

WHERE IS THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT TODAY?

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I HAVE OFTEN wondered about Jeremiah's wife and how her attitudes were shaped by reading over his prophecies and living through the many rejections of his message. Living with the author of *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*ⁱ has taught me to let go of naive optimism and be more realistic—not pessimistic, but realistic—when looking at the state of our culture. When I say, “They don't know what they are saying,” Bob will say, “They have an agenda.” When I say, “They don't understand,” Bob will say, “Yes, they do.” I am not a prophet, but looking at the past and present of the pro-life movement I can see that it has a future that may be bigger than anyone has imagined.

The future of the pro-life movement is tied up with other cultural developments at the end of the twentieth century. Many new secular and religious groups have formed for the purpose of revitalizing civil society. Many are against abortion or want it limited. These groups resist the tide of moral relativism and carve out a position of principle and policy, and they work to get their message out, especially to the young. The societal change all these groups want is, as Gertrude Himmelfarb says, not just the revitalization of society but “the far more difficult task of remoralizing it.”ⁱⁱ

Resistance alone is insufficient to achieve the larger goal of creating a culture of life.

As the pro-life movement promotes a renewed moral culture, it must resist the utilitarians and the population controllers promoting abortion as a right, a symbol, and a moral value. Political battles are inevitable and necessary to educate the public. Science and technology continue to open new windows on fetal development and the care of neonates. This knowledge adds to our understanding of the miracle of human life. As we look ahead to an enduring defense of life, to what is required in order to face a culture that is “Slouching Towards Gomorrah,” the unknown factor is whether we have the courage and fortitude for the task. How do we

make a moral argument to people who cannot think morally? How do we speak to a culture that has turned against man himself by allowing a parent to kill the child in the womb?

The judicial imperialism of the Supreme Court has colored the whole history of the pro-life movement. The Court created a constitutional right to abortion and took this issue out of the arena of public debate and action by state legislatures, the normal way in which social issues are usually decided by a democratic people. That is why this issue is so fractious and divisive. The Supreme Court imposed a ruling which was contrary to the moral views of the majority.

Pro-lifers have a difficult time working “the political trenches at the state level or [pushing] for statutory restrictions at the Congressional level.”ⁱⁱⁱ The movement has proceeded on two fronts: a war of conscience and an effort of love to reduce the number of abortions through crisis pregnancy centers and the promotion of adoption. By standing for preserving and respecting innocent life with limited means, it has succeeded in getting a hearing. Its articulate defense of the life issues in the national debate has exposed the euphemisms of the pro-abortionists. The other side has access to large amounts of government and private money and to favorable media coverage. The pro-life movement has not yet succeeded in getting an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that will protect life, nor will that happen any time soon. A cultural divide has opened up that can only be closed by a willingness to recognize the basic facts about conception, the effect of pregnancy on women, and the moral truths surrounding life, death, murder, and responsible love.

In the coming years, the goals of the movement will be the same, but the strategy and tactics will change as politics, politicians, technology, and science change. The movement will have to become larger and work with other groups to persuade greater numbers about its fundamental importance to our future as a democracy. Science and technology are providing us with new knowledge of the life of the fetus and pushing back the time of viability. They are opening the horizon of neonatology and confirming the dangers of abortion and post-abortion syndrome. Information about the complexity of developing life and about ways of healing it when ill shows up the horrors of abortion procedures performed

on fetuses of the same age. At the same time there will be still other technologies that destroy life at a much earlier stage of development, such as RU486 and abortifacient vaccines. The question not asked by *Roe* will be challenged by society and denied by pro-abortionists: whether human life begins at conception.

The most recent political success of focusing on an abortion procedure is the debate over partial-birth abortion, another episode in the ongoing battle over whose values are going to guide this country. Most observers agree that “the center of gravity in the abortion debate has shifted, even if only slightly.”^{iv} First, Ron Fitzsimmons, a representative of the national abortion providers’ “trade association,” admitted that the other side was lying about the numbers of partial-birth abortions. The pro-abortion side lost some of its credibility when he acknowledged that many thousands are performed on healthy women carrying healthy babies. They are performed not just in the third trimester but in mid-pregnancy. Then Senator Daschle’s amendment lost, and he voted for Senator Santorum’s bill, which passed 64 to 36. The Daschle amendment, viewed as full of loopholes by pro-lifers, does reflect the feeling even in the liberal community that late-term abortions are not acceptable. His amendment barred abortions on viable fetuses and narrowed the exception to cases threatening death or “grievous” physical injury to the woman. He did not include the usual “health” exception. Some pro-lifers like Bill Bennett thought that a compromise could have been reached with Daschle. The White House staff is concerned that the Republicans will use this issue in the ’98 elections. Our embattled President will certainly veto the bill.

As it stands now, since the wording of the Senate bill was changed slightly, it will be sent back to the House. The House will vote again and send it to the President. The President has ten working days to veto it. If he does not, it becomes law. If he does veto it, the Senate can vote again and try to get the three additional votes needed to override the President’s veto. Some of those who might change are Max Cleland (D-GA), Tom Harkin (D-IA), Bob Graham (D-FL), Bruce Feingold (D-WI), and others.

The two-year debate over the abortion procedure known as partial-birth abortion has seen pro-lifers on the defensive but genuinely successful at educating many people about the true nature of abortion. The use of short

TV ads in key states was successful, as were strong statements by religious leaders. Steve Forbes found his voice on this issue and aired ads on 600 radio stations. Doug Johnson of National Right to Life and other groups have kept the spotlight on this gruesome procedure, with the result that some people are learning for the first time just what abortion really is. Jeff Bell, a Republican strategist, says that even many liberal legislators no longer believe that they can defend late-term abortions. It remains to be seen whether President Clinton has noticed.

When the President vetoed the bill last time, he took the occasion to have a press conference in the Oval Office with several women, including three Catholics. He mentioned the religious affiliation only of the Catholics, implying that these women were “reasonable” Catholics, not blind adherents. He tried to win over both sides by claiming that it was an agonizingly difficult decision for him and that it was a rarely used procedure. He claimed that only a few hundred women a year “endure the agonizing decision of delivering a baby with terrible deformities” which would cause the infant to die around the time of birth anyway. Although many doctors have testified that the procedure is never necessary because Caesarian section is always a possibility, the President claimed that these abortions would help women to preserve their ability to have children in the future. “One of these women Mr. Clinton cited as an example of the need for partial-birth abortions has since suffered five miscarriages.”^v The pro-abortionists have also argued that the baby dies peacefully and painlessly from the anesthesia given to the mother before the procedure begins. The American Society of Anesthesiologists has stated unequivocally that their account was “entirely inaccurate.”^{vi}

Why all the lying? Paul Greenberg, a nationally syndicated columnist, said it well. There are a lot of partial truths about partial-birth abortions because “when an ideology runs headlong into fact, it’s the fact that must be explained away.” The pro-abortionists have known from the beginning that the majority of the American people would not condone abortion. The Court handed them the right, and they have been trying to explain away the facts ever since, their main argument being a woman’s so-called “right to choose.” A *New York Times* editorial maintained this tradition, saying that both sides have made distortions and evasions. We should not be

squabbling over numbers, the editorial insisted, for the principle at stake is privacy: “A ban on the procedure is still an unacceptable political invasion of private medical decisions and an attempt to limit access to abortion.”^{vii}

They want to defend a private medical procedure, even if it is infanticide.

Greenberg says that these rationalizations will continue “because every time one is exploded, another has to be invented. And ideology is nothing if not inventive.”^{viii} We do not know what imaginative rationale the White House will come up with, but we know that there will be one. Greenberg wrote: “Partial-birth abortion has long since ceased to be a medical question; it’s now an ideological one, and what ideology was ever deterred by mere fact?” I hope that Greenberg is wrong on this issue and that Senator Moynihan’s prediction is right that Clinton will change his mind and sign this bill.

On the political front, electing pro-life congressmen and senators is important to winning this cultural battle. During the 1994 elections no pro-lifer lost a seat, which means that no one suffered for holding to a strong pro-life position. Groups are needed like the Susan B. Anthony Fund to raise money to promote pro-life women who are running for Congress. It competes with Emily’s List, which raises much more money for the other side. There is much work to be done among Catholics, 64% of whom voted for Clinton in ’96.

Looking toward the future, the pro-life movement has learned a great deal in its struggle to present the truth about abortion. Statistics show that there are still many people who are pro-abortion, but they are uncomfortable with that position. They were sometimes turned off by the pro-life focus on the baby and felt that the mothers were being ignored. Dr. John Willke, a former head of National Right to Life, has come up with a third-generation strategy which may be helpful by taking as its theme, “Why Can’t We Love Them Both.” We need to be concerned for both the mothers and their children. Post-abortion syndrome is pervasive among women who have had abortions and it needs to be addressed. The Willke’s have produced a new video and a book that offers guidance to meeting pro-abortion arguments. Reaching that group in the middle will continue to be the main goal of the war of conscience.

Dr. Bernard Nathanson, one of the founders of Planned Parenthood and

one of the nation's best known abortionists, changed his mind in 1979 and for the last fifteen years has spoken out on behalf of life. He has reflected on where the movement is now and he sees difficulties for the foreseeable future. This war of conscience is as combustible and as full of incidents of violence as the struggle over slavery. There are many dissimilarities, but the core issue at the center of both struggles is "the definition in moral terms of a human being, and the sweep of natural rights which accompanies that status."^{ix}

He worries that we may be headed down a bloody road similar to the Civil War. The slavery issue was brought to a focus by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, which declared blacks, in effect, non-human property. "Free or slave, said Roger B. Taney, the Chief Justice of the Court who wrote the majority opinion, blacks could not be citizens of the United States and therefore could have no legal standing before the Court. Further, he wrote, 'Negroes are so inferior that they had no rights which a white man was bound to respect' and then went on to liken the slave, as pure property, to a mule or a horse."^x Taney tried to take the issue out of political debate and thereby took away the possibilities of political compromise, which in turn led inevitably to the Civil War.

Like *Dred Scott*, the *Roe v. Wade* decision attempted to remove the issue from public debate and political compromise. Pro-lifers only have the war of conscience as their sphere of action. But in recent years pro-abortionists are trying to constrict peaceful protest and advocacy. It is difficult to get them to attend hearings. Networks refuse to allow pro-lifers to buy time on air for pro-life ads. And there have been campaigns to shut down pro-life protests and pro-life speech. The Freedom of Access to Clinics Act is really an attempt to silence peaceful protest and "sidewalk counseling," not to thwart violence. The media have seized on the incidents of violence committed by the lunatic fringe of the movement and have painted the whole movement as terrorist and fanatical. Dr. Nathanson fears that with the legitimate avenues of protest cut off, extremists and activists with short fuses will resort to more violence. Events of violence by extremists led up to the Civil War, and he is afraid that we may be on the same path.

One of the best things that could happen to defuse this situation would be for the Supreme Court at least to send the question of abortion back to the

States and to let the political process work itself out. My husband does not think that this scenario will happen any time soon.

Dr. Nathanson observes a weakness on the other side: underestimating the depth of pro-life commitment to the cause. “Pro-life convictions spring from and have their roots in traditional Judeo-Christian values, in the Bible, in the commanding concept of the immortal soul.”^{xi} He thinks that this is a fatal mistake. The pro-life cause is rooted in people’s religious and moral beliefs, and they will continue to resist in a non-violent manner. Whether this can become a creative energy capable of re-orienting the culture remains to be seen.

On our side, we should not underestimate the deepening moral morass of society which must be addressed. The banner of abortion is carried by those who hold to a defiant radical individualism that insists on freedom without regard to truth. Their moral blindness is such that they do not accept the unborn child as a unique and irreplaceable human being. Some do acknowledge the humanity of the child, but not its personhood, and still value its destruction for convenience.

C. S. Lewis was concerned about the trend of moving away from objective moral standards when in 1943 he published the essay “The Poison of Subjectivism.” He saw subjectivism as the modern error that leads to the dethronement of reason, and he called it a “disease that will end our species... if it is not crushed.”^{xii} He felt that it leads to a mentality that wants to improve our morality by throwing off the restraints of the past and creating new values. Basic moral premises are given in human experience, and to deny that truth is to risk “the abolition of man.” Progressives argue that there is no traditional moral standard because it changes with history, which can be proven false. They also say that to hold to a certain standard is “to stagnate,” like water that stands too long. “To infer thence that whatever stands long must be unwholesome is to be the victim of metaphor,” says Lewis.^{xiii} Rather, without a permanent moral standard, there can be no progress.

For now the pro-life position is held in contempt by the dominant culture. It is ridiculed as not progressive, as merely neanderthal. We have to make the argument that Lewis made, that the value of the human being is basic to society. It is the “fixed point” against which we can measure our

progress. He predicted: “Unless we return to the crude and nursery-like belief in objective values, we perish.”^{xiv}

We can now argue from experience that many of the changes we see around us are not progress. Alexandra Colen, a member of the Belgian Parliament, reflecting on recent cases of murder and sexual abuse of Belgian children, wrote in *The Human Life Review*: “It was Christianity that brought a fundamentally different view of humanity.... Our society is gradually becoming a post-Christian society in which there is a return to the pre-Christian vision of man.”^{xv} We object to the rape, murder, and abuse of children, but we do not object to aborting unborn human beings. And we do not object to people being used as objects if they consent to it. Children are seen as property of their parents, as something they have a right to conceive or dispose of as they wish.

Gender feminists have further confused the issue by claiming rights over their bodies to the exclusion of anyone else. The body is their property. Eileen McDonagh has written a book, *Breaking the Abortion Deadlock*,^{xvi} in which she seeks to rewrite the feminine language we use about pregnancy and to replace it with masculine terms of self-defense. The fetus is an invader and the mother’s life should be protected from being harmed by this “potential life.” She says, “While it is true that preborn human life is dependent on another person’s body for its survival, it is hardly true that it is weak and helpless. To the contrary, preborn human life is a powerful intruder upon a woman’s body and liberty which requires the use of deadly force to stop.”^{xvii}

The pro-life struggle continues world-wide. The population controllers and the feminists after the Beijing Women’s Conference have put together a plan of action to ensure that their ideas find their way into the legal structures of all countries. So-called “progress” has become an agenda in which the unborn human person is the enemy, expendable in order to achieve certain totalitarian goals. Totalitarian countries crumbled from within, but their ideas and methods have been taken up by the West, intent on the destruction of its old morality. The significance of the pro-life effort is nothing less than the future of humanity.

NOTES

i. Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: ReganBooks, 1996).

ii. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "For the Love of Country," *Commentary* (May 1997) p. 34.

iii. Dr. Bernard Nathanson, *The Hand of God* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1996) p. 188.

iv. Fred Barnes, *The Weekly Standard* (May 26, 1997) p. 12.

v. Editorial, *The Washington Times* (Feb. 28, 1997) p. 22.

vi. *Ibid.*

vii. Editorial, *The New York Times* (March 3, 1997) p. A24.

viii. Paul Greenberg, "Partial Truth Abortions," *The Washington Times* (Feb. 27, 1997) p. A15.

ix. Nathanson, p. 188.

x. Nathanson, p. 188.

xi. Nathanson, p. 192.

xii. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1967) p. 73.

xiii. Lewis, p. 76.

xiv. Lewis, p. 81.

xv. Alexandra Colen, "Some Post-Christian Realities," *The Human Life Review* 23/2 (1997) 59.

xvi. Eileen L. McDonagh, *Breaking the Abortion Deadlock: from choice to consent* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

xvii. Tom Pelton, *Harvard Magazine* (March-April 1997) p. 17.