

A Deadly, Dying Fringe

By David J. Garrow

T WILLIAMSBURG, Va. he killings of two abortion clinic workers in Massachusetts may lead many citizens to believe that America's seemingly endless struggle over a woman's fundamental right to choose abortion is intensifying once again.

Wrong. Instead, what is now happening — from the March 1993 killing of Dr. David Gunn in Pensacola, Fla., through the July 1994 Pensacola murders of Dr. John B. Britton and a volunteer, James H. Barrett, to the shootings of Shannon Lowney and Leanne Nichols in Brookline last week — is the death throes of an anti-abortion movement in which almost every remaining participant realizes that the war to overturn Roe v. Wade has been irretrievably lost.

Ever since the Supreme Court's surprising 1992 reaffirmation of Roe in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, Operation Rescue and similar groups that harass abortion providers and their patients have been in retreat. The pro-death language of those extremists who explicitly advocate or condone violence should not divert attention from the much larger reality of such groups' decline.

Court rulings, energetic civil litigation and Congressional approval of the 1994 Federal Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act have all combined to put Operation Rescue and its progeny on the legal defensive. No longer do the protests of those groups draw anywhere near as many participants as they did four or five years ago.

And nothing has done greater harm to anti-abortion zealotry than the murders of Doctors Gunn and Britton and Mr. Barrett (a retired Air Force colonel) by the "pro-life" activists Michael F. Griffin and Paul J. Hill. Anti-abortion forces are suffering additional damage because of the Brookline killings, by a gunman identified as John C. Salvi 3d. More convincingly than any other possible evidence, the slayings dramatize

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how the anti-clinic wing of the "right to life" movement actually offers a message of hate.

The horror of the Brookline killings has caused even Archbishop Bernard Cardinal Law of Boston, a vociferous abortion foe, and Bishop Leo O'Neil of Manchester, N.H., to call on their followers to suspend all protests at clinics. Most notably, except for a few extremist spokesmen like Donald Spitz of Pro-Life Virginia, a decided majority of anti-clinic activists are telling journalists that they will abide by the bishops' directive. Such striking responsiveness could significantly dampen anti-clinic turmoil.

Don't hold your breath in anticipation, but the National Conference of Catholic Bishops could follow Cardinal Law's example and call for a permanent halt to harassment of

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is not heating up.
It's falling apart.

clinic patients and staff members. That would do more to restore the church's moral and civic authority than perhaps any action since Archbishop Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle gave the invocation at the historic civil rights march on Washington in 1963.

Indeed, the denouement of America's abortion struggle — particularly with regard to these five terroristic killings — is in part following a path that strikingly resembles the one by which the segregationist South, after considerable violence, finally accommodated the racial revolution represented by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In the civil rights era of the mid-1960's, a considerable number of Klan-sponsored assassinations took place soon after such extremist hoodlums realized that they and their more genteel segregationist allies had indisputably lost the legal and political war against fundamental black equality. In Mississippi, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman were killed

just several weeks after a successful, highly publicized Senate cloture vote guaranteed Congressional passage of the 1964 civil rights bill.

Nine months later, two white movement supporters, the Rev. James Reeb and Viola Gregg Liuzzo, were killed by angry Alabama thugs immediately after protests in Selma generated unprecedented national support for Federal protection of black Southerners' right to vote. Five months later, a segregationist in nearby Lowndes County, Ala., shot and killed another movement volunteer, Jonathan Daniels, two weeks after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 took effect and 10 days after newly empowered Federal officials began registering thousands of Lowndes County's black voters.

Of course, neither the 1964 Mississippi killings nor the 1965 Alabama murders were evidence that Southern Klansmen were gaining ground in their terror war against black freedom. Instead, just as with the slayings in Pensacola and Brookline, they were powerful, irrational testimony to how the most hate-filled extremists responded to the realization that they had lost the legal war. Like the Michael Griffins and Paul Hills of today, the Klansmen chose the gun to express their final paroxysms of defeat.

Federal laws and Supreme Court rulings will not convince every last American of either racial equality or a woman's right to abortion. In time, however, as history shows us, American law can and does put an end to the politics of terrorism. Abortion rights supporters will have to remain vigilant, but all those who mourn the deaths of Shannon Lowney and Leanne Nichols should understand where in the long sweep of history their sacrifices fall.

Thirty years from now Ms. Lowney's and Ms. Nichols's names will be remembered in much the same way we now commemorate the ultimate sacrifices of Chaney and Schwerner and Goodman, Reeb and Liuzzo and Daniels. The tragedy of the slayings should not confuse us as to what we are witnessing here; people who kill for "life" represent the last throes of a struggle in which armed terrorism represents the final fringe. □