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the HUMAN LIFE REVIEW



Democrats for Life

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Part I of this series outlined key problems faced by Democrats for Life of America: a Democratic Party platform that strongly supports abortion; a flock of Democratic presidential candidates who do the same; and powerful groups, such as Emily's List, committed to the protection of legal abortion.

Part II concludes the series by describing how pro-life Democrats challenge their party's support of abortion. It considers practical advice, from members of Congress and others, about what else should be done.

Part II. The Road Ahead

When former Boston Mayor Raymond L. Flynn spoke to a Democrats for Life gathering in January, 2003, he summed up his political philosophy this way: "I'm pro-life; I'm pro-family; and I'm pro-poor. . . . That was the Democratic Party that I grew up in." Painfully aware that this doesn't describe the Democratic Party of today, he posed two choices: "One is to quit and run away and do nothing about it. The other one is to stay and fight . . ." Flynn clearly wants to stay and fight. He suggested that Democrats for Life, although small now, "will turn into an enormous, important, mainstream organization."¹ He may be right, but the group certainly has a long way to go.

Where They Are Now

Formally organized in January, 1999, Democrats for Life of America opposes abortion, the death penalty and euthanasia, with the greatest emphasis on abortion. In a platform adopted in March, 2003, the board supported legislation against abortion, cloning and embryonic research—plus a bill “aimed at reducing the risk that innocent persons may be executed.” The group hopes to elect pro-life Democrats to public office, influence the party platform, and help achieve pro-life legislation.

Lois Kerschen, a Texan who was the organization’s first president, recalled that Texas, Kentucky and Indiana all had state groups of pro-life Democrats before the national organization was launched. Contacting people in other states, they “all got together and started talking and formed the national group.” At first Kerschen was not only president, but also chief cook and bottle washer. In 2002, however, Democrats for Life opened a modest Washington, D.C., office and hired a part-time executive director, Kristen Day. She had worked for then-Representative James Barcia, a Michigan Democrat, when he co-chaired the pro-life caucus in the House of Representatives. Barcia’s office, Day remarked, “is really where my pro-life activity started.” She helped her boss keep the other “pro-life Dems” informed about coming votes, forming a solid bloc in the House.² This gave her excellent contacts and the legislative background to keep the Democrats for Life Web site current on congressional developments.

That site—www.democratsforlife.org—is one the Democratic National Committee (DNC) doesn’t want its loyal troops to see. Despite requests from Senator Benjamin Nelson of Nebraska and 17 House Democrats, the DNC has refused to link its own Web site—which has links to over 200 groups—to the Democrats for Life site. One might think that the DNC, in the spirit of free speech and in courtesy to Senator Nelson and senior House Democrats, could spare a little space on its Web site for Democrats for Life. But abortion seems to be the most sacred cow of all in their barn. DNC Chairman Terry McAuliffe opposed using the party’s Web site to promote an organization “whose purpose is to reverse the current platform and/or to enact legislation that contradicts that platform . . .”³

Lois Kerschen thought that response was absurd: “. . . they’re saying that we would want to change the platform. Well, so does everybody else. . . . And to act as if the platform is eternally etched in stone is just ridiculous.”⁴ Columnist Mark Shields, a longtime critic of the Democrats’ abortion policy, wrote: “Consider the case of the Democratic Party and its current party platform, brimming with self-congratulatory language about the party’s admirable broadmindedness.” He quoted current platform language about welcoming into party ranks “all Americans who may hold differing positions” on abortion and other issues. The DNC’s refusal to link to the Democrats for Life Web site, he suggested, meant that language

was: “Baloney, B.S. and worse.”

In the best tradition of insurgent politics, Democrats for Life tries to get maximum publicity for the DNC’s closed-mindedness. But they’d rather have the link than the publicity over it. When the Texas state party linked its Web site to the Democrats for Life Texas chapter, Kerschen reported, it quickly led to contacts with two Democratic county leaders and produced “a rise in our e-mail contacts . . . it has really made a difference.”⁵

Organizing in the States

Texas Democrats for Life has several local chapters and holds an annual convention. Three Democratic U.S. House members—and a number of Democrats in the Texas state legislature—consistently vote against abortion. Yet even in Texas, Kerschen complained, the party has put heavy pressure on candidates to support abortion. She recalled people “who have practically talked to me in a closet because they were so afraid for anybody to find out they were pro-life . . . it’s sad, it’s pathetic. In my opinion, it’s a little spineless. But you know, political realities are such that these people are absolutely pounded on by the party.”

Now, however, after losing elections to the point where they have no statewide officeholders at all, party leaders are trying “to see what the problem is,” Kerschen remarked. “And we can tell them what the problem is. Because our e-mail, our membership—people tell us all the time, ‘I want to be a Democrat, but I think I can’t because of the abortion issue.’ Or ‘I used to be an active Democrat, but I’ve left’ or ‘I’m dormant’ or whatever.” She added that “we hear that from all over the country. But particularly in a formerly solidly-Democratic state like Texas, that’s a serious problem.” Perhaps this is one reason why the state party chairwoman recently said of Democrats for Life: “While they may disagree with a majority of Democrats on choice, they want to improve the quality of life in Texas. They are a welcome part of the Democratic Party in Texas . . .”⁶

Michigan is another state where the pro-life movement is strong and counts many Democrats among its members, including two members of the U.S. House of Representatives—Bart Stupak and Dale Kildee. Both have excellent anti-abortion voting records, and Stupak is a pro-life leader in the House. Of about 70 pro-lifers in the Michigan legislature, according to legislator William O’Neil, 17 are Democrats.

In 2002, O’Neil and another Democratic legislator were key founders of the Choose Life Caucus within the Democratic state party. According to O’Neil, state party chair Mark Brewer “embraced the entire idea” and provided the caucus with rooms at party conventions. O’Neil said party leaders have “given us full access to anything that we’ve needed. And they’ve come to our meetings.” They have also

placed a link on the state party's Web site to the Choose Life Caucus. Party leaders and a number of state legislators attended a February, 2003, caucus meeting; Mr. Stupak stopped by; and columnist Nat Hentoff spoke to the gathering by telephone conference call.⁷

Carol Crossed, current national president of Democrats for Life, recently helped establish a chapter in her home state of New York. While there were only about 15 people at the organizing meeting, she was happy to report that they included two state legislators. The chapter hopes to have a booth at the state party convention in 2004. Not knowing yet whether party officials will allow that, Crossed remarked: "They'd be very smart to do that . . . I'm sure they wouldn't want us outside picketing."

Long before the state chapter was formed, Crossed was invited to talk about Democrats for Life to three Democratic precinct committees in the Rochester area. One committee, she said, "listened politely and said thank you, and I left." But the other two "were very, very positive." At one, an objector was "strongly put in her place by, I would say, three or four other people who said, 'Listen, this is really what we've got to be talking about. This is what we need to hear.'"⁸ (One doubts, though, that precinct leaders in Westchester County or Manhattan would be so nice.)

In California, said attorney and Democrats for Life activist Karen Wheeler, there are no pro-life Democrats in the state legislature, statewide office, or Congress. "Nada," she declared. "It is a very harsh, hostile environment for pro-life members." Wheeler has hope, however. "Recently we had a volunteer come forward who's a political strategist," she said, "and he's going to work out a good strategy for us."⁹

In Colorado, "The only pro-life Dem that we have, probably, as far as the biggest offices would go, is the Denver district attorney," said Timothy Dore, another Democrats for Life activist. Before running candidates for office, he suggested, pro-life Democrats "need to create a presence in Colorado that doesn't exist right now publicly."¹⁰

The Democrats for Life contact in Rhode Island is David Carlin, a writer and college teacher who is former majority leader of the state senate. But the group doesn't have a formal chapter in the state, and Carlin doubts there is a need for it. "There are plenty of pro-life Democrats in the state, anyway," he emphasized, and candidates who share their views. "Rhode Island is a great exception in the Northeast . . . We're greatly different from Massachusetts, which is right next door." He added that he thinks "it's because there's a certain social-class base for the pro-choice philosophy." People who hold it are "well-educated, affluent, upper-middle-class or upper-class types. . . . And we don't have an awful lot of those people" in Rhode

Island.11

Reverend Smitley's Sunday Brunch?

Minnesota, which used to be the scene of fierce battles over abortion among Democrats, may see a return to such combat. But Leo LaLonde, president of Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life (the state affiliate of the National Right to Life Committee) is not optimistic about the outcome. A Democrat, and a pro-life activist since 1972, LaLonde is a veteran of many pitched battles. He recalls a time when the pro-life caucus within the state party was big enough to be represented on the party's state central committee. At one point, he said, "45 percent of the state convention" delegates were pro-life.¹²

In 1984, Representative James Oberstar, a pro-life Democrat, ran a strong campaign for the party endorsement for a U.S. Senate seat. Anticipating that balloting at the state convention might go through the night, Oberstar forces told their delegates, "Bring your lunch, bring your dinner, and bring your sleeping bag." But on the nineteenth ballot, Oberstar lost to a candidate who supported abortion. That was the same year Minnesota's Walter Mondale, the former U.S. senator and vice president, won the Democratic nomination for president. Yet nearly 20 percent of the Minnesota delegates to the national convention voted instead for a pro-life Democrat from Missouri, Senator Thomas Eagleton, in order "to express their opposition to abortion."¹³ They did not endear themselves to party leaders with such spirited independence.

The early 1980s were the high point for abortion foes within the state party. LaLonde, complaining of discrimination against proliferators, said it subsequently "increased to a level where many, many of our people actually left the party. I think a majority of those who left became Republicans, but others just simply became inactive." In recent years, he has claimed around 15 percent of Democratic state convention delegates, but he had only 15 *people* at the last state convention—about one percent of the total. When you go to a convention, he said, "and you have people hissing you and booing you and pushing you and shoving you and in some cases hitting you with signs . . . that's a lot to ask people to put up with."

Democrats in other parts of the country might regard this as normal Democratic behavior, which requires a certain zest for combat. "You have to go in and start a fight," said Marylander Joseph Barrett, a pro-life political consultant. "You have to make people understand that there's a brawl going on . . . In the Democratic Party, you don't win anything by going to Reverend Smitley's Sunday brunch. It's a beer brawl."¹⁴

Attorney Janet Robert didn't promise a ruckus when she launched the Democrats for Life Minnesota chapter last August. But Robert, a

former congressional candidate who heads the new chapter, got it off to a promising start with a display of political heft. The mayor of St. Paul appeared at her opening press conference; Minnesota's two pro-life Democrats in Congress sent messages of support; and Robert announced an advisory board which included those officeholders plus six state legislators and a former U.S. cabinet member.

A series of electoral defeats have chastened Minnesota's Democratic leaders to the point where state party chairman Mike Erlandson admitted that he wanted his party to "be better at asking people to join us than to leave us." When the Democrats for Life chapter can help elect Democrats "where a candidate who is anything other than pro-life would not be elected," he said, "we welcome their efforts." But Erlandson does not welcome efforts to challenge the state party's pro-abortion stance. He predicted there "will be little if any patience in the party to have a fight on the issue of life versus choice at our next state convention."

Janet Robert said her chapter's "first priority is to pass pro-life legislation," and its "second priority is legislation that supports women who decide to have a child," for instance, in areas such as "health care, fair wages and education." Robert would like to see some change in the pro-life movement, too. She is still upset that Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life endorsed only her Republican opponent in the 2002 congressional race. (Representative Mark Kennedy, the Republican incumbent, defeated Robert.)¹⁵ According to MCCL president LaLonde, his group and National Right to Life have a policy of supporting the incumbent when both candidates are pro-life. "We have to stick with our incumbents," he said, rather than "changing horses midstream."

But, Robert pointed out, MCCL failed to include on its 2002 sample ballots several incumbent pro-life Democrats, including veteran congressman James Oberstar. At one point, LaLonde acknowledged that there "was no specific thing that endorsed" Oberstar; but later he insisted that listing the congressman's record and his answers to a questionnaire in the MCCL newsletter had constituted an endorsement. LaLonde stressed that Oberstar faced a weak Republican candidate, that "there's just no way a Republican's going to win" in his district, and that Oberstar didn't need special help such as billboards or a literature drop. Cost was a major factor, too, LaLonde said, adding that "we don't spend money on a race that's already won."¹⁶ Yet it could not have cost much to at least issue a press release with a ringing endorsement, thus thanking an incumbent who has been loyal to the pro-life cause for many years.

Right-to-Lifers' Alliance with Republicans

Rhode Island's David Carlin hears complaints from colleagues in Democrats for Life that the National Right to Life Committee

(NRLC, the most powerful pro-life group and one with a strong political and lobbying presence in Washington, D.C.) is “like an arm of the Republican Party.” His response: “Well, yeah, but what do you expect? Of course, it’s an arm of the Republican Party. It’s only the Republican Party that cares about that issue. So, naturally, they want the Republicans to win.”¹⁷

National Right to Life regularly endorses Republican presidential candidates. Its political action committee (PAC) overwhelmingly supports Republican congressional candidates. NRLC executive director David O’Steen suggested this is simply because most Republican candidates oppose abortion while most Democratic candidates support it. “There was only one close, clear pro-life/pro-abortion contest in the last election, in the general election, that involved a pro-life Democrat and a pro-abortion Republican,” he declared. “That was in Maine. We supported the Democrat; we won. There were two such races in 1994. In both cases, we supported the Democrat, and we won. I don’t believe there was one in ’96 or ’98.”

In the past, O’Steen requested and received large financial contributions from Republican committees. Stressing their party’s official pro-life position, he told them that National Right to Life was “extremely effective—and the largest pro-life organization in the world.” He maintained that “the most efficient, effective way they could further the pro-life cause was to contribute to us rather than reinventing the wheel and forming some sort of pro-life group within the party.”¹⁸ In 1996 the Republican National Committee gave \$650,000 to National Right to Life (to the main group, not its PAC). O’Steen said there were “*absolutely* no strings” attached to that donation and that he used it for NRLC’s legal department, its state legislative department, and expenses of its officers and board members.¹⁹

The group has also received donations from other Republican committees. But, said O’Steen, under the McCain-Feingold campaign finance law (passed by Congress in 2002 and upheld by the Supreme Court in December, 2003), a party committee can no longer give money to a not-for-profit corporation such as the main NRLC group. The new provision, he declared, “was aimed straight at us.”

Quite apart from past financial aid, National Right to Life has benefitted in many ways from its alliance with Republicans. The latter have passed legislation to restrict federal funding of abortion, the promotion of abortion abroad, and partial-birth abortion. Republican members of Congress such as Henry Hyde of Illinois and Christopher Smith of New Jersey have given a substantial part of their lives to the tough, grueling and never-ending battles over abortion. The last three Republican presidents have used their appointment authority and executive orders to restrict abortion. The first President Bush, facing a hostile Congress, made courageous use

of his veto power on behalf of the unborn; and his son has been a firm supporter of the pro-life cause. While many key people in the party—including some large donors—support legal abortion, O’Steen undoubtedly is right when he says that “increasingly, the environment at the Republican committees is pro-life . . . a lot of the staffers there have been around the pro-life movement or have worked for pro-life congressmen or have had some associations with pro-life groups.”²⁰

But in the crucial area of the Supreme Court, Republican presidents have made several disastrous appointments (John Paul Stevens, Sandra Day O’Connor, David Souter, and Anthony Kennedy) since the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. With better appointments, Presidents Ford, Reagan and the senior Bush could have ensured reversal of *Roe*. The younger President Bush appears determined to appoint strict constructionists who may vote to overturn *Roe*; but it is very late in the game now, and there is no guarantee that he will succeed.

There are about 35 pro-life Democrats in Congress, and some are upset by the NRLC alliance with Republicans. Michigan Representative Bart Stupak said he has received endorsements from National Right to Life, but little in the way of financial support for his election campaigns. “I mean, I’ll tell you how bad it is,” he commented. “They don’t even return your call. . . . Without the Democratic pro-life members, they cannot pass one piece of legislation in the U.S. Congress. But yet they won’t help us . . . they won’t even say a kind word . . . you don’t even get a thank-you or anything. They’ll have a press conference; they’ll have all Republicans there and dismiss all of us Democrats.”²¹

David O’Steen explained that while “members of Congress would like, naturally, as many contributions to their campaigns as possible,” NRLC’s PAC focuses mainly on close races where “our efforts can make a difference.” Incumbents like Stupak often are so secure in their seats that they do not need nearly as much money as challengers do. But O’Steen believes that “pro-life Democrats are certainly thanked, invited, appreciated.”²²

Fights Over Campaign Finance Bills

Many pro-life Democrats in Congress were upset in the late 1990s when National Right to Life insisted they oppose campaign finance bills which, the group said, would violate its free-speech rights. The bills included a ban on broadcast advertising by the main NRLC group (and other incorporated, not-for-profit, lobby groups) that mentioned candidates in the period just before an election—even if the ads did not urge people to vote for or against the candidates. In other words, the bills were designed to protect incumbent members of Congress from ads that criticized their voting records or urged them to vote a certain way. The legislation allowed PACs to run such ads, but PAC money is hard to raise and subject to strict limits.

NRLC saw the bills (including the McCain-Feingold bill) as direct attacks on its ability to communicate with the public and to lobby members of Congress. It ran ads criticizing congressional pro-lifers of both parties who supported the legislation, including senior Texas Democrat Charles Stenholm. Despite Congressman Stenholm's solid pro-life voting record, NRLC's PAC even supported a pro-life Republican who ran against him in 1998. Stenholm survived the challenge, but received just 53.8 percent of the vote—a close call for a 20-year incumbent.

Several months later, NRLC pressed pro-life House Democrats so strongly on the campaign finance issue that one of them, Rep. Marion Berry of Arkansas, declared: "I don't care if you blacklist me; I'm never talking to National Right to Life again." He charged that the group's officials had been "dictatorial and rude." Recalling the incident recently, Berry said the NRLC representatives "let us know, in no uncertain terms, immediately, that we would either do it their way or we would be considered their opponents politically . . . that's where the meeting ended, and that's the last contact I've had with them."²³

While not endorsing such tactics, I believe that National Right to Life is absolutely right in fighting campaign finance legislation. Supporters of a 1998 bill, for example, made it clear that what they wanted to protect themselves from was free speech. One House member, after describing an issue ad that urged voters to "Call Representative A and tell him to stop raising your taxes," announced that "this is the sort of behavior we are trying to stop." Another complained about "sham ads," insisting "they need to be managed as free speech does throughout our society."²⁴ When free speech is "managed," of course, it is no longer free. What these members wanted to do, and what the McCain-Feingold law *does*, is precisely what the Founders tried to prevent when they declared in the Bill of Rights that "Congress shall make no law" limiting freedom of speech.

Campaign finance laws violate freedom of speech in other ways as well. By limiting campaign contributions, they restrict how much candidates can say and how far their message can be carried. They force candidates to spend huge amounts of time on fundraising. They regulate "independent spending" in such a way that candidates cannot communicate directly with citizens who engage in such spending on their behalf. And the laws discriminate heavily against challengers, who are given no break to compensate for the huge financial advantages of incumbents (government-supplied offices and staffs and the franking privilege).²⁵ They discriminate against insurgent candidates—the kind Democrats for Life must find and elect.

National Right to Life is fighting the good fight against campaign finance laws. Democrats and Republicans alike should join that battle, both on principle and in self-defense. As former senator and

presidential candidate Eugene J. McCarthy once said, “I’m holding out for the freest kind of politics . . . Once you give that up, you get pretty much into the second stage of the French Revolution, where everybody was equal, especially after they had their heads cut off.”²⁶

This does not mean, however, that NRLC has always approached the issue in the best way. Alienating congressional Democrats such as Charles Stenholm and Marion Berry was a major mistake, one that reinforced suspicions of a deep NRLC bias against Democrats. NRLC leaders should remember that one of their Republican heroes, President George W. Bush, signed the McCain-Feingold bill into law despite his reservations about its constitutionality.²⁷ In view of their relative political power, Bush bears far more responsibility for McCain-Feingold than Stenholm and Berry do.

Needed: Another Political Action Committee (PAC)

Relations between National Right to Life and pro-life Democrats are likely to undergo more strain from time to time, but both sides realize that there are opportunities for cooperation as well. The National Right to Life PAC director attended the June 2003, Democrats for Life fundraiser—where, ironically, Mr. Stenholm received a Leadership Award.²⁸

Yet Democrats for Life leaders know they must set up their own PAC, raise their own political money, and recruit like-minded Democrats to run for office. Their opposition within the Democratic Party is incredibly well-organized and wealthy. As noted in the first part of this series, Emily’s List alone raised nearly \$10 million in 2001-2002 for Democratic women candidates who supported abortion. “Many Democrats are terrified of Emily’s List,” Minnesota’s Janet Robert remarked, adding that “until there’s money available to help Democrats who are pro-life, they’re going to have trouble.” Former U.S. Representative John LaFalce of New York said that “we need Democrats, Republicans, conservatives, liberals for life” to contribute to candidates who face “uphill odds” in Democratic primary campaigns.²⁹

Democrats for Life would like to have a PAC in place for the 2004 elections; but, executive director Day explained, “We don’t have any deadlines set yet. We just are working on building our membership, building our office, building our state chapters . . . when we have a good base, then we’ll start a PAC.” They have, in fact, very little money even for their basic organizational work. Their goal for 2003 was to have a budget of \$100,000. That sum is “infinitesimal in Washington, isn’t it?” asked board member Thea Rossi Barron of Virginia.³⁰

In addition to establishing a basic operating budget, and raising money for a PAC, Democrats for Life needs to recruit more

candidates at all levels. “We are going to encourage the election of credible, across-the-board, full-service candidates,” said Karen Wheeler, the California activist, “ones who are pro-life and who also take the stands on other social-justice and domestic issues that have been the traditional mainstay of the Democratic Party.” Might she consider running for office herself? Not yet, she said. She’s taking time out from her legal career to be at home with her two small children. Wheeler also believes she needs more political experience before running for office: “I have years of working in the trenches ahead of me before that ever happens.” Lois Kerschen would probably be an excellent candidate; she is articulate, attractive, and a good “people person.” But, she insisted, “I am strictly a behind-the-scenes—and the further behind the scenes, the better—kind of person . . . Unfortunately, I do not have the talents to be a candidate.”³¹ Whether from outside their ranks or within them, Democrats for Life should be able to find good candidates.

Where such candidates run in culturally-conservative areas, they may receive party support as well. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, for example, sometimes gives substantial financial aid to pro-life U.S. House candidates when party leaders realize this is their only chance to win certain districts. But this doesn’t represent any change of heart on abortion. Party operatives undoubtedly realize that if the anti-abortion candidates win and help the Democrats take back the House, they can be kept off committees—such as Judiciary—which determine the fate of abortion legislation. When Democrats have controlled one or both houses of Congress, they have used this and other power plays to stop anti-abortion bills. Now Democratic leaders in the Senate are blocking consideration of key Bush appointments to federal appeals courts in order to prevent a reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. This is a major reason why National Right to Life is wary about supporting anti-abortion Democrats in congressional races.

Raymond Flynn and Mark Stricherz have declared pro-life Democrats in Congress “a dying breed,” with “no firebrands among their ranks.” They “include popular, honorable politicians,” but they are “not overly courageous ones.”³² While I believe this is too grim an appraisal—and Flynn himself sounds more optimistic on other occasions—it is true that pro-life Democrats in Congress need to be bolder. They especially need to demand seats on the Judiciary and other key committees. And activists who are looking for new candidates need to find people who, as Joseph Barrett said, “understand that there’s a brawl going on.”³³ They need candidates who are willing to take on pro-abortion incumbents in primaries. Defeating a few of them would challenge the aura of invincibility that abortion forces have acquired within the party.

This is not to say that pro-life Democrats should have a chip on their collective shoulder. As shown in Texas, Michigan and New York,

some party leaders believe in free speech and fair play and do not want to lose party members. But there are also areas where pro-life Democrats will encounter great hostility from party leaders. They will need firm support systems and real courage to deal with the hostility.

They might look to athletics for good role models. Ray Flynn, who was a sports star in his college days, once said that his experience as an athlete was a great preparation for politics: “You practice, sweat, there’s pain. You go out on the court and lose. And you pick yourself up. You look for the next game. You don’t dwell on the losses. You move forward. . . . you get hit in the nose with an elbow, you take the towel, wipe away the blood, and get back out in the field.³⁴”

Or, as tennis great Serena Williams once told her sister Venus when the latter was hurt during a match, “You are a champion; now fight.” Venus made a gallant comeback, leading another Williams sister to say that “after seeing what she did, I feel like I can do anything. I am never going to quit at anything again.”³⁵

A Presidential Candidate?

In early 2003 Michael Schwartz—a Democrat, longtime anti-abortion activist and Washington, D.C., lobbyist—said he would like to see a pro-life Democrat run in the 2004 presidential primaries. There is “nothing like a presidential campaign,” he said, “to bring people out, to get volunteers identified, to get them some experience, and to build those networks.” He thought there would be money to support such a campaign. But, he added, he was not speaking of a “George Bush, gilt-edged campaign. After all, the objective is less to win the nomination of your party, or to win the general election, than it is to organize a constituency. . . . And a people-intensive campaign can achieve wonderful things at a very low cost.”³⁶

Former Representative LaFalce, noting the “principle of divide and conquer,” ventured that if there were ten candidates, and only one committed to the pro-life cause, and if that one were “*consistently* pro-life . . . he would not be against gun control, for example, and therefore frighten off the Democratic base—then I think that candidate could do quite well.”

Joseph Barrett suggested that a conservative or moderate Democrat could make a serious fight for the nomination *if* he had a few million dollars in funding guaranteed at the start. Barrett realizes, though, that it’s hard to raise money for candidates at any level.³⁷

Democratic officeholders generally were reserved about the idea of a challenge in the presidential primaries. But Representative Ken Lucas of Kentucky, who believes “pro-life Democrats have to be more outspoken in the party,” thinks a presidential campaign “would help raise awareness of the commitment of pro-life party members and

help advance a grassroots movement.” Nebraska’s Senator Ben Nelson said “a credible candidate, I think, would be helpful,” but warned that “a non-credible candidate would do our cause harm.”³⁸

“I’d do it myself,” declared Ray Flynn. “The problem is, I just don’t have the money . . .” If he had been in the presidential race at the time, he claimed, he would have shown up at the NARAL Pro-Choice America fundraiser in Washington, D.C., in early 2003. Instead of “pandering” to NARAL, as he believes Democratic presidential candidates did then, Flynn would have told them “what I’m saying to you. I’m saying I’m pro-life, and I’m proud of it, but I’m a Democrat as well . . . and we have to give people a broader choice in the Democratic Party. We can’t continue to drive working-class, blue-collar, pro-life people out of the party.”³⁹

In the absence of a political professional to do the job, Philadelphia pro-lifer William Devlin was planning, in the fall of 2003, to run in the Democratic presidential primaries. Devlin, who works for the Urban Family Council in Philadelphia, is focused mainly on pro-life and pro-family issues. He has served as a Democratic precinct committeeman, but has never held public office. Although he had no money for a campaign when interviewed in the early fall, he hoped to raise enough to make a formal announcement in January, thus giving Democrats one candidate who “honors life.” But Devlin acknowledged that his lack of experience in elected office is a problem.⁴⁰ And the Democrats have front-loaded their primary schedule so heavily that the nomination battle may be over by early March of 2004.

Democrats for Life needs a stronger network before the group can convince a mayor, governor or member of Congress that there’s a real base for a pro-life campaign in the Democratic presidential primaries. That base must include fundraising for a serious PAC. Often in fundraising, the key steps are: 1) stop lamenting the lack of money and 2) start raising it, almost any which way. No one should rule out even the humble bake sale or yard sale. Getting started is key. Raising just a little money shows people there is money out there; more brilliant ideas can come later.

Influencing the Party Platform

Whatever happens at the presidential level, pro-life Democrats can try to influence the party platform by running for the office of convention delegate and going on the platform committee. As Senator Nelson remarked, “if we’re not on the inside trying to change it, you’re not going to be able to do it from the outside.”

In some areas, because party organization is weak and voter participation very low, electing delegates may be easier than people realize. Flynn, who has been involved in many presidential

campaigns, said that sometimes just “a handful of people show up” at a caucus and elect delegates. Someone who arrived with 30-50 people, he suggested, “could probably get elected delegate to the national convention.”⁴¹ Energetic activists could produce surprises by rounding up family members, friends, neighbors, and members of their local pro-life group; registering them as Democrats; and getting them out to caucuses and primary elections.

While it seems unlikely at present, imagine for the sake of argument that pro-life Democrats could send a respectable contingent to the national convention next July. How should they try to change the current abortion plank? The heart of that long-winded plank supports “the right of every woman to choose, consistent with *Roe v. Wade*, and regardless of ability to pay” and suggests that legal abortion is “a fundamental constitutional liberty.” A provision that was first adopted in 1996, and retained in 2000, declares: “We respect the individual conscience of each American on this difficult issue, and we welcome all our members to participate at every level of our party.”⁴²

Bart Stupak believes there should be an effort to gain “more of an acknowledgment” of pro-life Democrats in the platform, believing that the current acknowledgment has helped them somewhat. But John LaFalce doesn’t think it has made any practical difference in the way abortion opponents are treated within the party. He said it was just “a device to prevent pro-life Democrats from joining the Republican Party.” LaFalce believes that a long-range goal should be to strike the abortion plank so the party would be neutral on the issue. Senator Nelson would like to have neutrality, too. “I think that the issue is extremely important,” he said. But he holds that it’s a matter for each candidate and should not “be driven by a party platform.” Ray Flynn believes the current goal should be neutrality, and the ultimate one “a pro-life position.”⁴³

No one, however, has any illusion that it would be easy to knock out the abortion plank. Abortion forces, regarding the effort as a declaration of war, would roll out their heavy artillery in response. Without a pro-life presidential candidate—and a strong one—it would be nearly impossible to force a vote on the convention floor. But proposing neutrality at platform committee hearings, and having delegates who are prepared to fight for it, would begin an educational process that is long overdue. The process should be continued, year after year, at both state and national levels. If done with intelligence and a certain pizzazz, and if combined with key election victories, it would have a chance of ultimate success.

Other Ideas

Representative Mike McIntyre, a pro-life Democrat from North Carolina, made several suggestions about efforts to influence the party. Pro-life Democrats, he advised, should be equipped with solid

factual information and “should not be shy to use” information from any substantial research or policy group, whether on the right or left. They should be active at every level of the party. Polling has shown that grass-roots Democrats in North Carolina tend to be pro-life, McIntyre said, but activists on the other side win simply because “they show up.” Democratic leaders at the precinct and county level, he added, usually “are hungry for *anybody* to participate.” But, he cautioned, “to be effective, you also have to be multi-faceted”—that is, involved “in a variety of issues that affect the party and affect the people.” He also suggested a need “to pray for wisdom,” not assuming that one knows it all.⁴⁴

Mary Ann Bouey, former president of United for Life of Northern California, stressed the importance of understanding politicians who may not always sound right, yet manage to vote right. She recalled a state senator who always insisted, “I personally support a woman’s right to choose,” yet still managed to vote pro-life. “It was a beautiful piece of politics,” she said, and she was happy to have his vote. Bouey also noted the value of “small victories” that can be expanded. And she advised thanking and praising politicians whenever they do something right. The bottom line: “*Make friends.*”⁴⁵

Talking Points

Opinion polls cannot decide the right or wrong of an issue. On the other hand, the noblest human-rights causes go nowhere without public support. And political activists know that *intensity* of support makes a great difference in elections.

Exit and post-election polls show that for voters concerned about abortion, those who oppose it are far more likely to be single-issue voters than those who support it—what the National Right to Life Committee has called a “pro-life advantage” of two percent or higher.⁴⁶ This translates into enough votes to swing many close elections to the pro-life side. While abortion doesn’t trump all other issues (for example, economic issues in hard times), it often puts Democrats at a serious disadvantage. An NRLC handout on this subject cites leading polls such as CBS/New York *Times*, Wirthlin Worldwide, Zogby International, Los Angeles *Times*, and pollster Mark Penn. When asked about it, press aides at NARAL Pro-Choice America and the Democratic National Committee didn’t challenge the information in the handout by citing contradictory polls. They said they had nothing on the subject.⁴⁷

David Carlin, the Rhode Island writer and activist, suggested that Democrats lost control of the Senate in 2002 because pro-life voters “provided the margin of victory” for Republicans in close Senate races such as those in Minnesota and Missouri. He added: “But that doesn’t seem to bother anybody in the leadership levels of the Democratic Party. . . . They lost an election, and they don’t care.”

Referring to earlier elections as well, Carlin said: “They’ve lost the Senate; they’ve lost the House; and they’ve lost the presidency. And I would argue that the pro-life voters provided the margin of victory, probably, in all three cases.”

He believes that pro-abortion forces within the party are “ideologues . . . and it’s no good showing them that this principle they believe in is causing defeats.” He described their mindset as, “Well, you know, *one* of these days we’ll win. And as long as we maintain our strength within the party, then we come to power at that point.”⁴⁸ That is just what happened during the Clinton-Gore administration.

The rest of the party, however, pays a high price: years of wandering in the wilderness with the abortion albatross around their necks. Party leaders—and labor leaders, especially—should review polls showing that even many Democrats do not agree with the party’s all-out support of abortion. In a national poll by the Los Angeles *Times* in late 2002, 28 percent of Democrats opposed the *Roe v. Wade* decision. That percentage rises dramatically on some specifics. Early in 2003, for example, the *Times* found that 53 percent of Democrats supported a ban on partial-birth abortion. A CBS News/New York *Times* poll, also in early 2003, found that 21 percent of Democrats thought that abortion “should not be permitted” and another 35 percent believed it “should be available, but under stricter limits than it is now.” So 56 percent of Democrats do not agree with their party’s support of abortion on demand.⁴⁹

Finally, abortion kills vast numbers of unborn children who, if allowed to live, would grow up to be Democrats. Poor and minority women—facing high costs of housing, food and clothing for children—have far higher rates of abortion than do white, middle-class women. In the year 2000, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, 59 percent of U.S. women obtaining abortions belonged to minority groups and 57 percent were low-income. (Not all were destitute, but all were below 200 percent of the official poverty level.) In states with broad, “medically necessary” Medicaid coverage of abortion, “women with Medicaid coverage had an abortion rate more than four times as high as women without such coverage . . .”⁵⁰

By supporting abortion, and especially public funding, the Democratic Party is helping to kill off a huge part of its natural constituency—millions of potential voters. From 1972 through 2000, abortion took the lives of over 13 million non-white children in the United States.⁵¹ Perhaps Democratic Party leaders should not be surprised by their difficulty in winning elections today. They are paying the penalty for having transformed their institution from the party of hope to the party of abortion.

Philosophical Debate Is Important, Too

At its best, the Democratic Party has welcomed fierce debates. Onlookers often had the spirit of the Irishman who happened upon a group of men who were fighting and asked—as he stripped off his coat and rolled up his sleeves—“Is this a *private* fight, or kin anyone jine in?”

That was before political correctness descended on Democrats like a giant wet blanket. Pro-life Democrats can do the party a great service by showing that the robust debate it used to honor is still possible. But they must frame the argument in secular terms for the many Democrats who are secularist in outlook.⁵²

Democrats for Life leaders, like other pro-lifers, generally have strong religious motivation for their work. This does not call for defense or apology; after all, most of the great movements for social change in our history have been religiously inspired in whole or part. But it does call for caution, given the human tendency to stay with the people we know and agree with instead of reaching out to others.

The latest convention of Democrats for Life of Texas, for example, was held at Our Lady’s Maronite Catholic Church in Austin. There are Democratic atheists, agnostics, Jews, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists who might be willing to listen to the pro-life case, but would rather hear it in a public-library meeting room or a college lecture hall. Lois Kerschen understands the problem. “Every time, I try to encourage people not to have the convention at a church,” she said, “but usually that is the most convenient, the easiest to get, the least expensive, and so forth.”⁵³ Good organizing, though, requires giving up convenience in favor of effectiveness.

Pro-life Democrats can challenge the tendency, which is quite strong in the Democratic Party, to view abortion as strictly a women’s issue. This lets men off the hook too easily. Many of them would rather pay for an abortion than help support and bring up a child. It is easy for them to proclaim themselves “pro-woman and pro-choice” as a cover for their self-interest. Yet, having brought a child into existence in a state of dependency, *both* parents have an obligation to protect the child from harm. Insisting on this point encourages those men who want to be responsible parents, but have the mistaken notion that they have no right to debate a “women’s issue.”

Pro-life Democratic women can talk about the cruelty of placing women in an adversary relationship with their own children—of presenting death for a child as a benefit to the child’s mother. If abortion is good for women, they can ask, why do many women suffer guilt and remorse for years afterwards? Why are many now involved in the pro-life movement, urging other women not to make the same mistake they made? Why are the lead plaintiffs in the two cases that led to legalized abortion throughout the country—Norma McCorvey, the “Jane Roe” of *Roe v. Wade*, and Sandra Cano, the

“Mary Doe” of *Doe v. Bolton*—now urging the courts to overturn those decisions?⁵⁴

In supporting abortion, the Democratic Party discriminates against the entire class of unborn children. This comes from the party that is supposed to stand up for the weak and defenseless—the little guys of our society—and to champion the interests of children. It is hard to see how such a contradiction can survive open debate. Moreover, what the Libertarians for Life call a two-tiered system of justice undermines justice for everyone. Based on the idea that one can be a human being and yet not be a human *person*, this system defines superior humans who have rights and inferior humans who do not. As Republican Representative Ron Paul of Texas once said, “Abortion on demand is the ultimate State tyranny; the State simply declares that certain classes of human beings are not persons, and therefore not entitled to the protection of the law.”⁵⁵

In practice, legalized abortion also discriminates against poor people and minorities, as we’ve just observed. Democrats who support it can argue that this is not what they intend. More to the point, though, is the intention of the white elitists and eugenicists who started population control with the goal of suppressing the birth rates of groups they viewed as inferior. They knew that the pressures of poverty—combined with targeting allegedly inferior groups for sterilization and other birth control—would reduce the birth rates of those groups. Their successors pressed for legalized abortion and public funding of abortion for the poor.⁵⁶ The Democrats, champions of civil rights, are long overdue for a debate on this lethal form of discrimination.

The Consistency Ethic

As noted earlier, Democrats for Life of America opposes the death penalty as well as abortion and euthanasia. While it has no stated position on war, it is a member of the Consistent Life network, which does oppose war. There are differences of opinion among Democrats for Life—and among members of Congress they admire—over both the death penalty and war. But Democrats for Life president Carol Crossed is a longtime opponent of both, as well as abortion.⁵⁷ So are many other Democrats who are attracted to her group.

Conservative pro-lifers generally oppose the consistency ethic, partly because some liberals have hijacked it to use as a cover for pro-abortion politics. Yet the bedrock pro-life convictions of advocates such as Crossed, proven time and again over decades, cannot be questioned. And the conservatives overlook a key point: By refusing to support pro-abortion candidates, pro-lifers on the left help elect candidates they agree with on abortion but disagree with on war, the death penalty, the social “safety net” and other issues. At times they feel that *they* have been hijacked and used for agendas they oppose—

and oppose on ethical grounds. They believe that napalm, anti-personnel bombs and nuclear weapons involve ethical issues just as serious as those raised by abortion suction machines. They know that war kills many innocent people: children, born and unborn, as well as elderly, disabled and sick people who have no means of self-defense. They believe that the possibility of killing the innocent is one of the strongest arguments against the death penalty.⁵⁸

Consistent-ethic liberals do not expect the pro-life movement as a whole to take up the other issues. But they cannot forget them or, in conscience, do nothing about them. The Democrats for Life organization offers them a rare opportunity to work for all of their deepest convictions. It also offers them a chance to keep asking their fellow Democrats: “Why don’t you support nonviolent alternatives to abortion?”

Although an advocate of the consistent-ethic philosophy, I have long thought it a mistake to toss welfare issues into the mix as though they are on the same level as abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, and war. Whether one supports rent subsidies or the food stamp program is just not on a par with whether one supports direct killing. And some Democrats, including pro-life ones, are so eager to support government social programs that they forget their Jeffersonian, small-government roots. An immense and powerful government invariably threatens civil liberties and tends to view citizens as its wards instead of its masters.

On the other hand: While Congressman Oberstar overstated the case when he remarked that “Republicans will get you born, but you’re on your own from then on,” some Republicans and conservatives are oblivious to problems at the bottom of the economic heap. Juxtaposing their resistance to a minimum-wage increase with today’s high cost of housing, it’s fair to ask: “Where do they think poor people can *live*? How do they think hard-luck folks can take care of their children on the pathetic wages they now have?” One need not accept the entire Democratic agenda in order to agree with Bart Stupak’s comment: “We’re not afraid to say, ‘Hey, increase the minimum wage. Let’s make sure that, if you’re going to have welfare reform, that it’s really going to work . . . We want to make sure there’s a public safety net to take care of everybody.’”

Because pro-life Democrats are, as Carol Crossed emphasized, “not recycled Republicans” but real Democrats, they are in a strong position to challenge others in their party. Their leaders have the skills and dedication to do so. What they mainly need at present is more money and more activists at all levels. Some of their activists—and nearly all of their incumbent candidates—need more chutzpah. As Marylander Joseph Barrett declared: “The Democrats for Life have to stand up and say, ‘This is who we are. From life to natural death, we’ll fight.’”⁵⁹

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