

The battles over abortion

2 activists offer their views of the past and the future of the right to choose

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CHICAGO TRIBUNE, June 18, 2006, Section XIV, Page 4.

How the Pro-Choice Movement Saved America: Freedom, Politics, and the War on Sex

By Cristina Page

Basic Books, 236 pages, \$24

With Liberty and Justice For All: A Life Spent Protecting the Right to Choose

By Kate Michelman

Hudson Street Press, 278 pages, \$24.95

For most anti-abortion activists, their opposition has always gone hand-in-hand with opposition to artificial contraception, even if that linkage is rarely highlighted. And while a principled belief that human sexual activity must be reserved for the unobstructed purpose of procreating human life within a husband and wife's marital union is analytically understandable, it's a position that can lead to certain excesses. For example, the prolife.com Web site poses the question, "What about masturbation?" When you click for the answer, it's a memorable one: "masturbation is a homosexual act: sex with a person of the same sex, namely yourself."

How many pubescent teenagers, surfing the Web for explanations of newly developing feelings, may stumble upon this bizarre characterization and suddenly begin worrying that they're really gay?

That outlandish claim is noted in Cristina Page's provocatively titled attack on anti-abortionists' policy agenda, "How the Pro-Choice Movement Saved America."

Three years ago, Page, who works for the New York affiliate of NARAL Pro-Choice America, teamed with a young woman who worked for Right to Life of Michigan, Amanda Peterman, to write an op-ed piece in The New York Times that emphasized how increasing the availability of contraceptives, and providing health-insurance coverage for them, can reduce unwanted pregnancies and thereby decrease the total number of abortions. Pro-choicers' reactions were "mildly supportive, but mostly wary," Page says, but she was astounded when her co-author was engulfed in a "firestorm" of "livid" responses from abortion opponents.

If it took that experience for Page to appreciate anti-abortionists' intense and widespread opposition to contraceptives, she has only her own ignorance of U.S. reproductive-rights history to blame. Her book seeks to herald what she calls "the hidden anticontraception agenda of the pro-life movement," but it has never been a secret to anyone who's even half-attentive to the issue.

Page warns that "the pro-life movement has intensified its campaigns and rhetoric against birth control," and that such initiatives are "new," but opposition to contraception has been a core anti-abortionist principle since well before the U.S. Supreme Court, in 1973 in *Roe vs. Wade*, expanded constitutional privacy to protect a right to abortion up until the point of fetal viability.

Page rightly emphasizes that "there is not one pro-life group in the United States that supports the use of birth control," and that "the pro-life movement leads a stupefying and aggressive pseudoscientific campaign against the condom," but neither of these points should come as news to anyone who's interested in Page's subject.

As its title suggests, Page's book will have contributors to pro-choice organizations cheering her on as they turn each page, but it's unlikely to change the views of anyone who has mixed feelings about abortion rights. Yet she correctly highlights how for most pro-life activists, the core problem is neither abortion nor contraception but sex:

"Pro-life groups are not merely anti-abortion and anti-birth control. They are against sex and the sex lives the vast majority of Americans enjoy."

Page's acknowledgment that for most human beings sex is "a recreational activity" contrasts starkly with the American Life League's insistence that birth-control pills are nothing more than "recreational drugs." "We are in the midst of a culture war over sex," Page writes, and right-to-lifers are best understood as an "antisex movement," not just an anti-abortion one.

While Page is unschooled in reproductive-rights history, Kate Michelman, who was president of NARAL from 1985 to 2004, knows it all too well.

Her memoir, "With Liberty and Justice For All: A Life Spent Protecting the Right to Choose," retraces the abortion battles of that period, focusing on the Clinton years, when an abortion-rights ally was president. Michelman made her early mark at NARAL with the slogan "Who Decides? Women or the government?" which focused the abortion debate on the politics of choice, not the moral status of fetal life.

In 1992, just months before Bill Clinton's election, the Supreme Court narrowly but powerfully reaffirmed *Roe vs. Wade* in *Planned*

Parenthood vs. Casey. It was a landmark pro-choice victory, followed within two years by a second: enactment of the federal Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act, which all but ended extreme anti-abortionists' invasions and blockades of abortion clinics.

But for NARAL, those crucial successes, like Clinton's election, spelled trouble rather than triumph. Michelman already knew that pro-choice Americans responded energetically only to warnings of dire threats, not to reassuring developments. Even worse, abortion opponents had shifted to more-modest short-term goals, and their targeting of what they called partial-birth abortions--a procedure used for a modest percentage of abortions that occur after the 16th week of pregnancy--was a public-relations masterstroke.

The partial-birth issue became even more damaging when several major newspapers reported that pro-choice organizations were "deliberately underestimating the frequency with which the procedures were used." Michelman acknowledges that, "Once our factual statements were questioned, it was difficult to overcome the doubts," and she recounts pro-choice U.S. Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) coldly confronting her and declaring, " `You've lied to us.' " Michelman rightly asserts that she herself had not lied to anyone, but she concedes that the partial-birth debacle was "a case study in how to mishandle a controversy."

In 2000, the Supreme Court struck down a partial-birth-ban law. Michelman says it was "a critical victory," yet she tellingly adds that "like other successes, this one provided false reassurance to pro-choice Americans" that the courts would continue to protect abortion rights.

Michelman's goal was political supremacy, not constitutional affirmation, but when John Kerry emerged as the Democrats' 2004 presidential nominee, the pro-choice movement suffered further damage.

Candidate Kerry "seemed determined to treat a woman's right to choose as a liability, not an opportunity," Michelman complains, and after losing the election Kerry privately blamed abortion for his defeat. "Kerry's mistake was not speaking more forcefully about his pro-choice values," Michelman says, adding that abortion-rights supporters should not "embrace an overwrought or apologetic rhetoric that serves the interests of our opponents."

At a time when many pro-choice activists feel on the defensive, Michelman's memoir is a frank and bracing reminder that no short-term political calculus can justify betraying fundamental values. "We do not need to move to the right or reposition ourselves in the center," she says, for the basic right to choose continues to retain firm majority support. Instead, Michelman says, committed pro-choicers must continue to "protect, without apology, the right of every woman to obtain a safe and legal abortion."

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