

# Conspiracy suspected in abortion violence

## Woman's confession strongly hints at plot, spurring task force

By TIMOTHY EGAN  
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PORTLAND, Ore. — Handcuffed and nondescript in jailhouse blues, Shelley Shannon, a housewife from rural Oregon, stood before a federal judge June 7 and admitted waging a terrorism campaign against abortion clinics and doctors.

Shannon was already serving a 10-year term in Kansas for wounding a doctor in Wichita in 1993. Now, in a series of one-word responses to questions from a judge, she was admitting that a year before the shooting she had tried to burn down or disable six abortion clinics on the West Coast.

Shannon's guilty plea was not the exact ending federal investigators had hoped for. They had wanted to coax information from her about associates in the anti-abortion movement. But after talking earlier this year, Shannon suddenly refused to cooperate any further.

Her silence has seriously set back the federal task force struggling to determine whether a nationwide conspiracy exists to inflict violence on abortion doctors and clinics.

The nine-month investigation has brought dozens of witnesses before two grand juries and involved federal agents around the nation.

A certain urgency surrounds the work: In the past two years, five clinic workers have been killed and nine attempted murders have been investigated. Arson attacks on clinics have risen sharply since 1992.

The task force was organized by Attorney General Janet Reno last fall after an abortion doctor and his escort were shot to death in Florida.

Although investigators have

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learned much about the anti-abortion movement, they have not found the criminal conspiracy. The problem is as old as the constitutional debate about the difference between legal free speech and criminal incitement to violence.

What investigators say they have been able to do is sketch a chilling picture of radical abortion opponents as part of the new face of domestic terrorism, not unlike some members of the militia movement.

The anti-abortion militants, saying God is on their side, share manuals on how to set off bombs, harass doctors or use sabotage to foil enemies. This year, some have put together a list called the "Deadly Dozen" — 12 American doctors targeted for harassment.

"We need to keep up the pressure that light brings to these night crawlers," anti-abortion radical Joseph Foreman wrote in a letter introducing a group formed to harass doctors.

### Justifying violence

Splintered, hidden in the shadows, the most militant members of the movement quote Scripture and Malcolm X to justify murder, arson and death threats. They solicit money through a series of ever-changing post office boxes and rely on occasional legal help from a well-financed group founded by television evangelist Pat Robertson.

"God says that 'if a man sheds man's blood, then by man shall his blood be shed,'" wrote Paul Hill, the convicted killer of the Florida abortion doctor and his escort, in a recent response to questions from schoolchildren.

In the past two years these militant members have found some common ground with the anti-government militias. For example, a militia group in Nebraska, the Plainsmen, held aloft a hangman's noose in a demonstration outside Planned Parenthood's clinic in Lincoln earlier this year.

Strong links exist, law-enforcement officials say, between the handful of leaders who preach that violence is justified and people like Shannon who actually commit the shootings and bombings.

Not so, say anti-abortion activists. Some who have been called before grand juries openly mock the investigation and accuse the government of harassing them for their beliefs.

"They can't find a conspiracy for the simple fact that there isn't one," said Andrew Burnett, a longtime friend of Shannon. Burnett publishes a monthly magazine, *Life Advocate*, from a small rental house in Portland.

The magazine publishes essays justifying the shooting of doctors and pleads for financial help for jailed comrades like Shannon.

Like other anti-abortion militants, Burnett, a former roofing contractor and the father of five, was a leader of a much larger political group that has broken into small alliances.

### Movement hits the skids

Less than five years ago the anti-abortion movement was on a roll, picking up momentum and strength with the rise of Operation Rescue. That group was founded in 1987 by Randall Terry, a one-time rock musician and used-car salesman.

Supporters of the anti-abortion movement staged mass protests in front of clinics, using their bodies to



Paul Hill

Legal defense had ties to Pat Robertson

block entrances or stop cars. Such tactics attracted many converts from the less confrontational groups that had been fighting abortion through prayer, vigils and peaceful demonstrations.

But now Operation Rescue is virtually dead. What is left is a handful of new regional leaders, with headquarters in Dallas, who have recently been able to muster only a few dozen people for protests.

Civil court rulings, resulting in large fines against many Operation Rescue leaders, have taken a considerable toll on the group. A majority of followers who opposed abortion but did not want to go to jail or pay large fines were further scared off by the passage last year of a law making it a federal crime to block access to clinics.

The leaders reached a crossroads in March 1993, when Michael Griffin, a longtime supporter of the anti-abortion movement, shot Kentucky native Dr. David Gunn to death in Pensacola, Fla.

The murder caused an immediate split in Operation Rescue. To some, the shooting was a logical extension of the group's rhetoric.

Others were horrified. Flip Benham, who heads the national Operation Rescue group in Dallas, said it was blasphemous to cite Christianity as justification to murder.

The divisions came to a head a year ago during a meeting in Chicago attended by about 80 people. A petition circulated by Hill, a former minister, that justified shooting doctors was the focus of furious debate.

Four months after the meeting Hill gunned down Dr. John Britton and an escort as the men drove into a Pensacola, Fla., clinic. Hill was convicted and sentenced to death.

Those who signed the petition, or refused to condemn violence, broke away and formed several smaller and poorly financed groups.

### Patterns emerge in lawsuits

While federal officials have been frustrated in trying to prove a criminal conspiracy, lawsuits against some of the same people who have been federal targets have had more success in persuading juries of a civil conspiracy.

It is here where Robertson's group, the American Center for Law and Justice, has been active.

For instance, the group is appealing a civil case in Houston, where a jury last year found that leaders of Operation Rescue were liable for conspiring to shut down abortion clinics. The jury awarded Planned Parenthood more than \$1 million.

A few months before he shot Britton, Hill was charged in Florida criminal court with violating a noise ordinance while demonstrating at a clinic. His lawyers came from Robertson's group.

Then, during last year's trial of Hill for those killings, the defense tried to present a law-review article written by Michael Hirsh, a lawyer for Robertson's group. The article argued that killing abortion doctors was "consistent with Biblical truth."

Hirsh has since been dismissed from Robertson's group, and the legal foundation's leaders have lately been denouncing violence in strong terms.

### Seeking the smoking gun

If a conspiracy exists, does Shannon hold the key? The soft-spoken woman is invariably described as the last person you would expect to shoot a doctor or bomb a clinic.

After she was arrested for shooting Dr. George Tiller, who has recovered, investigators dug up a booklet in her back yard — the Army of God manual, a users' guide to bombing, burning and vandalizing abortion clinics.

Investigators do not know who wrote the manual. But federal officials say Shannon followed many of the instructions closely when she bombed a series of abortion clinics.

The militants scoff at the task force, saying they would not sign their names to petitions or grant interviews to reporters if they were involved in a conspiracy.

But Shannon herself has left some intriguing clues. Shortly after she stopped cooperating with federal officials she wrote a letter to Prayer and Action Weekly News, an anti-abortion newsletter in Des Moines, Iowa, apologizing for helping federal investigators.

Though Shannon, who faces a minimum of 15 years in prison, expresses anguish, investigators say she did not go far enough. The puzzle, they say, still has too many missing pieces.