

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Assessing Mixed Victories Over Abortion Rights

By DAVID J. GARROW

Don't misunderstand the subtitle of William Saletan's informative book on abortion politics. "Bearing Right" does not claim that opponents of legal abortion have prevailed. Quite the contrary. Many opponents, including President Bush, Mr. Saletan accurately reports, have all but explicitly given up any hope of overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

But that does not mean abortion-rights advocates have prevailed, Mr. Saletan argues. Instead he sees a parallel defeat in the proponents' failure to extend *Roe v. Wade* to provide public money for poor women's abortions and in the failure to prohibit parental-notice or consent provisions for minors seeking abortions.

To Mr. Saletan, advocates on both sides have failed, as public opinion has led both "pro-life" and "pro-choice" politicians to abandon the most immoderate positions. As he explains: "The people who hold the balance of power in the abortion debate are those who favor tradition, family, and property. The philosophy that has prevailed — in favor of legal abortion, in favor of parents' authority over their children's abortions, against the spending of tax money for abortions — is their philosophy."

Yet Mr. Saletan, a political correspondent for *Slate*, does not applaud this outcome as a desirable democratic accord. He disparages political actors on both sides for compromising or abandoning their most ab-

A crucial slogan: 'Who decides? You or them?'

solute principles during the abortion battles from 1986 to 1996 that "Bearing Right" perceptively revisits.

Mr. Saletan devotes much more attention to the abortion rights movement than to its opponents, and his account is richly informed by his use of private polling analyses and strategy memorandums from the files of the National Abortion Rights Action League, now known as *Naral Pro-Choice America*. He identifies the pollster Harrison Hickman as the crucial influence in recasting the abortion-rights argument during the late 1980's. "Government intrusion . . . is our most effective argument," Mr. Hickman reported in 1986, and politically "we must not stress the individual's right to abortion, but rather, that the government does not have the right to say that abortion is never acceptable."

Mr. Hickman's advice found a willing consumer in *Naral's* president, Kate Michelman, and Mr. Saletan claims that her embrace of Mr. Hickman's guidance was "the most important turning point in the debate since *Roe*." By early 1989 *Naral's* media consultants had distilled Mr. Hickman's tutelage that "the most important thing is to frame the debate in terms of who makes the choice" into a memorably simple and successful slogan: "Who decides? You or them?"

Attacking "abortion restrictions

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BEARING RIGHT

How Conservatives Won the Abortion War

By William Saletan

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as an encroachment by big government" and shifting the argument to one about "choice" gave abortion-rights advocates a political boost. But Mr. Saletan says that boost came at a price, for the newly recruited supporters of legal abortion refused to embrace all elements of the traditional abortion-rights cause.

In the years immediately after *Roe v. Wade*, abortion-rights proponents struggled to extend that landmark Supreme Court decision to include public funding for poor women's abortions and to prohibit states from requiring minors to inform their parents if they sought an abortion. But the Supreme Court refused to expand its decision to include either provision, and neither in the mid-1970's nor later did either effort win majority popular support.

Instead, as Mr. Saletan reports, in one 1989 poll "five of every eight pro-choice voters in Michigan supported mandatory parental consent," for instance, and 56 percent of respondents in a 1992 national poll opposed federal funding for poor women's abortions. "Without these voters — those who defined choice in terms of family authority and limited government — what was left of the pro-choice constituency?" The answer from the polls was bleak for abortion-rights supporters: "the 'pure' pro-choice vote" constituted only 17 percent of the American electorate.

It is hardly novel to describe abortion politics as a "struggle for alliances," because only two small minorities of voters fully back the two contending camps, but "Bearing Right" explicates the complexities of this struggle in consistently insightful detail. "Framing abortion as an issue of big government rather than women's rights" allowed *Naral* to dominate the political struggle of the early 1990's. But in conquering the middle ground, "the middle ground had conquered them," Mr. Saletan persuasively contends.

Mr. Saletan may betray his political leanings when he calls the Democratic Leadership Council "anti-liberal," but his analysis of contending abortion strategies is undeniably acute. "Bearing Right" disproves what he terms "the myth that the abortion debate is simply a clash between woman and unborn child." Instead, as he repeatedly shows, "activists on both sides have sold their policies to voters as a means to safeguard the rights not of women or unborn children but of husbands, parents, businesses, and taxpayers."

Mr. Saletan notes how some pending anti-abortion measures, like the Child Custody Protection Act, which would make it a federal crime to aid a pregnant minor in evading a state parental-involvement law, capitalize on the "Who decides? You or them?" question just as abortion-rights proponents did a decade ago. His conclusion that "pro-life pragmatism and pro-choice conservatism" have become "indistinguishable" is greatly exaggerated, but Mr. Saletan's political purism does not prevent "Bearing Right" from being a richly instructive book.