

HOME PAGE	MY TIMES	TODAY'S PAPER	VIDEO	MOST POPULAR	TIMES TOPICS	Welcome, dt	
-----------	----------	---------------	-------	--------------	--------------	-------------	--

**The New York Times**

# Opinion


WORLD	U.S.	N.Y. / REGION	BUSINESS	TECHNOLOGY	SCIENCE	HEALTH	SPORTS	OPINION	ARTS
AUTOS	EDITORIALS	COLUMNISTS	CONTRIBUTORS	LETTERS	N.Y./REGION	OPINIONS	READERS' OI		

OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Beyond Chastity Belts

By **NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF**  
Published: May 2, 2006

Abortion may be the single most polarizing issue in America today, but there's one thing Democrats and Republicans mostly agree on: it would be better if Americans had fewer abortions.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times  
Nicholas D. Kristof.

**On the Ground**

**Send Your Comments About This Column**

Nicholas Kristof addresses reader feedback and posts short takes from his travels.

[Read Other Readers' Comments »](#)

[Columnist Page »](#)

**Podcasts**

**Audio Versions of Op-Ed Columns**

The best way to reduce the number of abortions, in turn, would be to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies. Every year, Americans have three million unplanned pregnancies, leading to 1.3 million abortions.

So it should be a no-brainer that we increase access to contraception, and in particular make the "morning after" pill available over the counter. That would be the single simplest step to reduce the U.S. abortion rate, while also helping hundreds of thousands of women avert unwanted pregnancies.

Plan B, the emergency contraceptive, normally prevents pregnancy when taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex — although it is most effective when taken within 24 hours. It is now available in most of the U.S. only by prescription, but the American Medical Association and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists have both endorsed it for over-the-counter use.

President Bush's Food and Drug Administration has blocked that, apparently fearing that better contraception will encourage promiscuity. But unless the libidophobes in the administration mandate chastity belts, their opposition to Plan B amounts to a pro-abortion policy.

One study, now a bit dated, found that if emergency

SAVE

More Art

De  
To

TimesSelect subscribers can now listen to a reading of the day's Op-Ed columns.

 POD SUBSCRIBE

<http://www.nytimes.com>

contraceptives were widely available in the U.S., there would be 800,000 fewer abortions each year. And even though they are generally available only by prescription, emergency contraceptives averted 51,000 abortions in 2000, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

**INSIDE**

That's one of the paradoxes in the abortion debate: The White House frequently backs precisely the policies that cause America to have one of the highest abortion rates in the West. Compared with other countries, the U.S. lags in sex education and in availability of contraception — financing for contraception under the Title X program has declined 59 percent in constant dollars since 1980 — so we have higher unintended pregnancy rates and abortion rates.

Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium have abortion rates only one-third of America's, and France's is half of America's. France has made a particular push for emergency contraception to lower its abortion rate by making free morning-after pills available to French teenagers, without informing the parents. Nurses in French junior high and high schools are authorized to hand out emergency contraception pills.

That broad availability is the global pattern. While American women cannot normally obtain emergency contraception without a prescription (by which time the optimal 24-hour window has often passed), it is available without a prescription in much of the rest of the world, from Albania to Tunisia, from Belgium to Britain.

One thought that paralyzes the Bush administration is that American teenage girls might get easy access to emergency contraception and turn into shameless hussies. But contraception generally doesn't cause sex, any more than umbrellas cause rain.

The reality is that almost two-thirds of American girls have lost their virginity by the time they turn 18 — and one-quarter use no contraception their first time. Some 800,000 American teenagers become pregnant each year, 80 percent of the time unintentionally.

So we may wince at the thought of a 15-year-old girl obtaining Plan B after unprotected sex. But why does the White House prefer to imagine her pregnant?

Indeed, Plan B may be more important for teenagers than for adults, because adults are more likely to rely on a regular contraceptive. Teenagers wing it.

Granted, making contraceptives available — all kinds, not just Plan B — presents a mixed message. We encourage young people to abstain from sex, and then provide condoms in case they don't listen. But that's because we understand human nature: We also tell drivers

not to speed, but provide air bags in case they do.

The administration's philosophy seems to be that the best way to discourage risky behavior is to take away the safety net. Hmm. I suppose that if we replaced air bags with sharpened spikes on dashboards, people might drive more carefully — but it still doesn't seem like a great idea.

So let's give American women the same rights that they would have if they were Albanians or Tunisians, and make Plan B available over the counter. It's time for President Bush to end his policies that encourage abortions.

[More Articles in Opinion »](#)

**Related Blogs**

[The American Scene](#)

May 2, 11:35 AM

"Somehow, Nick Kristof manages to write an entire column about how much better Europe's approach to abortion is than ours - and Andrew Sullivan manages to echo his points - without once noting that European countries tend to ..."

**Related Searches**

[Plan B \(Contraceptive\)](#)

[Birth Control and Family Planning](#)

[Abortion](#)

[Pregnancy and Obstetrics](#)

U.S. »



[Governor, 88 Years Later, Pardons the Outspoken](#)

**TimesSelect**  
[Frontlines: Imagining Life as an Iraqi](#)

TECHNOLOGY »



[Special Section: Wireless Living](#)

WASHINGTON »



[Blogsphere Is Alive With Colbert Chatter](#)

SPC  
H  
Tr  
th  
A h  
was  
mo

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y./Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | :

Copyright 2006 [The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [C](#)