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**W**hen the U. S. House of Representatives passed an Unborn Victims Act making it a crime to harm an unborn child in the course of an assault on the mother, it was big news, the stuff of front-page headlines. ("House OKs fetus bill/Passage stirs outcry from abortion-rights advocates" — Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Page 1, April 27.)

Moral: There is nothing so new as the old. A total of 24 states already recognize that crimes can be committed against the unborn. Just last February, Eric Bullock, 31, was convicted here in Arkansas under the state's Fetal Protection Act. He was sentenced to life in prison without parole for hiring three guys to beat up a pregnant ex-girlfriend; the baby was still-born hours after the attack.

This year, the state legislature defined the fetus as a person within the meaning of civil law — in order to include the unborn in wrongful death actions. Which would seem only just — and common sense. Of course people who lose a child still in the womb have suffered a great loss.

In short, American law in A.D. 2001 may be catching up with an advanced piece of jurisprudence like Exodus 21:22: "If men struggle, and wound a pregnant woman so that her fruit be expelled, but no harm befall her, then shall he be fined as her husband shall assess, and the matter placed before the judges."

Who would deny that an awful crime is committed when the unborn are victims of criminal acts? Well, 172 congressmen voted against the Unborn Victims Act. One would like to think that those votes had little to do with the merits of the bill, but were cast in the swirling context of abortion politics, which will obscure common sense every time.

The bill explicitly states that nothing in its language "shall be construed to permit the prosecution of any person for conduct relating to an abortion for which the consent of the pregnant woman . . . has been obtained." It also exempts from prosecution any action by the woman, legal or illegal, that harms her unborn child, including any form of medical treatment.

But all that was not enough for defenders of abortion rights,

# Callouses on the conscience

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which have become a kind of political sacrament. The bill's opponents depicted it as an attack on abortion. And they're right. Because any defense of the unborn is an attack on abortion. Grant the unborn their humanity, recognize that a crime against the unborn is a crime, and the whole structure of legal, moral and medical arguments for abortion begins to unravel. For abortion to be defended, the unborn must be treated as unpersons.

This long-running debate over abortion irresistibly brings to mind another long-running controversy in American history: the one over slavery. No matter how many times opponents of slavery explained that they were out to abolish it only in the territories, or just in the District of Columbia, or in international trade, and that they had no designs on the Peculiar Institution where it already existed, their opponents knew better.

Defenders of slavery knew that, if the slaves' humanity were recognized in just some parts of the Union, or some parts of law, that recognition would spread and

undermine the whole institution.

So it is with abortion. Begin to recognize that the unborn can be victims, and who knows where the contagion might spread? Soon the dogma of abortion itself might be questioned.

The opponents of this bill had it right: It does indeed represent a step down a slippery slope. For abortion to remain unquestionable, it is imperative that not just a law protecting Unborn Victims be defeated. The very thought of the unborn as victims, as persons, must be denied. Deny their humanity, and we can do as we will with them. See the history of slavery. Or of the European Holocaust.

That's why this is a dispute not just over law and morals, but words. That's why defenders of abortion will call the unborn anything but the unborn; the word implies too much, like the possibility that they might be human. Euphemism has become their refuge and their sanctuary.

Rep. John Conyers, Michigan Democrat, understood what was at stake here. Note the lengths to which he went to avoid using any word that might hint at the human identity of what is destroyed in an abortion:

"This would be the first time in the federal legal system," the congressman warned his colleagues, "that we would begin to recognize a fertilized egg, a zygote, an embryo or a fetus. That's what this bill is trying to do."

The congressman seemed to use every word except baby. And never, never call them the unborn. For we might then recognize in them our brothers and sisters, our children, even ourselves at one point in eternity. That is why verbiage must precede feticide. If these victims are just fertilized eggs, embryos, Untermenschen, we can do with them as we will.

Evil is seldom the result of some one, single, conscious decision. We grow into it until the conscience is nicely calloused, and no impediment at all. So long as we don't call things by their right names, we're safe. It's only when we do — a baby, the unborn, a human life — that we are in danger of awaking.

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