

Beyond Abortion

Pro-lifers branch out to poverty, health care—and war.

By W. James Antle III

OPPONENTS OF ABORTION have grown accustomed to ridicule from the other side. While placard-sized taunts like “get your rosaries off my ovaries” are easy to dismiss, Congressman Barney Frank’s famous quip that antiabortion activists “believe life begins at conception and ends at birth” stings. Charges of indifference to life outside the womb have helped force a debate on what it truly means to be pro-life.

Pro-lifers often face hostile questions about the depth of their commitment to the unborn children they wish to protect from abortion. Do they favor free prenatal care? Do they support using their tax dollars to provide health insurance for mother and child? A similar litany of questions comes up when discussing opposition to euthanasia at the other end of life. Who is going to care for all these sick old people—the National Right to Life Committee?

The interrogation inevitably turns to the movement’s alliance with proponents of low taxes and limited government on the Right. Syndicated columnist Mark Shields, a pro-life liberal, complained to *U.S. Catholic* magazine, “We’ve got people who are against abortions, but, given a choice between funding Women and Infant Care (WIC) and cutting taxes, would choose to cut taxes.”

Some pro-lifers have concluded that the best answer is to get new allies. The case against abortion and euthanasia rests on certain premises about the intrinsic value of the human person that are applicable to other issues as well. Those engaged in rethinking the right-

to-life label range from antiabortion liberals to neoconservatives making a pro-life case for war.

Thus, Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, writing in *Books and Culture* (essentially an evangelical *New York Review of Books*), concede “pro-life is often shorthand for a stand against abortion” but contend that “thoughtful pro-life Christians (both evangelical and Catholic) also advocate care for the aging, medical care for the poor, adequate housing for all, and compassionate standards for immigration.” The group Consistent Life lists poverty and racism as pillar concerns alongside abortion, advocating “a coherent social policy which seeks to protect the rights of the weakest and most vulnerable in our society, the unborn, the infirm, the refugee, the homeless, and the poor.”

Immigration, housing, and health care aren’t issues usually associated with the conventional Left-Right abortion debate, but some see them as cutting-edge topics for a new pro-life movement shorn of its conservative image. Feminists for Life—an organization in the news lately because Supreme Court nominee John Roberts’s wife has been an advisor—promotes the idea that women’s equality and public compassion are necessary to move the debate beyond “making abortion illegal to making it unthinkable.”

Many pro-lifers who seek to expand their focus beyond abortion subscribe to what is called the “consistent life ethic,” which folds antiabortion views into a larger context of nonviolence, espousing “social justice” and opposi-

tion to most wars. Its adherents include columnist Nat Hentoff, actor Martin Sheen, and the Dalai Lama.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in 1983 began arguing that opposition to war, capital punishment, euthanasia, and abortion fit together in a “seamless garment” of pro-life issues. The seamless garment concept was popular with Catholic and Protestant thinkers who mixed theological conservatism with political liberalism but has not gained universal acceptance within the pro-life movement. One of the rare politicians who championed the idea was the late Pennsylvania Gov. Robert Casey, an economically progressive Democrat who argued that protection for the unborn was consistent with the “widening circle of democracy” that extended rights to the poor, women, and racial minorities. Some more socially liberal seamless-garment exponents would include gay rights in this list.

As a practical matter, it is easy to see how such views would drive a wedge between pro-lifers and their conservative allies. Critics of the seamless garment ideal argue that it gives liberal Democrats a pass on abortion by elevating other issues. Therefore, the argument goes, pro-life Catholics would still feel justified in voting for pro-choice Ted Kennedy because of his opposition to the Iraq War and the death penalty.

Perhaps the most audacious and improbable attempt to re-brand the pro-life movement was undertaken by Joseph Bottum in *First Things*, the high-brow religious-conservative journal of which he is now editor. Bottum inverted

the logic of the nonviolent consistent life ethic to argue that the “new fusionism” in American politics inextricably linked pro-lifers to supporters of the Iraq War and neoconservatives more generally.

In terms of electoral politics, Bottum’s portrayal is certainly closer to the mark than the Seamless Garment Network’s. The so-called values voters, most of whom are pro-life, and people who favored President Bush’s interventionist post-9/11 foreign policy together formed the basis of the 2004 Republican majority. Social conservatives are the largest mass constituency on the Right; any dominant conservatism, like the supply-siders of the 1980s and budget-balancers of the 1990s, needs their support. But Bottum does not stop with this uncontested political reality. He argues for the ideological compatibility of opposition to abortion and what he calls “the remoralization of foreign policy.”

“The opponents of abortion and euthanasia insist there are truths about human life and dignity that must not be compromised in domestic politics,” Bottum wrote. “The opponents of Islamofascism and rule by terror insist there are truths about human life and dignity that must not be compromised in international politics.”

Juxtaposing Cardinal Bernardin’s consistent life ethic with Bottum’s seamless garment of moral interventionism, one can begin to appreciate the limitations of the otherwise admirable tendency to apply pro-life principles to an ever-widening number of debates. The additional issues can end up undermining the pro-life project rather than reinforcing it.

Opposition to the shedding of innocent blood is a moral question, but attempts to order society and international relations justly often turn on prudential questions. One can agree that if human life is too sacred to be snuffed out by the abortionist that there is also an obligation to care for the children

who thus enter the world. But it doesn’t necessarily follow that the welfare state, especially as constituted before the mid-1990s welfare reform in this country, is the best means to this end.

Similarly, the dignity of human life that is violated by abortion and euthanasia is also affronted by tyranny and oppression. But it does not follow that the proper corrective is U.S. war on a massive scale to effect regime change in oppressive countries.

In recent years, pro-lifers have awakened to the fact that opposing abortion requires more than lobbying for legal restrictions. It also requires compassionate treatment of women and children and efforts to make the horrible option of abortion seem unnecessary. This is a weighing of means and ends.

But as pro-lifers have tried to broaden their focus to issues far removed from abortion, they have often sidestepped questions about means in pursuit of noble ends. Food, health care, and employment for all are each worthwhile goals. But serious thought is required about the means, especially given decades of evidence regarding the failures of welfare statism and socialism.

Let’s go back to the skeptical questions people tend to direct toward pro-lifers. In each case, the possibility that people may be a burden on the taxpayer is implicitly raised as a reason to allow them to die. The critics may be asking about pro-life consistency, but they aren’t offering to bear these burdens themselves. To put it another way: would taxing such people to finance health care produce more Terri Schiavos or fewer?

The shortcomings of Bottum’s pro-life case for pre-emptive war are more obvious. Even the best-intentioned military conflicts, aimed at dethroning the worst despots and undertaken with scrupulous efforts to avoid civilian casualties, exact a significant cost in

innocent life. The human cost of trying to bring democracy to the Middle East — if democracy would even be the outcome — could be staggering.

What has the Iraq War taught Americans about the sanctity of human life? Perhaps foreign-policy intellectuals and magazine writers favored the overthrow of Saddam Hussein because of some deep concern for Iraqi human dignity. But many voters backed the invasion because they saw the Twin Towers fall and the Pentagon burn, and they wanted to avenge the victims. As Bottum himself described a comparable sentiment in a subsequent *First Things* piece on capital punishment, “blood cries out from the ground.” It’s difficult to imagine any significant public support for the war apart from the Sept. 11 attacks.

The conflict has hardly lent itself to humanizing Iraqis. The images of brutalized naked men being forced into human pyramids at Abu Ghraib, persistent allegations of torture that have sullied the reputations of our men and women in uniform, and even casual talk at home from some quarters about bombs and the use of nuclear weapons—if this constitutes the “remoralization of foreign policy,” one shudders to contemplate the less moral alternative.

If the near-pacifism of seamless garment seems divorced from the reality of our dangerous world, the idea of war as a life-affirming event is divorced from certain realities of human nature. Wars can be necessary and just, but they seldom end up promoting the human dignity of the enemy, much less fostering a recognizably pro-life ethic.

The welcome realization that pro-lifers must focus on more than the enactment of abortion restrictions is likely to enhance the movement’s moral credibility. So would allowing prudence to assume a larger role in pro-life strategic and social thinking. ■