



The Liberal Origins of the Pro-Life Movement

Daniel K. Williams



This year's sharply differing Democratic and Republican platform statements on abortion reflect a partisan polarization on the issue that surprises no one. Ideological bifurcation between pro-choice liberals and pro-life conservatives has continued for so long that the pro-life movement's origin as a liberal cause has been almost entirely forgotten. Yet in the early 1970s, liberals were not only part of the pro-life campaign but, in fact, were the dominant voice in the movement, shaping pro-life ideology and framing the cause as a progressive fight for the civil rights of the unborn and the value of human life.

If one could travel back in time forty-four years to observe the first pro-life rally ever held on the National Mall in Washington, DC—a rally which the National Youth Pro-Life Coalition (NYPLC) organized in September 1972—liberals would have been in evidence everywhere. In keeping with NYPLC cofounder Sue Bastyr's description of her organization as "an extremely liberal group," the protest on the Mall featured a keynote address from the antiwar Lutheran minister Richard John Neuhaus, who had served as a delegate for George McGovern at the Democratic National Convention earlier that summer. "The anti-abortion forces are not instruments of political and social conservatism," Neuhaus declared.

About the Author



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“Rather they are related to the protest against the Indochina war, the militarization of American life, and the social crimes perpetrated against the poor.”¹

Pro-lifers’ success in framing their campaign as a human rights cause linked to the progressive politics of the antiwar movement and the War on Poverty contributed to their legislative victories in the early 1970s, when they defeated dozens of proposed abortion legalization bills. In 1972, the pro-life movement enjoyed the support of the Democratic vice-presidential nominee, as well as the most high-profile liberal Democratic senator in Washington.² After *Roe v. Wade*, this situation changed: pro-lifers who found themselves marginalized in the Democratic Party made new alliances with conservative Republicans, who did not necessarily share their larger values. Yet the pro-life movement’s conversion to conservatism was never complete; the movement retained vestiges of its liberal heritage, and these traces of liberal ideology became the key to the movement’s continued political saliency. By reexamining

dates back to the 1930s, when Catholic doctors drew on Catholic social teaching to oppose the first public calls for abortion law liberalization. These Catholics were often political liberals who championed the New Deal and who viewed calls for the legalization of abortion and contraception as attacks on human dignity that undermined the values that had led to the creation of the social welfare programs they supported. Abortion reduced human beings to the “level of a beast or to that of a cog in the social mechanism, thus destroying the essential dignity of man as a child of God and destined for God in heaven,” the National Federation of Catholic Physicians’ Guilds declared in 1937. Attacks on prenatal life were “closely connected with a long denial of a truly living wage and of social justice in our present economic order,” the Federation’s Jesuit moderator, Fr. Ignatius Cox, declared.³

As Cox’s advocacy of a “truly living wage” indicated, the Catholic New Deal Democrats who opposed abortion in the 1930s embraced a theology of social obligation and

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the forgotten origins of the modern pro-life movement, this essay explores why the pro-life movement emerged on the political left (rather than on the political right, as is usually supposed), and why pro-lifers’ political success has in large measure depended on their ability to ground their message in liberal values.

The liberal ideology of the modern right-to-life campaign

care for the less fortunate that papal encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) had mandated. This tradition of social teaching was based on slightly different premises than New Deal liberalism, yet there was enough correspondence between the two approaches that most Catholics of the 1930s were enthusiastic advocates of President Franklin Roosevelt’s

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social welfare programs. Indeed, some of the American Catholic clergy—especially Msgr. John Ryan, who served on the Industrial Appeals Board of the National Recovery Administration—often positioned themselves to the left of President Roosevelt in their calls for government aid to the impoverished and a living wage for workers.

It was thus not surprising that many of these politically liberal Catholics endorsed the liberal human rights movement of the late 1940s and sought to ground their claims for the right to life for the unborn in this larger human rights ideology. In 1947, the National Catholic Welfare Conference began its declaration of human rights with the “right to life and bodily integrity from the moment of conception,” but followed that with a call for the “right to a living wage,” “collective bargaining,” and “assistance from society”—a sign that the nation’s Catholic bishops considered their defense of prenatal life inseparable from a larger human rights program and New Deal liberalism.⁴ Many liberals at the time accepted this connection, which was one reason why the legal recognition of prenatal rights advanced in the late 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Between 1939 and 1958, state supreme courts or appellate courts in California, Kentucky, Minnesota, Ohio, and

Oregon, along with the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, issued decisions recognizing the personhood of the fetus in tort cases involving prenatal injury. Even the United Nations recognized the value of prenatal life. The Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which the U.N. adopted in 1959, declared that the child “needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth.”⁵

But defenders of the rights of the unborn lost ground in the 1960s. Catholic political influence waned in the wake of *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), the Supreme Court decision on birth control that seemed to discredit the Church’s longstanding campaign against contraception. Even worse, public opinion polls in the wake of Vatican II showed that a majority of Catholics no longer shared the Church’s view on abortion.⁶ Vatican II had reaffirmed the Church’s opposition to abortion in uncompromising terms, but many Catholics no longer felt obligated to honor such teaching—which prompted many politicians to realize that they no longer had to fear a backlash from Catholic voters if they supported abortion legalization. In 1967, three states liberalized their abortion laws, followed by thirteen others during the next three years.⁷

Faced with the challenge of gaining a hearing for the pro-life view, some advocates of fetal rights, such as National Right to Life Committee founder Msgr. James McHugh, decided to refocus the attention of the right-to-life movement on issues of human rights and social welfare, concerns pro-lifers hoped would appeal to American non-Catholic liberals. In language that echoed the charges

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of the New Left, many Catholics claimed that the fight against abortion was a quest to preserve respect for the life of the individual in the face of an increasingly technocratic society that saw human life only in utilitarian terms. "A failure in proper reverence for a single life, be it adult or intrauterine, is an attack on us all in principle," the Jesuit theologian Richard McCormick wrote in 1967. "We all have a profound communal stake in how our society solves its social, economic, and medical problems—whether destructively or constructively."⁸ In a direct appeal to the liberal tradition, Germain Grisez, a Georgetown philosophy professor who criticized the Vietnam War as unjust and condemned the strategy of nuclear deterrence as immoral, characterized his position on abortion as "an extremely *liberal* one—'liberal' not in the sense of approving abortion but *liberal* in the sense of favoring the freedom of the unborn to make their own choice about life and defending their right to live long enough to make that choice."⁹

The pro-life campaign became even more overtly liberal after women who rose to positions of leadership in the movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s made care for pregnant women a central part of their mission. Birthright, an international organization which Louise Summerhill founded in 1968 and which was led almost

exclusively by women in the early 1970s, made helping women facing crisis pregnancies its top priority and chose as its main slogan, "It is the right of every pregnant woman to give birth, and the right of every child to be born."¹⁰ Women Concerned for the Unborn Child, which Mary Winter founded in Pennsylvania in 1970, proclaimed a similar message, saying that abortion was the "ultimate exploitation of women."¹¹

Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life, which had been founded by Alice Hartle in 1967 and was led by Marjory Mecklenburg in the early 1970s, was especially vocal in calling for material assistance for pregnant women and their unborn children. Its charter document pledged the organization "to promote and encourage assistance in the care and rearing of children with birth defects," and "promote enlightened care and assistance to mother and child in difficult, unwanted and illegitimate pregnancies."¹² "The solution to the woman's problems is neither to offer her abortion, nor merely to prohibit it, but rather to demonstrate that there are humane alternatives," one MCCL brochure explained. "This means that we must provide counseling, medical care, financial assistance, homes for unwed mothers, adoption agencies and effective welfare programs. . . . Better development and use of such programs and agencies is far more socially progressive than the

violent, destructive, superficial solution of unrestricted abortion.”¹³

Some pro-lifers began to see a connection between defending fetal life and defending human life from destruction in war. Right-to-life activists had not said much about the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s, but by the end of the decade, several of the nation’s bishops, along with many pro-life activists, were calling for an alliance between antiwar activism and the pro-life cause. Archbishops Humberto Medeiros of Boston and John Dearden of Detroit issued statements linking the campaign against abortion with the antiwar cause, but one of the most succinct expressions of this consistent life ethic came from NYPLC cofounder Sue Bastyr, who declared, “If you are against killing in Vietnam, you should be against abortion.”¹⁴

This rhetoric appealed to some of the nation’s leading politicians on the left, especially if they were Catholic. In 1971 Senator Edward Kennedy, who was a supporter of the pro-life cause prior to *Roe v. Wade*, argued for the connection between pro-life activism and other social justice causes. “Wanted or unwanted, I believe that human life, even at its earliest stages, has certain rights which must be recognized—the right to be born, the right to love, the right to grow old,” he declared. “When history looks back to this era it should recognize this generation as one which cared about human beings enough to halt the practice of war, to provide a decent living for every family,

and to fulfill its responsibility to its children from the very moment of conception.”¹⁵

Partly as a result of the support they received from political liberals, pro-lifers began winning legislative victories, not only in conservative states, but also in bastions of Democratic liberalism such as Minnesota and Massachusetts. In 1971, twenty-five state legislatures considered abortion legalization bills, but pro-lifers stopped every one from passing. And in 1972, the pro-life movement experienced a similar level of success, blocking abortion legalization measures in all but one of the states that considered them.¹⁶

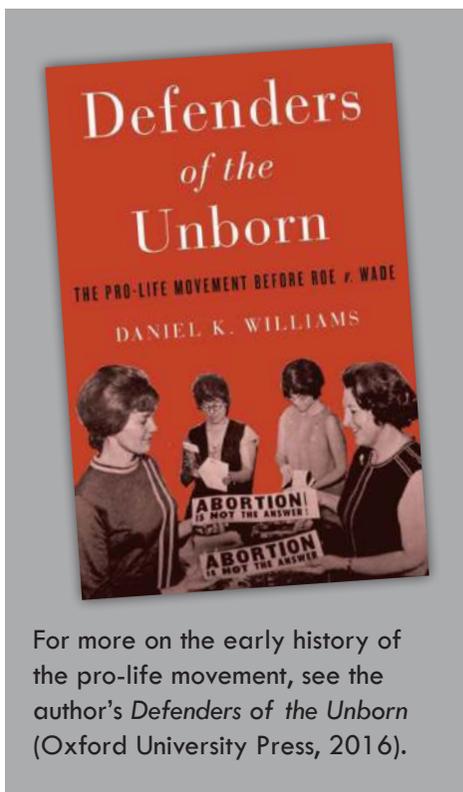
But in spite of its early alliance with the politics of the left, the pro-life movement ultimately ended up on the political right. In the end, most political

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liberals decided to distance themselves from the movement because the liberal values of the pro-life movement—values such as the belief in the constitutional protection of all human life and the commitment to defending the lives of defenseless minorities—came into conflict with other liberal values, such as the belief in personal autonomy and the rights of women to have full equality with men and full control of their own fertility. *Roe v. Wade* (1973) brought this conflict to a head and ultimately led to the severing of the pro-life alliance with political liberalism by siding with pro-choice liberal arguments, while directly repudiating the central claims of pro-life liberals. This had a profound effect on

American liberals. Prior to *Roe*, the Democratic Party had been divided over abortion, because both pro-life and pro-choice Democrats could legitimately claim that their arguments were grounded in the party's historic liberal tradition. But by making one particular set of arguments settled law, *Roe* bolstered the claims of one group of liberals in this debate and tipped the balance of power in the Democratic Party in favor of pro-choice advocates who viewed abortion as a women's rights issue. Liberal Democrats could not endorse the pro-life movement's demands for a Human Life Amendment to the Constitution without alienating the feminists in their coalition. The safest course, many decided, was to profess personal opposition to abortion, while refusing to support any measures to limit its availability. This was the course that Senator Edward Kennedy and numerous other Democrats decided to take.

Roe thus had the unanticipated effect of pushing the pro-life movement into an alliance with political conservatism, because most of the limited political support that pro-lifers found for a constitutional amendment to protect unborn life came from the political right. Many conservative Republicans, including Ronald Reagan, viewed the Supreme Court's ruling in *Roe v. Wade* as an example of judicial overreach and a misreading of the Constitution, and their opposition to *Roe* endeared them to the pro-life movement. But pro-lifers' alliance with the Republican Party was never a comfortable one, and it required them to make political compromises that distressed some members of their movement. As the movement became more narrowly focused on reversing *Roe*,



For more on the early history of the pro-life movement, see the author's *Defenders of the Unborn* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

pro-lifers abandoned some of the earlier human rights causes, such as antipoverty and antiwar efforts, that had once interested them. In fact, after decades of allying with conservatives on the issue of abortion, some pro-lifers became ardent champions of a few of the conservative causes that they had once strongly opposed. Richard John Neuhaus, the antiwar pro-life Lutheran minister who had given the keynote address at the National Youth Pro-Life Coalition's rally on the Washington Mall, eventually became both a Catholic and a neo-conservative because of his pro-life commitment, and he ended his life as a supporter of the Iraq War.¹⁷

But in spite of this political shift on the part of many pro-lifers, the movement's central human rights claim—the claim that the fetus has an “inalienable” right to life—remained the guiding force for the movement, and it was a primary reason why the movement retained

its political influence among young people in the rights-conscious era of the early twenty-first century. By 2009, Americans aged 18-29 were more likely than their counterparts in any other age group to say that abortions should be illegal in all circumstances.¹⁸ Young people who oppose abortion today do so because they believe that abortion violates a fetus's right to live. They have probably long since forgotten the New Deal Democrats or the antiwar liberals who contributed to their movement's formation in an earlier era. But they have not forgotten these pro-lifers' central argument, which is that the fetus is a person deserving legal protection. The contemporary pro-life movement may not have the support of liberal politicians in Washington, but its continued use of rights-based language has allowed it to retain an appeal that is possible only because of the movement's liberal origins. **P**

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