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Pro-Choice Revolution or Reform?

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Toward the Free Society

Jan. 22, 1995 marked the 22nd anniversary of Roe v. Wade. Instead of being a celebration, it was a day of mourning. Instead of being an affirmation to women everywhere, it was mostly filled with muted anger and suppressed rage. In demonstrations across the US the urgency to break through the liberal facade was palpable on the faces of fierce women taking the streets in the bitter cold. What we need to do now is repeat again and again, “we won’t go back,” taking our demands beyond this rotting American dream. We need a movement willing not only to defend the clinics but to build an insurgent base for a revolutionary counter-society. Only then will we be able to defend our bodies and bring their hate machine to the ground. The women who have given up their lives demand that we push beyond Roe. As women took the streets in NY on the 22nd, police politely asked us to stay on the sidewalk; we refused. Our freedom is not up for negotiation, our bodies are not up for a vote. Our lives depend on our refusal and our willingness to put our bodies beyond their death culture and grasp the free society.

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be used to protect abortion clinics and women, limiting Operation Rescue's efforts to shut clinics down, without affecting other political struggles. Just imagine RICO in the hands of Alabama's state legislature during the Montgomery bus boycott. NOW's myopic view of women's rights leads directly to such counter-productive victories. Moreover, legal efforts have failed.

Note that Brookline had "model" anti-blockade laws. Doctors wearing bullet-proof vests with armed bodyguards are still murdered. Faced with their own political failure, the liberals can only re-double their lobbying efforts, hoping that a split will develop within the right. As Susan Yanow of the Massachusetts Abortion Access Project was quoted as saying, "the shootings have divided the abortion movement. They are fighting with each other over tactics." Caught in this quicksand of lesser-evilism, liberal feminists hope the checks-and-balances charade of American democracy will rein in the extremists. This strategy represents a death of vision that cannot adequately ensure women's reproductive freedom. The anti-choice movement has moved its agenda beyond a legislative strategy to destroying the women's movement with violence. We need to take direct action against this movement to stop them. Roe was a tremendous victory, we now have to expand on it. We need to defend Roe and the clinics using whatever means necessary. We have to move women's reproductive freedom outside the parameters of the state's authority, linking abortion rights to Major Ana María of the Zapatista National Liberation Army's vision of a free society, a world without borders and directly democratic, moving us toward directly challenging the existing order's monopoly on power.

The Pro-Choice Response

The liberal pro-choice movement has failed; it's just too wedded to the system to admit it. In response to the rise of anti-choice forces in the mid 1980s many feminists formed local direct action clinic defense groups. These groups, often coalitions of different political tendencies, had a more flexible approach to the new terrain of the struggle. These groups tend to choose tactics which fit the situation, meaning if the police were relatively benign they would use this to their advantage, if they were not the clinic defenders challenged anti-choice forces and the police with the same resistance. The National Organization for Women's [NOW] standpoint has always been to lobby the state regardless of it's response, and attempt to integrate other feminist movements' efforts into their own. This was done not so much out of opportunism, as the logic of its liberalism. NOW believes its establishment ties put them on the front line of feminism's possible success, therefore they should determine the movement's direction. The end result has been the half-hearted use of clinic defenders, chanting leftist slogans from behind police barricades while the police fail to provide even the minimal protections offered by the law. The liberal feminists' new legislative weapon—National Organization for Women et. al v. Joseph Scheidler et. al., better known as the RICO case—creates dangerous legal precedents for revolutionaries (Love and Rage vol. 5, # 3). While this may seem like a display of anarchist revolutionary elitism, RICO limits all activists' ability to determine what tactics are necessary to ensure their freedom. RICO empowers the government to prosecute any organization (in this case Operation Rescue) engaged in a pattern of "racketeering," broadly including acts or the conspiracy to commit such acts, such as interference with commerce, arson, obstruction of justice. Prosecution under RICO does not have to take place in a public court, and grants the state unlimited power to seize documents and force testimony. NOW argues that RICO will

On Dec. 30, 1994 John Salvi, an anti-choice hitman, walked into the Planned Parenthood Clinic in Brookline, Mass., shot and killed Sharon Lowney, the receptionist, and wounded three others. Salvi then walked down the block to the Pre-term Clinic and opened fire again, killing Leanne Nichols and wounding two other clinic staff members. These murders are the third such attack in the last year and a half. In Mar. 1993, Michael Griffin shot and killed Dr. David Gunn. Griffin was a member of Rescue America, an anti-choice group founded by former Ku Klux Klan member John Burt. On July 29, 1994, the Reverend Paul Hill assassinated Dr. John Bayard Britton and his clinic escort James Barrett, wounding escort June Barrett.

News reports have been quick to fixate on the establishment churches' criticisms of the Brookline killings, arguing that the insanity surrounding abortions leads to such desperate actions. In other words, "women's reproductive freedom is unacceptable, this is what you're going to get if abortion remains legal." Yet, while there are no direct ties between the Catholic hierarchies, Operation Rescue's troops, and John Salvi, he is not a lone gunman, nor are his actions beyond the pale of the religious right's tactics.

From 1984 to 1993, the National Abortion Federation has recorded 1,540 incidents of violence at clinics; almost 200 clinics have been bombed, 254 have received bomb threats, 276 were invaded, and 279 vandalized. This rise in violence since the mid-1980s marks the religious right's awareness that its legal efforts to overturn Roe v. Wade have failed. The religious right has now moved to overturning Roe through the use of violence. In order to resist the right's use of hitmen and physical force, we need to break from the politics of liberal feminism and accept only a feminism that is fundamentally about liberation, not protection. We must begin by reinvigorating feminism with a refusal to negotiate women's reproductive and sexual freedoms. Women's right to abortion on demand must be part of a strategy to transform society

through a militant mass movement that is directly democratic and empowers all women, a movement that can independently guarantee women's reproductive freedom.

Abortion Reform and Women's Liberation

Women won the legal right to abortion in 1973 because there was a mass movement forcing the government to change or risk being destroyed by the social movements of the 1960s. The women's movement related abortion reform to a revolutionary vision, shaped by their participation in the struggle for Black liberation, inspired by the resistance of women like Assata Shakur, who withstood police torture for being a leading figure in the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army. Sisterhood was an international solidarity, binding the 100,000 women in Thieu prison in Vietnam fighting American imperialism to women's demand for absolute control of their bodies.

The victory of Roe had clear limitations from the outset—it did not grant abortion on demand nor do women now have permanent control of their bodies beyond the state. Simply, it asserted that the state would not regulate women's right to privacy. Roe benefited the state, undercutting more radical demands for free health care, pre-natal services, and control of the burgeoning abortion business, and cementing a dependency between liberal feminist organizations, the court system, and the illusory left wing of the Democratic Party. The result was women becoming one more interest group whose rights are settled in the court of public opinion.

The Right Counter-Attacks

Since 1973, the right has mounted a legislative assault on abortion rights. The Hyde Amendment cut off federal Medicaid funding for abortion in 1977. Further, the marked decrease

in the number of obstetrics-gynecological residency programs offering training in abortion procedures, and public hospitals unwilling to provide the service due to political expediency, illustrates that Roe, like much of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, set up symbolic rights, neglecting the entrenched social and economic inequalities that made Roe a hollow victory for many women.

During the Reagan-Bush years, the women's movement was faced with continued attacks on clinics, an unsympathetic White House, and a disinterested House and Senate dominated by Democrats. Without a mass movement, the Democrats could afford to pay lip service to women's rights while not following through. The right was then convinced it had successfully set the national tone to legally dismantle Roe. The new Bush nominees to the Supreme Court, however, didn't overturn Roe, although they severely restricted it. The 1992 Casey decision, and Webster v. Reproductive Health Services in 1993, required parental notification and gave the states leeway to require waiting periods; barriers that overwhelmingly affect poor, rural, Black and Latina women.

Seeing the new Republican-dominated House and Senate willingness to put their anti-choice, anti-queer rhetoric temporarily to the side, at least until the 1996 presidential elections, the religious right has faced its legal efforts' limitations, and has moved toward a strategy of violence and intimidation. The religious right has a powerful mass movement committed to using violence, with ties to neo-nazis, the Klan, and the growing citizen militias. The pro-choice response has been to assume the right is willing to negotiate women's reproductive rights because it needs to maintain its place in the Republican fold the same way they need the Democrats.