pedophilia, anal and oral sex, sex education and teenage pregnancies.” In response to this outcry, Congress tabled the survey.⁸

However, the most significant change in the structure of federally funded sex education came in the form of decreased funding for comprehensive sex education—that is, sex education that included discussions of both abstinence and contraceptives. In 1988, over 80 percent of Americans believed that schools should teach sex education, and over 93 percent of American schools provided this type of education. While the actual amount of time most schools spent on such education was limited to a few hours per year, the overwhelming majority of these programs were comprehensive in that they provided information on the ways in which abstinence, monogamy, and contraceptives could prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.⁹ But during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, funding for abstinence-only programs began to rise. In 1981, two conservative congressmen, Orrin Hatch of Utah and Jeremiah Denton of Alabama, co-sponsored the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA). Included in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, the bill had no hearings, and there were no discussions regarding its provisions before it became law. For its supporters, the Act, which promoted chastity, was viewed as a much-needed counterbalance to Title X, which had allowed for contraceptives to be disseminated from clinics receiving federal funds. More important, AFLA channeled funding away from organizations such as Planned Parenthood that provided a broad array of reproductive services, including abortion. Because religious organizations had been at the forefront of the abstinence-only movement, these institutions wound up receiving a substantial amount of the funding provided by AFLA.

The federal government and the Public Health Service had a long history of providing funding for sex education to organizations having religious ties.

Keeping Fit, the Public Health Service's first sex education campaign, had been a collaborative effort with the YMCA. At the time, the YMCA was an overtly religious institution with strong ties to the evangelical Protestant community. J. A. Van Dis, the YMCA official who created the federal program, had even spoken of his desire to have organizations "Christianize" its message, and the PHS had also encouraged churches and other religious institutions to promote discussions of syphilis and gonorrhea among their congregants during this period. However, the PHS never knowingly provided funds to religious institutions to "Christianize" its program, and there is no evidence that federal employees knew of Van Dis' intentions or endorsed his views. More important, there is no evidence that religious organizations used religious symbols or doctrine to promote the government's sex education campaign. But the PHS had come dangerously close to blurring the line between church and state with this early-twentieth-century campaign. By the 1970s, the PHS and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare had become much more savvy and much more concerned about the potential conflicts that could ensue as a result of this approach. When the PHS and HEW reached out to YMCAs to promote their sex education campaign during this later period, they did so knowing that the YMCA had become a highly secularized institution that did not promote overtly Christian messages, that was not affiliated with any one religious organization, and that welcomed and did not seek to convert non-Christians.

Beginning in the late 1980s, federal officials who administered AFLA became less careful about supervising the government's interactions with religious institutions. AFLA funds went to organizations such as the Catholic facility St. Margaret's Hospital, in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Using federal funds and with the knowledge of federal officials, St. Margaret's created an abstinence-only program that featured materials on "The Church's Teachings on Abortion" and "The Church's Teachings on Artificial Contraception." In 1983 the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sued the federal government, claiming that AFLA, as it was being administered, violated the separation of church and state. The investigation and appeal process took several years, during which attorneys found widespread constitutional violations by the Reagan and Bush administrations. In 1993 the case was finally settled when the Department of Health and Human Services, which administered the program, agreed to provide stricter monitoring of grantees and their programs to ensure that the line between church and state was maintained.¹⁰

Despite these challenges, AFLA significantly changed the structure of feder-

ally funded sex education programs. Between 1988 and 1999, the proportion of teachers who taught in abstinence-only programs rose from 1 in 50 to 1 in 4. Turning away from Surgeon General C. Everett Koop's call to provide comprehensive sex education at the earliest age possible, American schools ceased to provide their students with information on condoms or birth control as a method of preventing sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancies.¹¹

In the absence of comprehensive sex education programs, a surgeon general who prioritized sex education could, as Parran and Koop had demonstrated, make a crucial difference. But although Antonia Novello had worked on issues relating to pediatric AIDS and although she had made children her priority long before she became surgeon general, she was reluctant to use her position to badger an unwilling Bush administration or those on the Right into a reassessment of their growing rejection of comprehensive sex education. In 1992, when Novello released *Parents Speak out for America's Children: Report of the Surgeon General's Conference*, the report contained no references to sex education.

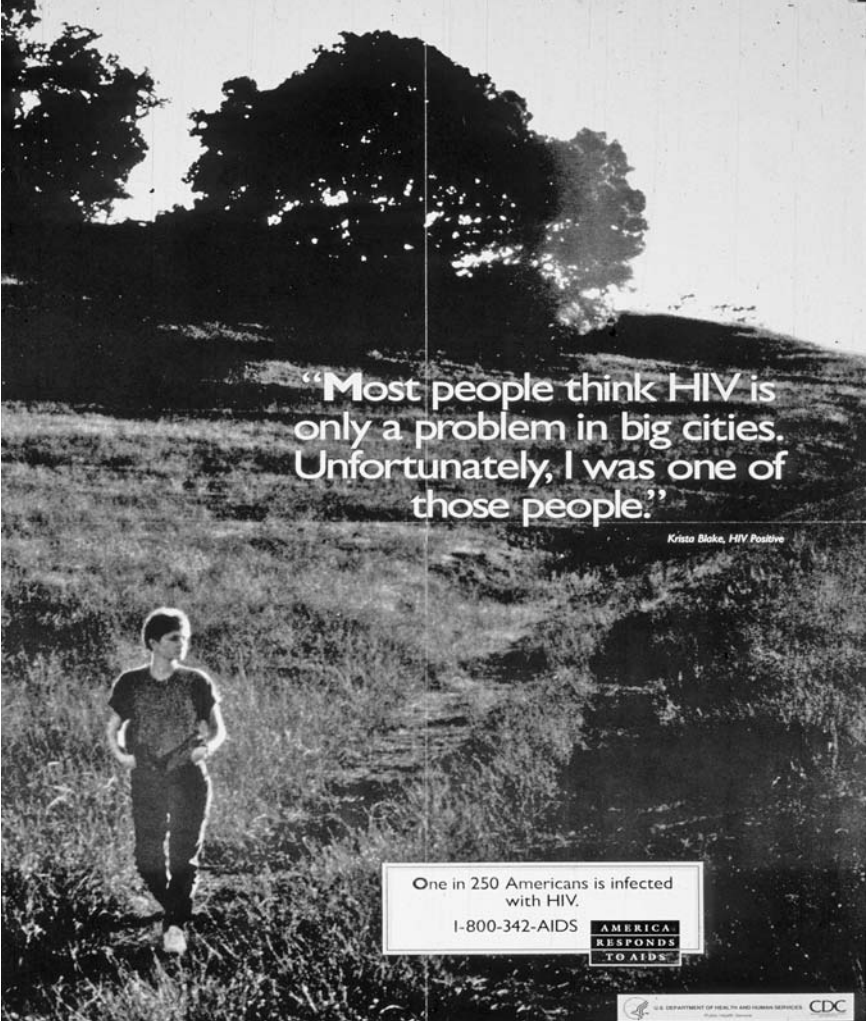
AIDS, however, was an elephant that could not be overlooked, and by the early 1990s Novello was eager to release a surgeon general's report on AIDS that would both serve as a followup to Koop's report and provide information on risk factors that had been unknown in 1986. But here Novello encountered problems. In the spring of 1992 a frustrated Frederick Kroger, head of the AIDS education program at the CDC (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), told a congressional subcommittee that the report "was being held until after the election." The report had been lying "fallow since September, 1991" because of fears that its frank language and detailed information would offend Bush's most conservative constituents. While Novello denied that she had allowed the report to be held back for political reasons, the timing of the report's release—which was slated for late 1992 *after* the election—remained suspicious. The delayed release date was even more suspicious as early test marketing of the report in six cities had indicated that a surprising 99 percent of survey respondents thought well of the report and wanted relatives and friends to read it.¹²

In the post-Koop era, there was little in Novello's report that could shock Americans. In fact, Novello's approach to sex education was extremely cautious. Insisting that "families nurture children, provide a supportive environment and teach values and discipline," the report stressed that sex education should begin in the home. Schools were a part of the process, but "the most effective sex education programs support and reinforce the AIDS prevention message given at home."¹³ In many ways this emphasis on sex education being taught in the home

was a clear response to the concerns of the Religious Right, which had always held that sex education should be provided in the home, not in the schools. This approach had a strong appeal even among those who did not consider themselves part of the Religious Right. After all, who could argue with the idea that individual parents should be allowed to shape the sex education their children received? Unfortunately, studies dating back to the 1920s had demonstrated, over and over again, that many American parents failed to provide their children with any sex education in the home. But even when parents were prepared, in the words of an early-twentieth-century Public Health Service pamphlet, to “do their part” and teach sex education at home, the nature and scope of this education varied widely. If a child learned only abstinence at home, should a school program reinforce that message? But if so, then what kind of program could that school provide to the child who received more comprehensive sex education at home?

Although Novello sidestepped the complicated issues raised by Americans’ diverse views on sex and religion, her report did discuss, as her predecessor’s had, practical ways in which AIDS could be prevented. Abstinence and monogamy were touted as the best ways to avoid the disease, but readers were also told “if you are not in a [committed and monogamous] . . . relationship and [you] engage in sex you should use a latex condom every time you have sex.” Detailed instructions as to how one could and should use condoms followed. These instructions also put to rest persistent rumors regarding the reported failures of condoms: “Condom failure is usually due to a person not using the condom correctly, rather than flaws in the condom itself.”¹⁴

The report did not stand alone. Posters, television ads, and pamphlets describing how Americans could protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies were also released during Novello’s tenure. But unlike Koop’s report, Novello’s provoked little to no discussion in the mainstream press of sex, sexually transmitted disease, teenage pregnancy, or sex education. To be fair, Koop’s status as a major media figure meant that almost anything Novello did would be seen as anticlimactic. Yet Novello’s failures were not limited simply to her inability to develop more innovative ways to provide Americans with sex education. Unlike Koop, she never became the face of the Public Health Service, and unlike Koop, she did not call for widespread dispersal of the government’s sex education materials. This failure to agitate for comprehensive sex education or, more simply, to develop more innovative ways to reach Americans, was an indication of trouble ahead.



“Most people think HIV is only a problem in big cities. Unfortunately, I was one of those people.”

Krista Blake, HIV Positive

One in 250 Americans is infected with HIV.
1-800-342-AIDS

**AMERICA
RESPONDS
TO AIDS**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
CDC

Reminding Americans that sexually transmitted diseases were not confined to urban areas had always been central to the government's sex education campaigns (ca. 1990s). Department of Health and Human Services.

Novello's reluctance to antagonize opponents of comprehensive sex education was shared by her boss, George H. W. Bush. Bush's history as a supporter of Planned Parenthood, Title X, and even *Roe v. Wade* made it unlikely that he could win the Religious Right's complete trust, but he was prepared to try. During his four years as president, Bush used a variety of tactics to push the federal

government into endorsing the Religious Right's views on sex education. Among these tactics was the midlevel political appointment. Because most mid-level appointments did not require confirmation from Congress, none of these appointees were required to state publicly their views on sex education. Throughout the Bush presidency, stealth appointments of this type were used to place advocates of abstinence-only programs in crucial positions. Few Americans knew, for example, that Bush had appointed William R. Archer III, a strong opponent of birth control and premarital sex, as the assistant secretary for population affairs in the Department of Health and Human Services. In the grand scheme of things Archer was, as one reporter put it, "a small potato." But this small potato also proved to be a very hot potato. Archer advised the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Louis Sullivan, on contraception, teen sexuality and teen pregnancies, and family-planning services in general. More important, Archer, who advocated abstinence in both his private and public life, was responsible for allocating funds under Title X and the Adolescent Family Life Act.¹⁵

In the long run, even appointments such as these failed to convince the Religious Right that Bush was on their side. But even as the Religious Right withdrew their support, Bush had dramatically changed the structure of sex education in the United States. Although the settlement of the lawsuit sparked by the Adolescent Family Life Act forced the government to provide greater scrutiny to sex education grants given under the Act, the government had started down a path that prioritized abstinence over comprehensive sex education. There would be, at least over the next fifteen years, no turning back.

"The Wake-up Call"

In 1992, however, many proponents and opponents of comprehensive sex education believed that the election of Bill Clinton would cause a shift in the government's approach to sex education. If nothing else, Clinton's record seemed to indicate that he would emphasize this issue. As governor of Arkansas, Clinton had demonstrated a passionate interest in the broad issue of educational reform. With his wife, Hillary Rodham, he had worked to transform Arkansas' notoriously poor educational system. During the presidential campaign he had also promised to address the growing crisis in health care, the politically tricky issue of gay rights, and growing challenges to legal abortion, all issues that would have a direct impact on the government's approach to sex education. By

the time voters on both the Left and the Right entered the voting booth in November 1992, most of them knew that in Clinton they would have a president whose views on sex, sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, and sex education differed from those of his predecessor.

If there was any doubt on this issue, voters had only to look at the woman Clinton had appointed as the director of the Arkansas Department of Health. An outspoken African-American pediatrician, Joycelyn Elders had overseen a controversial program to distribute condoms in the state's schools. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the number of adolescents who contracted not only syphilis and gonorrhea but also HIV/AIDS rose, school districts from rural Maryland to suburban California had attempted to develop programs to distribute condoms to students. But these distribution programs met with extremely vocal opposition from some parents and community leaders. "This gives a stamp of approval to something we feel is unhealthy and immoral," argued the ultra-conservative Lubavitcher rabbi Abraham Hecht. Proponents of distribution programs countered that "to call abstinence a fantasy is to stretch even the idea of a fantasy." Pointing out that half of the nation's sixteen-year-olds were sexually active, Debra Haffner, the director of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), insisted that the distribution of condoms was not an immoral act. The immorality, she said, was in those who "say 'just say no or die.'" In calling for condom distribution, Debra Haffner, the director of SIECUS, was breaking with the tradition of her own organization. In its early years SIECUS had advocated abstinence.

Arguments regarding condom use and adolescents were even more complex than many of these simple discussions would seem to indicate. Proponents and opponents of providing adolescents with more and better knowledge as well as contraceptives pointed out the complexity of the issue. Teens "approach sex in neither a logical nor a rational way," Stan Weed, a supporter of abstinence programs from the Institute for Research and Evaluation, pointed out. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Richard P. Keeling, the chair of the American College Health Association's Task Force on AIDS, admitted that the mixed messages teens received with regard to sex simply caused many of them to act in ways contrary to the advice they were receiving in their sex education programs. Congress' failure to sanction the survey on American sexual behavior simply added to the problems, as researchers and educators were forced to guess at most Americans' sexual behavior. While Americans were uncertain about the distribution of condoms in schools during the 1990s, their views shifted over

the next few years. By 2007 a report by the Kaiser Family Foundation indicated that 67 percent of Americans favored the distribution of condoms in schools.¹⁶

In Arkansas, Elders' plan to distribute condoms had backfired not because of opposition from opponents of comprehensive sex education but rather because the condoms distributed to one group of high school students came from a batch with a high percentage of defects. The condoms were recalled, and later studies of the worst batches demonstrated that 95 percent of the condoms were safe, with only 5 percent deemed defective. "Citing her fear that a young person would not bother using a condom at all if he or she knew that it might be defective," Elders opted not to make public the information that the condoms were defective. In Arkansas, the decisions both to release the condoms and to avoid a public announcement of the recall met with harsh criticism. Elders' defense—that she had followed the cardinal rule of public health by acting in the interests of the greatest number of Arkansans by avoiding discussions of the flawed condoms—was overwhelmingly condemned by her opponents.¹⁷

Elders had no love for the Religious Right, and she had refused to cater to their interests. But she had taken this a step further by repeatedly and very publicly denouncing those on the Far Right throughout her career as director of the Arkansas Department of Health. Statements such as her widely reported comment that the advocates of the Religious Right "love little babies, as long as they're in someone else's uterus," won her few supporters, as did her very public dismissal of the Religious Right as "religious non-Christians." She had also clashed with many of her fellow African Americans, criticizing those who equated her efforts to contain teenage pregnancies with genocide or, even more simply, overt discrimination. In an especially blunt and often quoted comment, Elders had compared unmarried teen mothers to slaves.¹⁸

By the time Clinton nominated her as his surgeon general in the spring of 1993, it was clear that Elders' decision in the condom recall, combined with her record of being extremely blunt, if not impolitic, would make her a contentious nominee. In June and July of 1993, as Elders' nomination came before Congress, critics and supporters on both sides of the aisle emerged. Pat Robertson, the leader of the Christian Coalition, denounced her as a "way-out radical leftist." Phyllis Schlafly, who had labeled Koop the condom king, nicknamed Elders the condom queen. Janet Parshall, special assistant to the president of the conservative organization Concerned Women of America, labeled Elders "morally reprehensible." Taking a cue from Elders' own rhetoric, Parshall's organization also alleged that the nominee "would like to enslave every child in America to

her idea of sexuality education.” And from her home state of Arkansas, the Reverend Willis Walker compared Elders to “the midwives of Egypt . . . killing the babies of America.”

In response to these and similar outcries, Donna Shalala, Clinton’s secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, said, “Those who would portray Dr. Elders as being radical or out of touch with the desires of the American people are distorting her record.” Elders, Shalala noted with some irritation, “supports comprehensive health training . . . but that does not mean inappropriate sex education . . . for young children, as her critics suggest.” Elders also found support among her fellow Methodists and other mainstream Protestant and Jewish groups. The director of the United Church of Christ’s Office for Church in Society summed up the sentiments of many of his fellow liberal Protestants, saying, “We are frankly disturbed to see [Elders’] candidacy used . . . to attack sex education, birth control, people with AIDS and a woman’s right to choose abortion.” It was Koop all over again, pundits gleefully noted.¹⁹

But was it really? One of the major obstacles to Koop’s nomination had been his lack of experience in the field of public health. Even Elders’ most vocal critics could not claim that she lacked experience. Much of her career had been spent in this field. As her hearing dragged on, her experience and expertise were put under the microscope. By September, Elders had won over enough of her critics to gain the nomination, and converts such as Republican Senator Bob Packwood enthusiastically endorsed her, saying that she was “the wake-up call we need to hear.” But as Elders headed off to put on the uniform of the surgeon general on September 8, 1993, even her supporters worried that her reputation for outspokenness would be her undoing. Senator Nancy Kassebaum fretted that she was a bit of “a diamond in the rough.”²⁰

Ultimately Elders’ unwillingness to bow to political forces would prove to be her undoing. But while Elders’ tenure as surgeon general lasted less than two years, her outspoken calls for improved sex education forced the issue back to the forefront of American politics.

The M Word

As tensions over her nomination mounted, Elders traveled to New York City to receive an award from the Academy for Educational Development. At the award ceremony, she sounded an alarm: “Our children are out in the ocean drowning while we’re sitting on the beach worried and talking about whose values and

whose morals we are going to teach.”²¹ For Elders, the fundamental problems facing the nation were the “issues of teenage pregnancy and making every child a planned, wanted child.” Echoing her predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s, she insisted that poverty often stemmed from teenage or unwanted pregnancies. The strong and very clear connections among poverty, ignorance, and poor health meant that providing American children with comprehensive sex education and a full understanding of the ways to prevent disease should, Elders said, be at the heart of all of the Public Health Service’s efforts.²² While the relationship of poverty to sexual behavior and teenage pregnancy is more complex than Elders’ sound bites made it appear, her simplification of the issue had a broad appeal both to the many Americans who endorsed comprehensive sex education and the many public health experts who were eager to develop and implement concrete programs to address this issue.²³

Those who wondered just how Elders would address the problems of sexually transmitted disease and teenage pregnancy had only to watch as she packed up her desk accessories to move from Little Rock to Washington, D.C. Among the most prominent items to make the journey was a bouquet of faux flowers made from condom wrappers. The bouquet, which had been given to Elders by a colleague and had long sat on her desk in Little Rock, had signs attached to it: “Blooms Mostly at Night . . . Blooms May Wilt in Chilly Atmosphere.” One look at the bouquet, and the future of federally funded efforts to promote sex education was clear.²⁴

Within the first four months of her appointment, Elders was everywhere. Appearing on the popular news show *This Week with David Brinkley*, she urged Americans to provide and support sex education in their schools. These efforts were, she insisted, central to reducing out-of-wedlock births. She publicly lamented what she called the nation’s fear of sex. “I personally feel that the underlying issue is sex,” she told a reporter. Linked to the nation’s fear of sex was the belief that “fornication must be punished and that teenage pregnancy and the bad things that happen are the punishment.” In January 1994 she followed up on this comment, pointing out that while “everyone in the world is opposed to sex outside of marriage . . . everyone does it.” It was, she insisted, time to “Get Real.” Elders’ controversial comments on public health were not limited to sex education. She also spoke about the need to put health clinics in the nation’s schools, the importance of reassessing the nation’s drug policies, and the need to immunize and care for the nation’s poor—all policies that had little or no appeal to those on the Far Right. But it was Elders’ comments on sex

education that sparked the most heated controversy. By the spring of her first year in office, Catholic bishops had condemned Elders' discussion of homosexuality as an attempt at a "re-definition of the family." Republicans in Congress had publicly called for her firing, and conservative and liberal columnists were building their careers on the Elders sound bite.²⁵

In short, Elders fulfilled all of the expectations those on both the Left and the Right had had with regard to her appointment. As an admiring John Cowan, the co-founder of Lead or Leave, an advocacy group for adolescents, pointed out, the "political system is squeamish about the truth," but Elders was prepared to advocate for the truth "as far as young people are concerned." She is "the only person in [a] . . . high position who speaks about how gay and lesbian people live in this country and . . . [how] they are a part of communities," Robin Kane of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force noted with pleasure. But others remained uneasy. While admitting that new ideas come from those who push at existing boundaries, Kent Amos of the Urban Institute worried that some of the surgeon general's comments "inflamm[e] passions and emotions that are not productive." This ability to antagonize her opponents had led even some who agreed with her to step back. Thomas Parrish, the pastor of a Lutheran church in rural Minnesota, noted ruefully that while he agreed with "about 85% of what she does," Elders' approach to public health was so abrasive that he had not hesitated to protest when she was invited to speak to religious leaders in his community.²⁶

In 1987, when then-Arkansas governor Clinton had introduced Elders at a news conference, he had remarked with some amusement, "I know how Abraham Lincoln felt when he met Harriet Beecher Stowe [and he said]: This is the little lady that started the great war."²⁷ Elders' appointment as surgeon general had intensified the battle for sex education, and the attacks on comprehensive and abstinence-only programs now came from both the Left and the Right in a fast, furious, and almost constant barrage. Some of the criticism aimed at Elders and her calls for comprehensive sex education was, as both she and Clinton knew, part of a broader attack by Christian conservatives on Clinton himself. But Elders' refusal to tone down her rhetoric meant that by 1994 she had her own very vocal, and very active, group of detractors.²⁸

Given both the doggedness with which those on the Right tracked every comment Elders made and Elders' own tendency to speak bluntly and off the cuff, it was just a matter of time before the controversy exploded. Fifteen months after her appointment, Elders' opponents found her Achilles heel when

Elders casually responded to a reporter's questions on World AIDS Day. Although Elders' exact response will never be known, the gist of her comments was enough to seal her fate. Asked by a psychologist in the audience if she believed that there would ever be a shift in the taboo against public discussions about masturbation as a component of human sexuality, Elders responded that she viewed masturbation as a natural part of human sexuality. Yes, she said firmly, she believed that discussions about masturbation should be included in sex education.

Proving that masturbation was indeed a taboo subject, a very public outcry quickly erupted. Calls for Elders' firing were, as they had always been, extraordinarily loud and persistent. This time Clinton, who found himself under growing attack by the Religious Right and even many on the Left, had little choice but to fire Elders. Within two weeks of her statement, Elders was out of a job. In an ironic twist that Elders must have later savored, those who led the call for her ouster—Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich—would soon provide graphic illustrations of Elders' earlier remark that while "everyone is opposed to sex outside of marriage . . . everyone does it." But in December of 1994, all that was in the future.²⁹

Elders' fall was in many ways predictable. Of all of Clinton's appointees, she had been the one who most enraged the Religious Right. The reasons for this antagonism are complex. The views of the Religious Right on race and gender cannot be neatly categorized, but the movement experienced its greatest growth during the push both to desegregate schools and to deny tax-exempt status to schools that segregate on the basis of race. Many members of the movement have also called for a return to the "traditional family," a call that may indicate some opposition to women in the workplace. Obviously not all members of the Religious Right endorse racist or sexist views, but the fact that the movement has often been most active on issues relating to race and gender, as well as the fact that leaders of the movement, such as Jerry Falwell, have openly advocated racist views, would seem to indicate a strong racist element in the movement. These factors meant that Elders was unacceptable as a surgeon general to many members of the Religious Right, simply because of her race and gender. But Elders' refusal to kowtow or even tone down her rhetoric when speaking to or about those on the Far Right really solidified their anger against her.³⁰ Many of the statements Elders made were no different from those made by Koop. But Koop, unlike Elders, had retained credibility among many moderates and even

some on the Far Right. As a result, he had greater latitude to speak about sex education, and this greater latitude had been central to his longevity in office.

In the wake of Elders' fall, many Americans expressed discontent with Clinton's decision to fire her. From Parsippany, New Jersey, Joseph Wardy wrote to his local paper, pointing out that "taboos [against] masturbation remain taboos unless we fight them." From Boulder, Colorado, one columnist noted that in firing Elders, Clinton and Gingrich "were speaking in code, past me, and past most moderate Americans, to the religious far right." In Boston, Roger Gauthier told a reporter, "I liked her. I thought she was up-front but that was her problem apparently." From Iowa City, William Stosine pulled no punches. His letter to the editor followed Elders' own blunt approach: "Anyone who thinks she would advocate teaching a 'how-to' course in masturbation in schools is an idiot indoctrinated in conservative propaganda."³¹

If Elders' dismissal did little to assuage the concerns of the many Americans who were in favor of comprehensive sex education, it also did nothing to buy Clinton support among those on the Far Right. As Clinton would discover, the Religious Right was not prepared to negotiate a compromise on any of their core issues, nor were they prepared to temper their criticisms of Clinton himself.

"A Mainstream Physician"

Clinton's first choice for Elders' successor as surgeon general was Henry Foster, an African-American gynecologist and obstetrician. In the 1980s Foster had founded a comprehensive sex education program called "I Have a Future." The program, which had been implemented in the housing projects of Foster's home state of Tennessee, included tutoring, job training, and medical services. It also taught children about contraception. During the presidency of George H. W. Bush, Foster and his program had been recognized as one of the "thousand points of light," but when Clinton moved to nominate Foster, an outcry erupted among those on the Far Right.

The problem? As an obstetrician, Foster had performed abortions. The exact number of the abortions Foster had performed was never clarified, although it appeared to have been relatively low. While the media went for the quick sound bite and clearly enjoying playing up the tensions between those on the Far Left and those on the Far Right, Foster's views on abortion were complex. Like many of his fellow Americans, Foster viewed abortion as a last resort. Additionally, no

evidence indicated that Foster had performed abortions before they became legal. But legal or not, Foster's actions in this regard were sufficient to damn him in the eyes of those on the Right. Warning that "the Senate Republican leadership needs to stop being so squeamish and . . . stand forthrightly behind the pro-life views they say they hold," James A. Smith, a leading lobbyist for the Southern Baptists, insisted that it was time for the "Senate Republican leadership to get engaged in the culture war." Denying their support for Foster's appointment would, Smith suggested, be a good start. Among Catholics, Foster also encountered opposition. Especially vocal in their opposition was a small group of African-American Catholics led by Dolores Bernadette Grier. Rejecting all attempts to shade the issue, Grier told her 500-member organization, "The man is not black. The man is not white. He is an abortionist who terminates life in the womb and that's what he should be judged by."³²

In the weeks that followed, mounting opposition to Foster made it clear that he could not win the nomination, and Clinton, eager to avoid yet another showdown with the Religious Right, began to look for a less controversial candidate for surgeon general. In David Satcher, an African-American physician who had, like Elders, risen from extreme poverty to become the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Clinton found a "mainstream physician who is an eloquent advocate for the health of all Americans." Although his nomination came under attack by Senator John Ashcroft, Satcher had overwhelming support among the majority of congressional legislators, and he was confirmed in February 1998.³³

Satcher, as he well knew, was stepping into an oversized uniform. In interview after interview he told reporters, "I'm not Dr. Elders or Dr. Koop." But, he added, "I still have a lot to say in my own way." Firmly insisting that he wanted to be "the best David Satcher I can be," the new surgeon general found himself walking a fine line as he struggled both to find his own voice and to become the aggressive advocate for public health that he believed the nation needed.³⁴

Unlike his immediate predecessor, Satcher was not one to court controversy. "The first thing that I am looking for," he told a reporter, "is agreement on where we want to go as a nation." But Satcher, who characterized himself as someone who "love[s] a good fight but . . . [doesn't] go out looking for one," quickly found that this approach raised problems, at least when it came to sex education. After a year in office a frustrated Satcher was forced to admit that the Religious Right "has opposed a lot of the things I've tried to do . . . to help people reduce their risk for HIV transmission." "I've tried," a weary Satcher

confessed, to “work around them or work through them but I wouldn’t dare say I’ve figured out how to deal with them yet.”³⁵

Compounding Satcher’s problems was the Monica Lewinsky scandal, which erupted shortly after Satcher took office. As discussions of oral sex became common on the nightly news, Satcher found himself in an awkward position. Would an aggressive discussion of sex education and sexual responsibility simply compound his boss’ problems? Tiptoeing his way through what had become a political minefield, Satcher found himself forced to weigh his words when speaking about sex education.

“We’re Continuing That Tradition”

In 1998 Satcher had been appointed to a four-year term as Surgeon General. When a beleaguered Clinton left office in 2000, Satcher elected to remain in his position. Although there was little to indicate that the new president, George W. Bush, would support an activist surgeon general, Satcher clearly felt he had some unfinished business, specifically the release of a long-awaited surgeon general’s report on American sexuality. Like Novello and Koop, Satcher had come to believe that these reports were one of the best ways of provoking a national discussion on sex education, and in the summer of 2001 Satcher released his own report, which was, he emphasized, “based on science.”

With this report Satcher sought to explain once and for all why the nation needed to endorse and support comprehensive sex education programs. Sexually transmitted diseases infected approximately 12 million Americans each year. Over 700,000 new cases of AIDS had been reported since 1981. Nearly half of all pregnancies in the United States were unintended, and over a million abortions had been performed since 1996. “Each of these problems,” the report stated, “carries with it the potential for lifelong consequences for individuals, families, communities and the nation as a whole.” Calling for a “mature and thoughtful discussion about sexuality,” Satcher admitted that asking Americans to find “common ground might not be easy,” but it was essential if Americans were to “lay a foundation for a healthier society in the future.” The time had come for Americans to get serious about promoting a comprehensive and nuanced program of sex education.³⁶

At heart, *The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior* did not advocate anything really new. Emphasizing the use of science, the report sought to clarify several key issues about sex, sexuality,

and sex education. There was no scientific evidence indicating that comprehensive sex education led to early sexual activity. There was no scientific evidence that sexual orientation could be changed. There was no scientific evidence that abstinence-only education prevented or even delayed teens from having sex. Scientific studies did, however, indicate that a high incidence of sexually transmitted disease, unintended pregnancy, rape, and sexual abuse plagued the nation.

For those on the Left, the report was anticlimactic. "I yawn . . . over this report . . . the progressive elements are news only to the hopelessly clueless," snorted one columnist on the Left. A Seattle columnist agreed, pointing out that the report was "neither radical nor revolutionary." But even as those on the Left chided Satcher for failing to advocate a more aggressive approach to sex education, Satcher found himself under attack by the Bush administration and its constituents.³⁷

Tommy Thompson, the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, quickly distanced himself from Satcher, insisting that *The Call to Action* was "independent work." Pointing out that the report had not been released during the Clinton administration, Bush's spokesperson Ari Fleischer maintained that the report had probably not been released because Clinton officials "must have seen something in it that would make them delay it." The delay in the report's release undoubtedly stemmed from Satcher's reluctance to release a report on sexual responsibility at a time when Clinton was undergoing an impeachment trial on charges of sexual irresponsibility. But for Fleischer and the many officials in the Bush administration who were reluctant to endorse or even appear to endorse Satcher's report, the delay provided a convenient excuse to condemn it.³⁸

While there was little in the report that was news to the American people, the report did present problems for the Bush administration. The contested nature of Bush's presidency meant that he was heavily dependent on the right wing of his own party. And the Religious Right had, as both Bush and Satcher knew, long advocated the removal of comprehensive sex education programs from the nation's schools. In his *Call to Action* Satcher broke with both his predecessor, Antonia Novello, and his new boss, George W. Bush. Rather than advocating that the home should be the driving force behind sex education, Satcher called upon schools to become "the great equalizer." Pointing out what many Americans already knew, Satcher gently reminded his fellow citizens that parents routinely failed to provide their children with sex education. Satcher also noted that Americans overwhelmingly endorsed comprehensive sex

education programs in schools. Wasn't it time, he asked, for American schools to fulfill their promise by providing American children with comprehensive sex education?³⁹

But this was not the only element of Satcher's report that caused the Bush administration to distance itself from Satcher. Satcher's terse remarks about the lack of scientific evidence regarding the effectiveness of abstinence-only sex education won him no support among those who had spent decades advocating this type of education. Equally problematic was Satcher's strong statement that sexual orientation could not be altered. But even as he angered those on the Far Right, Satcher demonstrated that he was exactly what Clinton had promised: a "mainstream physician." By 2000 the majority of Americans accepted and agreed with these views on sex, sexuality, and sexual responsibility.

Yet even as Satcher did little to challenge mainstream America's views on sex education, the Bush administration was opting to follow a very different path. Eager to appease its constituents on the Far Right, the administration began a series of initiatives designed to alter American sex education. Many of these initiatives entailed a continuation and even escalation of policies that had begun under Reagan and that had continued under the first president Bush and Clinton. Other tactics were new.

In 1996, as part of the Clinton administration's welfare reform initiatives, Congress had agreed to provide \$50 million annually to states that used abstinence-only sex education as the standard for schoolchildren. Matching funds, provided by the states, pushed this amount up to \$87.5 million annually. The grant program provided a strong and clear definition for what constituted abstinence-only education. Abstinence-only education programs stressed the "social, psychological, and health gains" of remaining abstinent until marriage. They also promoted abstinence as the standard and only acceptable form of sexual behavior. Teachers in abstinence-only programs stated that abstinence was the only way to prevent pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases; that monogamy within the context of marriage was the only acceptable form of sexual activity; that any type of sexual activity outside of marriage would have "harmful psychological and physical effects;" and that bearing children out of wedlock would have "harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents and society." Also emphasized were methods to teach young adults how to reject sexual advances. Educators stressed the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.⁴⁰

From the perspective of those who advocated comprehensive sex education,

this approach to sex education was riddled with problems. Children who are born out of wedlock are stigmatized by these programs, critics charged. Moreover, in a society that denies same-sex couples the right to marry, abstinence-only programs such as these imply that homosexuals and lesbians should never engage in consensual sex with same-sex partners. Worse yet, said many on the Left, abstinence-only programs “exaggerated the failure rate of condoms” and used “terror tactics to keep teens from having sex.”⁴¹ These criticisms had no effect on funding for abstinence-only programs. Between 1996 and 2005, \$1 billion was channeled into abstinence-only programs.

What were Americans getting in exchange for the money? By 2005 the United States had the highest teenage pregnancy rate of any nation in the industrialized world. And yet Americans were no more or less sexually active than their counterparts in other industrialized nations.

The fault, Representative Henry Waxman charged, lay in the nation’s approach to sex education. In 2004, two years after Satcher left office, researchers prepared a comprehensive report on sex education at Waxman’s request. Focusing on the “most popular abstinence-only curricula used by grantees of the largest federal abstinence initiative,” researchers discovered that over 80 percent of the curricula used by the majority of grantees contained “false, misleading or distorted information about reproductive health.” The report also found that there had been a continuation of the blurring of religion and science that had plagued federally funded programs in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of these programs endorsed outdated gender stereotypes. The most notorious of these was a program called “Choosing the Best.” Widely cited in the press, “Choosing the Best” featured a story in which a knight attempted to rescue a village from a dragon. At a loss as to how to kill the dragon, the knight receives advice from a princess. While the knight uses the advice to kill the dragon, his reliance on the princess leaves him feeling “ashamed.” Rather than marry the princess, he chooses instead to marry a village maiden “after making sure she knew nothing” about how to kill a dragon. The moral of the story? Too much advice “will lessen a man’s confidence and turn him away from his princess.” The story and its use in an abstinence-only curriculum graphically demonstrated the complex agenda of many of those who advocated abstinence-only programs.⁴²

But it was the disregard for science that most angered Waxman. Looking at these and other curricula, a frustrated Waxman said, “I have no objection [to] talking [about] abstinence as a surefire way to prevent unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases . . . [but] I don’t think we ought to lie to our chil-

dren about science.” Something, he concluded, “is seriously wrong when federal tax dollars are being used to mislead kids about basic health facts.”

In response to Waxman’s report, the Bush administration was quick to defend itself. Even though Waxman had indicated that he had “no objection” to talking about “abstinence as a surefire way to prevent” pregnancy and disease, Alma Golden, the assistant deputy secretary for population affairs in the Department of Health and Human Services, moved quickly to imply that Waxman did not support abstinence. The report, Golden lamented in the press, did “a disservice to our children.” In a statement that Waxman would have, and in fact already had, endorsed, Golden reminded her fellow Americans that abstinence is “the most effective means of preventing the sexual transmission of HIV, STDs and preventing pregnancy.” Golden’s approach was nothing new; both opponents and proponents of comprehensive sex education had spent the last three decades speaking past one another in this fashion.⁴³

But problems were not limited to how federal dollars were being used to promote abstinence-only programs. The surgeon general who replaced Satcher, Richard Carmona, proved reluctant to voice his opposition to the Bush administration’s policies on sex education. While Carmona later claimed that he had been expressly forbidden to express his views on sex education, his unwillingness to speak publicly did little to counter the administration’s reluctance to “hear the science.”⁴⁴ This disregard for science was especially troubling as the science on sex education was becoming clearer.

By 2007 the mainstream media began publicizing facts that scientists, statisticians, and public health experts had long suspected. Teens in abstinence-only programs not only engage in sex, they are also less likely to use protection than their peers who receive comprehensive sex education. While religious belief strongly correlates with attitudes toward sexual activity (evangelical teens, for example, are more likely than nonevangelicals to say that they will abstain from sex outside of marriage), it is not always a strong predictor of sexual activity. On average, white teens who identify themselves as evangelicals become sexually active shortly after turning sixteen; their white peers who define themselves as Jews, mainline Protestants, Catholics, or Mormons not only become sexually active at a later age, they are less sexually active than evangelical teens. But even this finding needs to be nuanced; teens who attend church regularly and who strongly identify with their evangelical beliefs tend to be less sexually active than their fellow evangelicals who are not as religiously active. Reflecting this pattern of behavior, the states in the Bible Belt are generally more likely to have



The failure of abstinence-only education programs to prevent pregnancy quickly came to be seen as a joke (2008). *The New Yorker*. © The New Yorker Collection 2008 Frank Cotham from cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.

high rates of teen pregnancy than their counterparts elsewhere. However, it is unclear whether public health experts were focusing on the right factors when assessing teenagers' sexual behavior.⁴⁵

Throughout both Bush administrations, the Public Health Service and its parent, the Department of Health and Human Services, provided few opportunities to those who were eager to explore and candidly discuss the factors influencing teens' sexual behavior or the best ways to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.⁴⁶ Newspaper reports also indicate that the administration of George W. Bush may have been directly involved in activities ranging from rewriting federally funded websites on sexual health to repeatedly auditing organizations that advocate comprehensive sex education.⁴⁷ Lawsuits have also been filed alleging that federal funds have been used to promote religion in federally funded abstinence-only programs.⁴⁸

Chilling as these actions may have been to those who advocate an open discussion about sex education, George W. Bush administration's very aggressive attempts to limit the debate on sex education had an unforeseen effect. By advocating a one-size-fits-all sex education message, the administration united a diverse and growing number of Americans, all of whom believed that sex education should be both comprehensive and secular.

"Individual Responsibility and Mutual Responsibility"

In the summer of 2008, as the presidential election heated up, the McCain campaign released a thirty-second ad attacking Senator Barack Obama. "Obama's one accomplishment?" the ad asked. "Legislation to teach kindergarteners comprehensive sex education." Within days, fact-checking organizations and the media had released assessments of the ad. Pointing out that Obama had called for "age-appropriate sex education" for young children, pundits and columnists quickly agreed that the ad was "off-base" and a distortion of Obama's stance on sex education.⁴⁹ Left undiscussed in these assessments was the fact that Obama's stance on sex education differed little from the position proposed by the federal government ninety years earlier.⁵⁰ But the rush to clarify Obama's position on sex education reflected the fact that sex education still remained a hot-button issue across the United States. And while it quickly became clear that the McCain campaign had distorted Obama's position, the ad graphically illustrated how discussions about sex education can be and often are used both to stoke the culture wars and to advance very different political agendas.

Obama's own views on both sex education and the nature of discussions about sexually active teens were clearly articulated throughout his campaign. When news of Bristol Palin's pregnancy broke, Obama issued a withering condemnation of those who sought to make the story an issue. Reminding Americans that his own mother had been both a teenager and pregnant when she married his father, Obama insisted that "how a family deals with issues and teenage children . . . shouldn't be the topic of our politics, and . . . if I ever thought that there was somebody in my campaign that was involved in [exploiting] something like that, they'd be fired."⁵¹ For Obama, the broader issue was not about the pregnancies of high-profile teens—or even how the actions of high-profile teens could be used as focal points in broader political debates—but rather about how Americans deal with the issue overall. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in August 2008, Obama sought to find and to

remind his fellow citizens of the common ground that many Americans hold in regard to sex education. “We may not all agree on abortion,” he said, “but we can all agree we want to reduce the number of abortions.” For many Americans, Obama’s comments were a clarion call for the nation to provide better sex education. But even as Americans on both sides of the aisle nodded in approval of this measured statement, Obama’s comments in Denver sparked protests at his campaign headquarters in the nearby and heavily evangelical city of Colorado Springs.⁵²

Clearly there were to be no easy answers to the questions of how and why sex education should be taught.