

Christian Science Monitor (Boston, MA)
February 23, 2005, Wednesday

Pro-choice groups giving up too much?

By David J. Garrow

OPINION; Pg. 9 **LENGTH:** 986 words

DATELINE: COLUMBUS, OHIO

Only a conscientious collector of abortion-related news clippings can fully appreciate just how much self-doubt pro-choice advocates have been expressing since November's presidential election.

The defeated Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry told a private audience of liberal activists that the party has to convince voters that it doesn't like abortion one bit. Democratic New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, a likely 2008 presidential candidate, in a late January speech, stated that "abortion in many ways represents a sad, even tragic choice to many, many women." Senator Kerry declared on NBC's "Meet the Press" that "abortion should be the rarest thing in the world," and the immediate echo from NARAL Pro-Choice America, the venerable abortion rights interest group, was the announcement of a "new campaign to reduce the number of abortions."

Senator Clinton even declared, "I, for one, respect those who believe with all their hearts and conscience that there are no circumstances under which any abortion should ever be available."

"No" circumstances includes cases where a woman's life is endangered by a pregnancy. That's an exception that many antiabortion crusaders willingly concede, though radicals like Randall Terry, once the leader of Operation Rescue, vociferously disagree. But did Clinton really intend to express "respect" for the most extreme opponents of abortion?

Yet Clinton seems not to be alone. Long-time Democratic operative Paul Begala echoed her remarks, saying, "It's about time a Democrat stood up and said there are too many abortions in America, we ought to restrict the number, and people who oppose abortions are good people."

What's more, a whole slew of usually liberal magazines - Harper's, The American Prospect, The Atlantic Monthly, and the New Republic - have featured prominent essays expressing either ambivalence or downright opposition to the Democratic Party's ongoing defense of abortion rights.

Some of this is not new. The New Republic's Andrew Sullivan has long denounced abortion, and The Atlantic also has previously published anti-abortion screeds. But there's more going on here than just a plethora of calls to bring back the "safe, legal, and rare" slogan that Bill Clinton successfully invoked during his presidency.

Senator Clinton's recent speech altered her husband's prescription, but most journalists didn't notice. She called for a world in which "the choice guaranteed under our Constitution either does not ever have to be exercised or only in very rare circumstances." Only Slate's William Saletan highlighted the difference. "Not safe, legal, and rare. Safe, legal, and never," he emphasized. "Is the press corps asleep?"

Maybe. Several major newspapers failed to report the resignation of Gloria Feldt, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the pro-choice movement's biggest organization. When Ms. Feldt told Newsweek that "the issues have become too polarized, too much about abortion ... abortion is just a tiny piece of it," the magazine posted her surprising comment only on its website. Feldt, like Senator Clinton and NARAL, would rather discuss birth control and how most antiabortionists also oppose contraception. Yet that change of subject will be difficult to achieve.

But the most important statement of all has come in Conscience, the quarterly magazine of Catholics For a Free Choice. Frances Kissling, CFFC's president, is an abortion rights veteran whose involvement reaches back to 1973, when *Roe v. Wade* first legalized abortion nationwide. "At the time *Roe* was decided," Ms. Kissling accurately writes, "people spent little if any time thinking about the fetus." But scientific advances have made the fetus far more visible and "present among us" in today's culture than it was then, and that development has fundamentally altered the cultural underpinnings of political battles over abortion. Yet pro-choicers, Kissling says, have failed to make any meaningful response to this major cultural change.

Kissling argues that abortion rights advocates must "assure the public that we do value fetal life." She also asserts that "I do not think that considering and respecting fetal life ... is the least bit inconsistent with support for legal abortion." Acknowledging that "a siege mentality has developed" among pro-choicers, she admits that "we fear that the expression of any sadness for the loss of fetal life that is part of abortion will be interpreted as weakness. I believe that the exact opposite is true."

Pro-choice groups will be making a bold gamble if they follow Kissling's advice. Is it truly possible to simultaneously emphasize that abortion "in and of itself is not a moral good," as Kissling says, yet also energetically champion its largely unrestricted availability as a legally inviolate constitutional right?

As Senator Clinton demonstrated, defending a fundamental right while recommending that it be exercised rarely if at all may very well be a rhetorically impossible balancing act even for the most adroit politicians.

Perhaps pro-choice politicians instead should revive a now largely forgotten abortion rights credo of the *Roe* era: every child a wanted child. Although the fears of overpopulation that once helped give rise to that slogan no longer resonate, statistics show that the neglect and maltreatment of young children is an even larger problem in American society today than it was three decades ago.

Perhaps no public figure wants to discuss how many fetuses, once born, tragically become victims of neglect. But increased attention to the fetus ought to be accompanied by a more honest public conversation about how often childbirth then leads to child abuse.

* David J. Garrow is the author of 'Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of *Roe v. Wade*.'