

Forum

"The findings of this advisory committee will be very important as the agency decides whether nicotine-containing cigarettes should be regulated."

— Dr. David Kessler, head of the Food and Drug Administration, as an FDA panel considers whether cigarettes should be considered drug-delivery systems.

FANATICISM ON ABORTION

WASHINGTON — When Americans hear about fundamentalist zealotry in another culture than our own, we have no trouble recognizing the danger it presents.

The suicide car bomb, the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, the marchers in Bangladesh demanding the death of another writer, Taslima Nasrin: We shudder at such terror in the name of God.

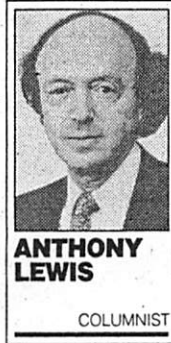
But fanaticism in our midst we take less seriously. When a nicely dressed American preaches that absolute revealed truth justifies extremist action, most of us do not see the menace to civilized life.

Paul J. Hill, a fundamentalist former minister, made it amply clear that his absolutist reading of the Bible justified murder to prevent abortion. "Sometimes you have to use force to stop people from killing innocent children," he said on national television last year.

Last Friday, he evidently acted on his beliefs. He has been charged with the murder of Dr. John Bayard Britton and a volunteer safety escort at a women's medical clinic in Pensacola, Fla.

"I know one thing," Hill said when he was arrested. "No innocent babies are going to be killed in that clinic today."

Anti-abortion groups quickly tried to distance themselves from the killing. "The pro-life movement has no room for violence or vigilantism," the Rev. Pat Mahoney, a leader of Operation Rescue, said. Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles, a principal figure in Catholic activities against abortion, said the murder "makes a mockery of everything we stand for."



ANTHONY LEWIS

COLUMNIST

But when you tell your followers that abortion is "murder," that doctors are "baby killers," that America has an "abortion Holocaust," you cannot so neatly disavow responsibility once someone takes you at your word. The hysterical rhetoric of the anti-abortion movement in this country is an invitation to violence.

And it is not only rhetoric. Operation Rescue and other groups have used physical obstruction and all kinds of harassment to terrify patients and doctors at clinics. They circulate the addresses and license numbers of doctors who perform abortions.

Opposition to abortion is a position that everyone should respect. Millions of people think abortion is wrong. But they, equally, owe a decent respect to the contrary view — which in almost all Western countries is supported by law.

One of the striking aspects of the extremist tactics used against abortion in this country is that they are a singularly American phenomenon. No such hysteria or violence is common in Italy or Spain, overwhelmingly Catholic countries where abortions are lawfully performed. In Poland, public opinion is resisting an effort by the church and President Lech Walesa to make abortion illegal.

What is it about America that nourishes extremism on the issue? This is a country of intense religious beliefs. The political preachers who denounce separation of church and state do not understand that religion has flourished here under that system — far more than in England, for example, which has an established church but

few churchgoers.

And there is a long American tradition, now in fresh flower, of fundamentalist protestantism, teaching that the words of the Bible are to be taken literally and as absolute commands. Our history is marked by evangelical religious movements in wave after wave.

One element in the national atmosphere now, too, is the attempt to impose Christian beliefs on all Americans, believers or not, through politics. No one can properly ob-

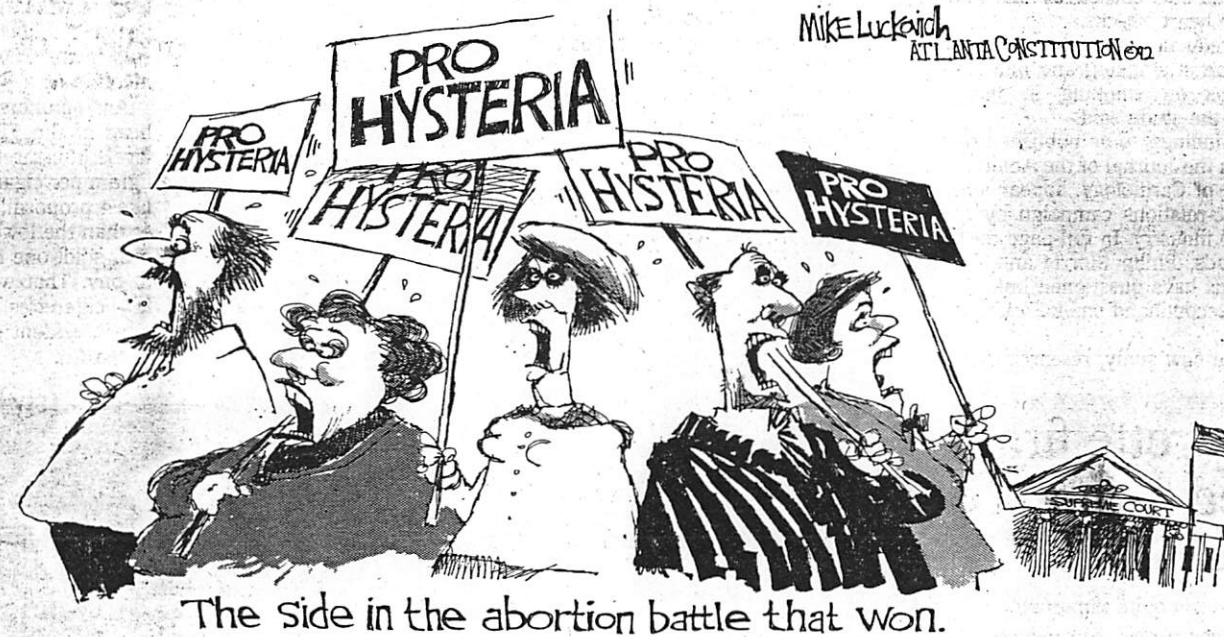
ject to religious groups being politically active. It is another thing to try to turn a country whose greatness has arisen from diversity into a narrowly defined "Christian nation."

Then I think the air of hate in American politics these days breeds extremism. We live in a time when prominent ministers consider it appropriate to suggest that the President of the United States is a murderer, when a talk-show host brands those with whom he disagrees as "Nazis." Writ-

ers of letters to newspapers call President Clinton a "socialist," use unprintable language about Mrs. Clinton, speak of "left Jewish newspapers."

America will live through this era of paranoia as it has others. But people are hurt, some even killed, by hate. At a minimum, Americans who want to keep this country together need to understand the danger of those who claim to have the absolute truth.

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MIKE LUKOVICH IN THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION