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Kimberly Haught Washington [illegible]

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Koop: Moralist with flair, general without an army

By Jane Sims Podesta
WASHINGTON TIMES STAFF

The closing lines came to Dr. Charles Everett Koop as he pulled away from the operating table for the last time. He dipped one finger in soap suds and scrawled T. S. Eliot's words across the operating room window. "This is the way the world ends / this is the way the world ends not with a bang but a whimper."

He tugged off his surgeon's gloves, still covered with traces of a hernia operation. The room was silent of farewells on that day, March 6, 1981, when Koop walked out of the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. He knew he never wanted to operate again; Koop wanted to head for Washington.

"There is relief and release not having to constantly make decisions that have to do with life and death... People who go into surgery have a specific kind of personality that is operative in everything they do. A good surgeon is aggressive and suspicious.

Once a man — a pediatric surgeon — cuts open a child and discovers the sight of pain, he does not smile easily. He redefines the meaning of hurt and sometimes he searches for answers beyond the medical books. Koop seldom smiles, concealing a deadpan humor behind a stoic gaze. His words are tightly text-tube babies to give the gay movement more political clout. He was attacked by Sen. Edward Kennedy for telling a high school graduating class that it's "harder to be a woman today than when I was your age" because in his day women "did not have a feminist telling them they must be liberated and they have to fight for their rights."

"I think that some of the things that were said about me were extraordinarily unjust... to be attacked by Sen. Kennedy for my attitude toward women as being medieval and old-fashioned and cruel. A little investigation would have shown that

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I have always gotten along very well with the women I have worked with. I trained more women in pediatric surgery than anybody else in this country. That doesn't sound sexist to me.

"The other thing that I felt was very unfair was that the American Public Health Association voluntarily went to bat against me on the basis of my competence as a public health officer. I believe now, as I did then, that their attack on me was because of my pro-life stand. They were one of the first organizations in the country that came out for abortion on demand -- well before the Supreme Court made that sort of a household word."

What about Koop's Auschwitz sewn but he is given to occasional outbursts of rage and reverence.

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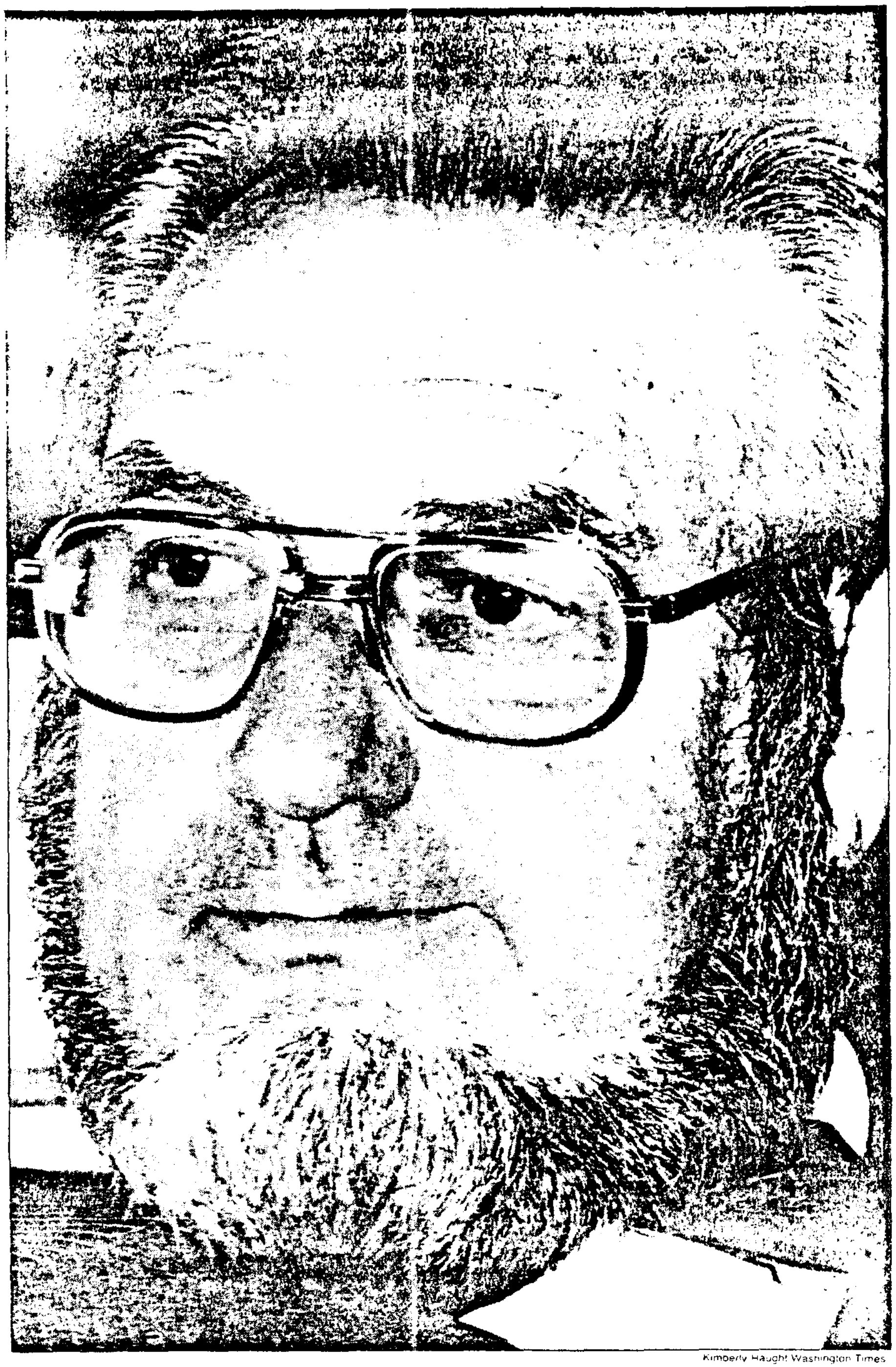
Dr. Charles Everett Koop is a general without a traditional army. He stood alone on The Hill last year waging the fiercest battle of his career to become U.S. Surgeon General. He won the war when Congress confirmed his nomination, but the battle scars are still healing.

Everything controversial that Koop, 66, ever said came tumbling down on him after he left the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia in 1981 and went after the U.S. Surgeon General job. From the beginning he was roundly typecast as a heavy, the Reagan administration's pacifier for anti-abortion forces and fundamentalist Christians. Fragments of his life — commencement addresses, medical papers, religious books — were pieced together in snapshot portraits in the press.

"I'm always amused that the things people say about me have sort of missed the mark. They talk about my armor-piercing glare. I figure, gee, they really don't know how kindly I am. And they say I have the presence of an Old Testament prophet, and I say to myself, 'Little do they know.' I see myself as someone who brings to the job determination and loyalty and a sense of humor that makes it possible to do this."

Clashing images — public perceptions of Koop the fanatic and personal perceptions of Koop the public servant — converge, and one reels in the revolving door. Who is Koop, anyway? He has the bearing of a Civil War general with a scratchy beard hanging around the edges of his jaw. His stern posture supports a surgeon's ego, a healer with firm moral convictions that raised the ire of Congress a year ago.

Foraging through Koop's confirmation hearings obviously still pains the man, yet that past battle needs to be examined to put him into perspective. Without exaggeration, Koop is the most controversial U.S. Surgeon General to come into power in the history of the nation. He is the national counselor for public health matters, holding a position that evolved from the Merchant Marine's "supervising surgeon" in 1798. Today Koop oversees the 6,200 Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service.



Kimberly Haught Washington Times

Surgeon General Charles Everett Koop believes his positions have been distorted by an antagonistic press.

"Everything that was put in the papers was just a repetition of what everybody else said. I was always called an anti-abortion activist as though that were the worst thing in the world to be. A fundamentalist Christian as though that were the absolute end of the earth. The American Public Health Association said of course Koop has not had any experience in public health so he should not even be thought of for this job. Why didn't somebody ask me? Who is the guy who helped build a medical school, who got children's X-rays for shoes removed from the market, who... I could go on."

That sharply clashes with the popular image of Koop, the dogmatic doctor who compared legalized abortion with "the beginning of the political climate that led to Auschwitz, Dachau and Belsen." He predicted in a 1979 commencement speech that in 20 years the Rockefeller Foundation would be funding homosexual's quote? "I wrote a paper one time that was called 'The Slide to Auschwitz.' The fact that I look at abortion, infanticide and euthanasia as successive steps in the lessening of the appreciation of life is nothing original with me. Many people have talked about this for many years. They just didn't happen to be in a position where the president had nominated

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them for the office of a public health official."

Then what about the Rockefeller foundation quote about homosexuals wanting test-tube babies? "There was a lesbian group that made a proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation for artificial insemination. I just merely quoted it out of the newspaper. I thought it was pretty funny… there is nothing that says lesbians will make lesbians."

In Koop's view, his press image is a poorly drawn cardboard cutout constructed of quotes taken out of context and misunderstood remarks. He measures himself by a conservative's gauge, looking over his accomplishments from a singular vantage point that probably nobody else but Koop could ever completely understand. Depending on one's political vantage point, he is either a villain or a hero. There is no denying that the man is an old-fashioned moralist with a dramatic flair.

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His figure is silhouetted before an office window overlooking the Capitol. His gray, pin-striped suit fills a chair and his deep voice occupies the room, a seventh-floor office in the Hubert H. Humphrey Building on Independence Avenue.

Across the office, above Koop's desk is a massive black-and-white portrait of one of his four children, David, scaling the crest of a mountain. Koop says he feels comforted looking at David's calm determination, standing beneath the clouds and above the cares of the rest of us. And only Koop knows how many times he has slid back in his office chair to look at that innocent face, unafraid of mountains that move.

"David was killed six months after that picture was taken in October 1967. He was on top of Mount Adams above the clouds with his older brother Allen. Allen took that shot and sent it to David's fiancee in Louisiana. She sent it away to one of those places that advertise blown-up pictures for $5.95. After several weeks it didn't come back so she wrote away and the company said they had no record of the picture.

"His fiancee assumed that it was lost forever. And David was killed on the 28th of April in 1968. I telephoned his fiancee and told her what happened. She said she would take the first plane to Philadelphia. She walked out of the house to get in the car and the mailman was coming down the driveway with that picture rolled up in a scroll. She brought it to us; she had never seen it until she opened it in our presence.

"You can imagine, if you've lost your son in a mountain-climbing accident, and you suddenly see his picture standing above the clouds with one foot out of heaven. It was both a terrible burden for us to look at and a great source of comfort."

When Koop tells a story, he cuts deep into the heart and operates. He lingers over the words and delivers the last lines with the precise touch of understatement. He learned that from his maternal grandfather, Gustav Apel, a Brooklyn tinsmith who used to load young Charles on his wagon and wander about New York.

Every summer Gustav took off for Nova Scotia with Charles, an only child, by his side and they toured by horse and wagon. They would travel from town-to-town, stopping on the way to hop a dory bound for the lighthouses along the coast. On a good day they would hit two lighthouses, and Gustav would pull out his five-string banjo to entertain the boat crews and the lighthouse keepers.

Gustav Apel, a German-born, self-educated man, figures as the biggest force in Koop's childhood. Koop's father, John, a New York banker, provided the money for Koop to venture off to Dartmouth and Cornell to further his education. But Gustav probably shaped the lad more than his parents when he took young Charles about New York on a horse-drawn wagon on tinsmithing jobs.

With his grandfather's determination, Koop forced his way into precisely the medical spot he wanted the day after Pearl Harbor. The way Koop tells it, his life "hung on that cobweb."

Young intern Charles Koop was in the hospital, suffering from a peptic ulcer on Dec. 8, 1941. That day his wife, Elizabeth, a University of Pennsylvania Hospital secretary, overheard a conversation in her office. She phoned Koop to tell him that she heard Dr. I. S. Ravdin, chief of surgery, was getting ready to take off for Pearl Harbor to doctor the wounded. Bad news. Koop had been talking with Ravdin about training with him and feared that Ravdin might never come back.

"I called the nurse and told her I planned to take a long sleep. I put the light out in my room, got dressed and sneaked out to catch a trolley to the university. I tried to see Dr. Ravdin, but I was told he was busy. I inquired what kind of car he drove, and I was told it was a blue Packard.

"I went out and sat on the running board until he came out. I asked if I could ride downtown with him. We got on the middle of the South Street Bridge and I said, 'Dr. Ravdin, I know you are going to Pearl Harbor tonight. I wonder what I should do about my future surgical training?'

"He had no way of knowing how I knew of his plans. He could either think that I knew somebody in the government higher than he did or that I had some supernatural understanding. In either case, I was a force to be reckoned with. He said, 'I will declare you essential to the univerity tonight and you may start as my resident on the 1st of July.' When he came back from command of the 20th General Hospital, he asked me if I would like to be surgical chief of the Children's Hospital."

Forty years after Pearl Harbor, the first time Koop ever wore a uniform was the day he took over as U.S. Surgeon General. Koop, leader of the Commissioned Corps, is Reagan's spokesman for health care goals and a power within the Department of Health and Human Services.

"Want to put something in your paper that nobody has said? One of the first things Surgeon General Koop did when he got into office, in spite of all the things that have been said about his poor attitude toward women, was to appoint a woman as his deputy."

The day after Dr. Faye Abdellah was sworn in as the first female deputy Surgeon General, she gave Koop two penguins. Pretty soon there were penguins showing up all over the office, all because Koop told a joke about penguins at her swearing-in ceremony.

Koop's mood is animated when he tells the story. He adjusts his bow tie as if he were looking into a mirror, and tosses away his serious side. Another Koop repeats the joke, describing how he was asked by a zoo in Philadelphia to bring two penguins down to the National Zoo. He was pressed for time, so it goes, and Koop asked Abdellah to drive the penguins down. That night — catch this, he says — Koop saw Abdellah in downtown Washington and she still had the two penguins in the front seat.

"'I thought you were going to take the penguins to the zoo,' I told her. She said, 'I did and they liked it so much we're going back again tomorrow,'" Koop says. There, Koop tells a reporter, "See why I say I bring a sense of humor to this office?"

Still, it is difficult for Koop to dispel his popular image as a moralizing preacher of a guy, hell-bent on sending women and gays back to the 19th century. Whether or not his views have been exaggerated, Koop provokes strong emotions in his critics and hears few political figures rallying to his side.

Just about the time Koop thought the furor over his anti-abortion stance had died down, a group of feminist psychologists circulated a pamphlet angrily protesting his appearance at the American Psychological Association Convention last August. The group, the Association of Woman Psychologists, convinced some psychologists to boycott a Koop speech because of his views on abortion, women's rights and gay rights.

"I was really so naive that I didn't think the psychologists would demonstrate. I took the occasion to say how sorry I was that they had chosen that occasion to dig up a lot of things that I thought were buried. I thought that of all people, psychologists should recognize the situation that they put themselves in."

After Koop retrenched from the attack by feminist psychologists, he was taken on by video game manufacturers last month. Koop charged that the video games produce "aberrations in childhood behavior" because "everything is eliminate, kill, destroy."

Wherever Koop goes he believes he is being watched with a critical eye. He stood in for Vice President George Bush recently to address the Maine Bar Association. Before Koop spoke, the association's president told the assembled dinner guests, "For those of you who are uncomfortable because you are smoking in the presence of the Surgeon General, let me tell you that he just put a large dab of sour cream and three pats of butter on his baked potato." Everyone laughed.

Now here's the U.S. Surgeon General, the man said, opening up the floor to Koop. Koop turned to him and said, "Sir, I would remind you that the government pays me to give advice, not to set an example."

Maybe it was the deadpan look or the stern tone of his words that made Koop sound as if he were lashing out at the bar association's president. In any case, the next day, Koop's rejoinder, minus the introduction, was carried over the wires.

"I made a little quip to get back at him and look what happened… I'm going to eat my potato any way I like it."

Enough already. Beyond the potatoes issue, does Koop believe that the Surgeon General really has any power? After all, President Nixon simply abolished the job in 1973 when he was unable to find a candidate and never bothered to appoint anyone. Then President Carter reinstated the job, but there are still those in the government who believe that the power of the Surgeon General peaked in 1964 when the "smoking is hazardous to your health" warning came out.

"The Surgeon General doesn't have power. He is in a position of exerting moral persuasion," Koop says, adjusting his thick, wire-rimmed glasses. He looks up and pauses when he is asked "what kind?" "When the Surgeon General says don't smoke, that is not power, that is speaking from a position of knowledge about an issue that is good for the health of individuals."

Ten years ago Koop kicked the habit and gave up his pipe. Around Koop the air is usually clear of cigarette smoke, but not always because everyone heeds the Surgeon General's warning.

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"It is an interesting thing that very often people who do smoke don't smoke around me or they feel uncomfortable. I gave a talk at an unnamed place once and somebody mentioned that practically nobody was smoking in the room. Then somebody said, 'Yes, but did you try to go to the ladies room?' I hardly ever go into the ladies room so I didn't know."

There is no trace in Koop's voice of the lad who grew up in Brooklyn's Flatbush district. He once orated about morality, the way one imagines his Dutch colonist ancestors talked when they settled in this country in 1690. On a promise to Health and Human Services Secretary Richard Schweiker, Koop agreed to no longer stand on the pulpit and talk about the evils of abortion.

Crusader Koop's strong beliefs crystalized one Saturday afternoon in 1976. He was trying to unwind after operating to save three premature infants who weighed together less than 10 pounds. He has told associates how he sat with his residents and realized "this is what we were put here for." He went home and wrote "The Right to Live; the Right to Die" in a day. Koop became an anti-abortion missionary of sorts, creating a multi-media crusade called "Whatever Happened to the Human Race?" that he took to 20 cities in 1979. He offered moral and medical alternatives to abortion, which Koop described as carnage.

Although Koop usually avoids the subject of abortion today, he offers a reporter a record of "Whatever Happened to the Human Race?" and tells how it records the sound of a baby in a womb. His manner is that of a doctor handing out a prescription to a patient as she leaves the office.

Thirty five years ago when Koop began practicing, he was only the sixth doctor in the country to devote his surgical practice to pediatrics, compared to more than 500 pediatric surgeons today. In the early days there was a 95 percent mortality rate in operations on newborns, vastly different than the 95 percent survival rate today. Koop successfully operated on Siamese twins three times, perhaps a medical record.

"I have had my career and it has been a successful one, well recognized. I don't have to prove anything to myself. I can accept this job with its ups and downs. I think, with some perspective. At my age I don't look forward to needing another job after this one so I'm not going through it worrying about feathering my nest.

"I will be 69 when this term is up, and I don't know how I will feel then about retiring. I've never felt better. I absolutely feel no different than I did when I was 45."

And yet Koop has changed. He is outside the operating room, a place where his expertise was unquestioned, and still searching for a sound level to be understood as U.S. surgeon general.