"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."

Koop: Moralist with flair, general without an army

By Jane Sara Perkins

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 turned 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 together to give the 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 this 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 medi eval and old-fashioned and cruel. A little investigation would have shown that..."
I have always been 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 view? But he is given to occasional outbursts of rage and reverence.

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 1973 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. Fragment 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.'"

Clothing 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 scruffy beard hanging around the edges of his jaw. His stoop 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 pain the man. 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 nation's consoler for public health matters, holding a position that evolved from the Merchant Marine's "supervising surgeon" in 1798. Today Koop oversees the 1.2 million employees of the U.S. Public Health Service.

"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. Who 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."
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them for the office at a public health official.

Then what about the Rockefeller Foundation quoted about homosexuality
was a warning bell? There was a lesbian group that made a
proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation
for artificial insemination. I just
merely quoted it out of the news-
paper. I thought it was pretty fun-
ny... there is nothing that says les-
bians 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 conser-
vative'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 deny-
ing that the man is an old-fashioned
moralist with a dramatic flair.

His figure is silhouetted before
an office window overlooking the
Capitol. His gray, pin-striped suit
fills a chair and the 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 vase with a white
drawing of one of his four children.
David, scaling the crest of a moun-
tain. Koop says he feels comforted
looking at David's calm determina-
tion, standing beneath the clouds.

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

Gustav, a German-born, self-
educated man, figures as the
most fortifying influence 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 tiring jobs.

With his grandfather's determina-
tion, Koop forced his way into pre-
cisely the medical spot he wanted
while Gustav was training.

Young intern Charles Koop was in
the hospital, suffering from a nes-
tic ulcer on Dec. 8, 1941. The day
his wife, Elizabeth, a University of
Pennsylvania Hospital secretary,
overheard a conversation in the
office. She phoned Koop to tell him
that she heard Dr. I. S. Ravdin,
attendee of surgery, was getting ready to take
off for Pearl Harbor to doctor the
wounded. Bad news. Koop was back,
but his name had been added to the waiting list.

"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 trolley at 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 under-
standing. In either case. I was a force
to be reckoned with. He said, 'I
will do what I can for you. I will
try to get you a surgical chief of the
Children's Hospital.'

"Forty years after Pearl Harbor,
the first time Koop ever wore a uni-
form was the day he took over as
U.S. Surgeon General. Koop, leader
of a U.S. Surgeon General, was a
Reagan's speaker man for health care
goods and a power within the Depart-
ment of Health and Human Services.

"Want to put something in your
paper? nobody has asked? I think it was
about the first thin thing 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, to appoint a woman as his
assistant.

A few years later, when the
Surgeon General's wife was in town,
Koop asked Abdellah to drive her
while Abdellah was a woman in the
Surgeon General's group. She drove
the cars and the Surgeon General
went to all the dinners and as a
woman, was to appoint a woman as
his assistant.

The day after Dr. Fayy Abdellah
was sworn in, the first female dep-
y of Surgeon General, she gave Koop
two penguins. Pretty soon there were
penguins showing up all over the office, all beca 
somebody who has power. He is
in a position of enormous authority
and I am not sure what he would do
about my future surgical training.

"I thought he would try to
get me to go to the penguins to the zoo.
I told her, 'I'd like to like them, but I
would never go back again. I could
not take the time to go back again and
work in the office.' Koop said, 'Okay,
I'll send you to the National Zoo. He
was pressed for time, so he goes, and
Koop asked Abdellah to drive the
penguins down. That night --- catch
this, he says --- Koop saw Abdis-
seh in downtown Washington and she
had still the two penguins in the front
seat.

"I thought we were going to take
the penguins to the zoo. I told her.
She said, 'I'd like to like them, but
I would never go back again. I
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and work in the office.' Koop said,
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penguins in the front seat.

Twenty years ago Koop kicked the
habit and gave up pipe. Around
Koop the air is usually clear of cig-
arette smoke, but not always because
everyone needs the Surgeon Gen-
eral's warning.

The Green Sheet
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 1699. 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 crystallized 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 U.S. 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 him 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 a career and it has been a successful one, well recognized. I don't have to prove anything to myself. I can accept that job with its ups and downs. I think with some perspective. At my age I don't look for one this week or another job after this one so I'm not going through it worrying at all 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.