The Emergence of the Right-to-Life Movement


The headlines on Tuesday, January 22, 1973, were momentous. On the previous day former President Lyndon Baines Johnson had died of a heart attack in his Texas home. Peace negotiations in Paris were beginning to make the end of the war in Vietnam look almost possible. And in Washington, two landmark opinions delivered by the U.S. Supreme Court—Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton—struck down all state abortion laws, not only the remaining nineteenth-century laws but also the new, liberal “reform” laws such as California’s.*

For many of the anti-abortion people we interviewed, the 1973 Supreme Court decision came, as one of them put it, “like a bolt out of the blue.” It seemed to them that the Court had suddenly and irrationally decided to undermine something basic in American life, and they were shocked and horrified. As one of them said: “I thought the American public would stand up and scream bloody murder, and they didn’t. Even the Catholic bishops in this country didn’t scream bloody murder—which is what abortion is.”

* Both cases dealt with the constitutionality of abortion laws: the law challenged in Roe was a nineteenth-century Texas law of the kind described in Chapter Two; the law challenged in Doe was a 1968 Georgia law modeled, like California’s 1967 law, on the American Law Institute’s Model Penal Code. These two separate cases, handed down the same day, addressed different facets of the abortion issue and are thus usually referred to in the singular, as the Court’s abortion decision.

Historically, of course, the Supreme Court decision on abortion was in no way sudden or unprecedented. It was the result of over a decade of political activity, during which sixteen states, including California, had passed greatly liberalized abortion laws. Still, there was a grain of truth in the pro-life perception that the abortion issue came to life for the first time on that Thursday morning in January of 1973. Although pro-choice activists had been struggling for just such a decision since at least 1961 and “abortion on demand” had for all practical purposes existed in California since 1971, the Supreme Court decision really did usher in a new era. Abortion was no longer a technical, medical matter controlled by professionals; it was now emphatically a public and moral issue of nationwide concern.

When the California Committee on Therapeutic Abortion (CCTA) and the Society for Humane Abortion (SHA) began to mobilize support for a liberalized abortion law in California, they attracted the attention of those who opposed abortion in principle. But the early activities of abortion opponents, who came to call themselves the right-to-life movement, were marked by failure. Despite their opposition, the Beilenson bill became law in California in 1967, and the law’s passage was rapidly followed by dramatic changes in the frequency of legal abortions. On the federal level, opponents of abortion were unable to persuade the Supreme Court to uphold traditional abortion laws or even to put limits on the new “reform” laws. When we examine the early pro-life activists in California—who they were, where they were located socially, and how they understood the issue—the reasons for this almost unbroken string of failures prior to 1973 will become clearer.

Pre-1973 Recruits

Early activists, 1959 to 1967

In the course of our interviewing for this book, we spoke with eleven activists throughout the state who began their public opposition to abortion before the passage of the 1967 Beilenson bill.* Of these

* The pool of people likely to have become early anti-abortion activists was small to begin with. The early group we interviewed remember the core group as having been “a dozen or so.” As might be imagined from a group of people who were middle-aged in 1967, the original group has dwindled owing to death. I am reasonably sure there are very few early pro-life activists in California who were not interviewed for this book.
eleven, nine were Catholic male professionals and one was a housewife active in conjunction with her husband, himself a Catholic male professional. Since those who favored abortion reform in these early years made much of the fact that their opponents were predominantly Catholic, it is important to clarify what we mean by “Catholic male professionals” and to explain why so many of them were recruited into this early group of activists. With a few minor exceptions, they had the following characteristics in common: they were physicians, lawyers, or other professionals; they were raised in the Catholic religion and remained active in their faith; they were members of Catholic voluntary associations such as the Catholic Physicians’ Guild or the St. Thomas More Society; they had graduated from elite Catholic universities such as Notre Dame and Georgetown; and they tended to be affiliated in their work lives with institutions such as Catholic hospitals, law schools, and colleges. Moreover, they were all professionally successful, having been officers in their professional organizations, notably bar associations and county medical societies. In short, all were what might be thought of as “pillars” of their communities.

In this group of eleven activists, there were four lawyers, four physicians, one college professor, one scientist, and a housewife originally trained as a social worker. Only one of the eleven was not Catholic, and only one was a woman. Eight of them became involved in anti-abortion activity in a professional setting; typically, they were members of a bar association or county medical association that had been asked to support the Beilenson bill.

To these early activists, such a request for support was both unexpected and unsettling. From their point of view, an attempt to broaden the reasons for undertaking an abortion was simply baffling for several reasons. First, with the exception of the only non-Catholic in the group, all of them had grown up with the belief that an embryo is a child from conception onward and that abortion therefore ends the life of an innocent child. This belief was not an explicit or salient part of their upbringing; it was simply something they had always taken for granted. And because they took it for granted, they assumed that all decent and respectable people shared their point of view. In particular, they interpreted the relative social invisibility of abortion prior to the 1960s as proof that their opinion was the common one. And in a way, their assumption was plausible. If people didn’t talk about abortion very much (or talked about it only in hushed tones in back rooms),

wasn’t that because most people believed it was the taking of an innocent life, hence morally repugnant? What these early pro-life activists did not understand was that for many people abortion was “unspeakable” not because it represented the death of a child but because it represented “getting caught” in the consequences of sexuality. Sex, not abortion, was what people didn’t talk about.

When pro-choice activists began to press for a more “rational” treatment of abortion, that pressure was inexplicable to those with pro-life sympathies. They had made the mistake of assuming that other people’s unwillingness to discuss abortion had been based on fundamental values that approximated their own, values that were part of the ordinary fabric of social life. Moreover, their very limited experience with abortion tended to confirm their views: other people seemed to behave as if they assumed that abortions were wrong. The one woman activist recalled that when she first heard of the Beilenson bill, her husband assured her that it would find no support in the medical profession: “I read in the newspaper that the legislation was being introduced, and I thought, My God. My husband is a physician, he’s a family doctor and did a lot of obstetrics at that time. . . . He said, ‘Oh, that will never go, doctors will never do that . . . in medical school, in our embryology class, we were shown why it was so brutally unethical.’ ”

Another early activist, a physician, made much the same point and called attention to the fact that in practice, at least in his own experience, opposition to abortion was not limited to physicians of his own religion:

I think abortion is a horrible thing, it’s killing your unborn child. When I went to medical school, that was the accepted view within the profession. . . . The respectable, acceptable view was that abortion was not something you did unless you really had a problem. . . . When I trained at the county hospital, the number of abortions per live births, I think was one in 10,000 or something like that; it was pretty rare. And what’s more, the Seventh-Day Adventists were there, [and they] competed with the university service, which had a lot of Catholic obstetricians, to see who could do the fewest abortions. That was the challenge, to bring a woman through without needing to resort to this drastic thing.

These early pro-life activists reported very low levels of exposure to abortion. Most of them had no awareness of it until it became a po-
itical issue. The rest were aware of it only through rumors (a certain less-than-reputable physician was said to be the town abortionist). Even the physicians in this group knew little about the prevailing vagaries in medical interpretation of the abortion law, vagaries so graphically chronicled by Packer and Gampell in their 1959 Stanford Law Review article, which had started the whole debate. Partly this was due to their location in the social world: they were family doctors or obstetricians trained in either county or religious hospitals where they had not been exposed to alternate definitions of “justifiable” abortion. Further, as physicians raised in the Catholic faith and as active members of Catholic organizations, they were unlikely to enter those realms of practice in which abortion was common. (And as one of them said, abortion was acceptable “if you really had a problem.” In other words, as long as abortion opponents believed there were some medical grounds for abortion, they were unwilling to challenge abortions undertaken by their colleagues “in good faith.”)

These social factors created a situation in which the early activists were caught off guard. Their own values about the meaning of embryonic life, their own previous experience with the “immorality” of abortion, their own lack of exposure to the ambiguities that had motivated the pro-choice people to seek a more formal and explicit clarification of the law—all these combined to make them unprepared to cope with the movement to liberalize abortion.

Perhaps the most important reason why pro-life activists were not well prepared to resist abortion reform was that they simply couldn’t believe such a movement would get very far. They tacitly assumed that the unsavory connotation of abortion rested on a deep belief in the sacredness of embryonic life, and they found it hard to understand how such a belief could be changed so quickly. They counted on public opinion to be outraged and were stunned when most of the public was either unaware or unconcerned.

This same tacit assumption made it difficult for them to rally those that shared their values. If “everyone knew” that abortion was the death of a baby, who could take the Beilenson bill seriously? At most, it would allow only a minor revision of the rules about when a physician could induce an abortion to save the mother’s life. In principle, of course, pro-life people were opposed to any change from what they thought was absolute legal protection of the embryo (a protection only occasionally overlooked in order to save a woman’s life). But, in prac-

tice, they felt they could live with minor adjustments that would give physicians a little more latitude in weighing one life against another. What was in fact the case—that one group of physicians saw themselves as weighing a “real” life against a “potential” life—was not yet part of their understanding.

Their belief that everyone accepted a common definition of the meaning and moral nature of abortion left these pro-life people with few arguments to use against the abortion reformers. They tried to appeal to what they thought was the commonly shared value, but when it turned out to be not so common after all, they were literally at a loss for words. One activist, a lawyer who resigned from the bar association when it awarded a prize to an essay in favor of abortion reform, noted: “Well, I don’t exactly recall how I stated it, but the views that I communicated were that abortion took an innocent life, and that it was considered, and that I considered it wrong. I think I had a quotation from a papal encyclical in connection with it, and that’s about all I remember about it.” Once the abortion reformers had pointed out how broadly the actual letter of the law was being interpreted and once it proved difficult to rally public opinion, the early pro-life activists were stymied. The diverse and in some respects nonpartisan groups whose aid the pro-abortion forces were able to muster—including the Young Republicans and the Junior Chamber of Commerce—showed that there was real support for at least some reform of the existing law. The depth and breadth of that support must have been discouraging.

Thus far we have focused on the typical members of this early group of pro-life activists—the Catholic male professionals. It will now be worthwhile to examine the two atypical people as well: the one woman and the one male non-Catholic. Each represents a theme that would become far more salient in the next phase of the pro-life movement. Whereas the elite pro-life activists had focused their attention on fellow professionals and the state legislature—because, after all, that was where the issue was being contested—these two people had experiences that suggested a new direction for the movement, new “interested publics” ready for its message.

The woman had joined the movement with her husband, a physician. Like the other early activists, she was a Catholic and had always assumed that abortion was wrong because it meant the taking of an innocent life. But, unlike the others, she had direct and personal reasons for finding the issue a troubling one:
I had recently had a baby, at age forty I think, and you know they were talking an awful lot about [abortions]; a lot of the arguments were not only about rape and incest but [about] women, older women, and Down's syndrome babies, and this and that and the other thing, so it was very real to me, because my little guy was very much there [in utero], and all of those things together made me jump in with both feet.

The sole non-Catholic man was not a part of the social world of these other activists. Although he was not a Catholic, he later married a woman who was, and he did not meet the other early activists until he sought them out because of his feelings on the issue. Rather, because he found the idea of abortion so upsetting, he flew to Sacramento when the Beilenson bill was under discussion and handed out his own statement in opposition. Unlike the others in this group, until he became active in this issue he had been surrounded chiefly by people who favored abortion, and his larger social circle of family and friends supported liberalized abortion laws. Nonetheless, he found abortion profoundly disturbing for personal reasons:

It was the late 1940s. I was nine, ten years old. Roughly it was the time of the war for the Israeli independence, and I was feeling very nationalistic, chauvinistic, whatever you want to call it. And the school I went to, they had a six- or seven-volume history of ancient Israel there. And I opened it up, and toward the beginning there was a discussion of the Canaanite culture, and here was this picture. I don’t remember exactly, [but] I think what it was was a cross-section of a clay jar that they’d found in an excavation, and inside was a little kid with his skull cracked. And the caption saying that the Canaanites had practiced the sacrifice of the first-born male child. I’m a first-born male child. And I was aware, although the ramifications of course didn’t sink into me then . . . that there was a ceremony when I was a month old, where my parents [symbolically] buy me back from . . . a Cohen, who’s a representative of the ancient priesthood. Anyway, it was something that hit a nerve. At that time I didn’t know what abortion was or anything. The only time I’d ever come across the word before that I can remember is in descriptions in the Hearst newspaper, the *Journal American* in New York, of the things Russian troops were doing in what’s now East Germany. And I didn’t know [the word] and I asked my folks to tell me, and they wouldn’t tell me . . . . A few years later, apparently, when I first came across the concept of abortion, it was just this immediate, personal identification. [I thought] that’s like what happened to the little boy in the jar, and that’s what could have happened to me if things had worked out differently historically or something like that. And so, just from the first time I became aware of what the concept meant, I was just violently opposed to it.

These quotations suggest that one's own experiences—either as a mother or as someone who could have been the victim of abortion “if things had worked out differently”—might be shared by “interested publics” much broader than professional elites. In the long run, appeals to these personal experiences would prove far more compelling than references to papal encyclicals.

**The beginnings of organization, 1967 to 1972**

The passage of the Beilenson bill was a dispiriting loss for the pro-life activists, but given their original definition of the issue, it was not a crushing one. As we have noted, because the clause permitting abortion for fetal indications was removed from the bill (after Governor Reagan’s threatened veto), the new law did not explicitly violate the belief that the embryo was a person. It broadened the grounds upon which one life could be sacrificed for another, but without necessarily calling into question the absolute value of embryonic life. Many early activists decided, therefore, that it might be possible to prevent further liberalization by continuing to persuade people that abortion was wrong *in principle* because it took a life. The one woman activist among our eleven recalled the genesis of the first formal pro-life organization in the state in this way:

So in 1967 the legislation passed, and it was very depressing because we had done a very good job in Southern California . . . but Northern California lost it [for us]. . . . And Ronald Reagan signed it and that was that, everyone went home sad, but strangely enough . . . the debate continued. . . . The handful [of volunteers who remained active] decided by golly we were going to form an educational organization because there was a lot of interest in it. And the founding president, he was elected president [even though] he wasn’t there, that’s how excited we all were about the organization at the beginning. At any rate, [he] said . . . the reason we need this organization is that even if abortion is legal and even if what happens—and of course all the things he predicted happened, regarding the welfare and everything—it’s still the decision of an individual, we’re still in a free country and nobody’s really making you submit to an abortion, so we said that, [if] we can
educate people about the reality, the reality of life before birth, the humanity of the unborn child, we’ll do a lot of good.

The actual situation regarding abortion changed rapidly after passage of the Beilenson bill. Both pro-life and pro-choice forces had underestimated the willingness of doctors to perform abortions and the eagerness of women to seek them. Consequently, by 1971, almost everyone who applied for an abortion was granted one. As abortion came to be offered, for all practical purposes, “on demand,” it became integrated into everyday life. Blue Cross began to cover therapeutic abortions as a routine part of medical care, and Kaiser-Permanente, the state’s largest health maintenance organization, did likewise. By the end of the 1960s abortion was officially covered as a routine medical procedure under Medi-Cal, the state of California’s program of medical services for those on welfare.

This state of affairs gave new impetus to the movement to formalize the new status quo. For example, in its 1969 decision in People v. Belous, the California Supreme Court used language that raised doubts as to whether the state was willing to exercise any control over abortions so long as they were performed by licensed physicians. In rejecting as unconstitutionally vague the old California law (which in any case had been made moot by the passage of the Beilenson bill), the California court anticipated a number of arguments that the U.S. Supreme Court would make four years later. It held that the right to seek an abortion was covered by the right to privacy and that in deciding whether an abortion was “medically necessary” physicians could weigh the statistical risks of abortion against the statistical risks of childbirth. Because statistically, early abortion carries fewer risks for the woman than childbirth, this decision was widely seen as signaling the unwillingness of the court to entertain complaints that individual physicians had overstepped the intended boundaries of the Beilenson Act.

With no consensus inside the medical profession about when abortions should be performed and the state’s highest court apparently unwilling to try to regulate those decisions, the last remnants of the physicians’ historical role as arbiters between the competing rights of women and embryos came quietly to an end. More truly than ever before, abortion became an individually negotiated decision between a woman and her physician.

Throughout the state during this period, several factors—the increasing number of abortions, their relatively uncomplicated acceptance into daily life, and the Belous decision formalizing what was in practice a very liberal abortion situation—served to bring new people into the pro-life cause. But although these factors enhanced the likelihood that a person with pro-life sympathies would encounter something distressing enough to cause him or her to become active, abortion was not yet a public issue for most people. Most of those mobilized between 1967 and the eve of the Supreme Court decision were still those who were strategically placed in the social world to notice the new abortion situation.

The backgrounds of the activists mobilized in this period, between the passage of the Beilenson bill of 1967 and the Supreme Court decision of 1973, make that clear. Like the earliest activists, many of them were people who worked in situations where they were likely to encounter some aspect of the abortion debate; they were physicians, social workers, or people who counseled unmarried pregnant women. The remainder were people who might be described as having accidentally “bumped into” the abortion debate. Let us consider what some of them had to say about their activities.

One of them was a college professor whose interest in population made him aware of the emerging debate:

Well, I had been a little taken aback, actually dismayed [in 1967] when California passed the law that would allow abortion for a woman’s mental health. And like most people, I didn’t do much about it in terms of protesting. But in 1970, Senator Beilenson tried to pass a law in California which would knock down all the restrictions to abortion. So I began to get concerned that this was more than just a minor movement that was trying to relax a few laws. And so I phoned around to see if there was any organization which was trying to stop Senator Beilenson and I found there wasn’t any at all; that the previous defeat pro-life people had had at the hands of the pro-abortionists in 1968, it really kind of shattered them. So, finding none, I contacted a friend of mine who is a Lutheran minister in Pacific City, and another who happens to be an attorney. And we got together and called a meeting of some attorneys and college professors and a few students. I put it to them that there’s nothing being done but we should certainly do something [emphasis added].

In another part of the state a Catholic nun and social worker who had worked with unmarried pregnant women was asked by her local
bishop to “look into” the developing abortion situation. She was joined by two others—a Catholic woman who had taught natural childbirth classes in a local hospital and a non-Catholic social worker whose agency also dealt with unmarried pregnant women. Thus all three were in a position to be aware of the increasing impact of abortion. The non-Catholic woman had also previously volunteered to work in a family planning clinic that made referrals for abortion; it was there that she realized that her own values (on population control and sexuality in particular) were very much at odds with those who were advocating abortions:

So I found out that their statistics [those of abortion advocates] were pretty well distorted, and I found out that their point of view was tied in with another cause, which is the population explosion cause. So you had a messianic message: as you deal with the individual, you see that this country is overpopulated. . . . So you would discourage the poor from having children. You were doing a good thing for the client. But even if the client were not poor . . . you’d find another rationale for why the abortion would be necessary. . . . I began to question the people first, and I began to become uneasy about abortion; I began to see that I had bought a lot of stuff that wasn’t accurate. I also saw the tie-in . . . there was a promotion of freer sexuality; an acceptance of freer sexuality is different than promotion. So there was a promotion of freer sexuality.

These three women drove to another city to visit a pro-life group. Equipped with new ideas and movement literature, they began to work with a group called Support Life, whose members were concerned about the increasingly widespread public acceptance of abortion. One of the Support Life members gave this report:

I suppose I got interested in the [Support Life] hot-line because I was working for welfare at the time. I saw girls coming to apply for assistance for Medi-Cal to pay for their abortion. I saw them coming in uninformed, uneducated. You’d ask them, “Do you want to see a social worker?” because eligibility workers do not get into counseling—I never have on a work basis. But you’d ask them if they wanted to see a social worker and assess the, you know, consider the other solutions, and they would say, “No, my mind’s made up,” and I’d say, “O.K., who’d you see?” and they’d say, “Oh, well, my doctor said he would do it on such-and-such a day.” But obviously nothing had ever been discussed—whether it would be good for them, much less whether it was right or wrong.

The period between 1967 and 1973 was one of slow but steady growth for the pro-life movement as a pool of activists was gradually drawn from the larger segment of the population that was becoming aware of legalized abortion activities in California. This process might have continued indefinitely had it not been for one dramatic event of national significance.

Post-1973 Recruits

The “bolt from the blue”

On January 22, 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court decided the case of Roe v. Wade. More of the people we interviewed joined the pro-life movement in 1973 than in any other year, before or since; and almost without exception, they reported that they became mobilized to the cause on the very day the decision was handed down. For many of them, the memories of that day are extraordinarily vivid. A woman who felt herself to be the product of an unwanted pregnancy—and who, like the man we have quoted, felt that if things had been different she would have been aborted—had this to say:

[It was my oldest son’s] third birthday and I was making his cake . . . and we were at this table, this same table, and I was decorating, it was right over here, and there was a bunch of junk piled, like normal, on this table. This time it was toys—birthday toys. My husband came in with a newspaper. It said there would be peace in Vietnam, and of course that overshadowed the Supreme Court decision. So he was going through the paper and he saw this [article] about legalizing abortion. After I’d felt so good about those states voting it down in the referendums . . . the people voting it down. I wasn’t in any organizations or anything, and I had only written one letter several years before. I had read [newspaper] articles because the issue had struck me as something I felt from the heart. . . . And so, all of a sudden he walked into the kitchen and he showed me, he said, “Hey, did you see this, Maria?” I say . . . you know I was too busy doing the cake but he says, “Lookit here,” he says, “read this.” And I read that and it very much upset me. I’ve got that paper to this day. It wasn’t saved because of the peace in Vietnam. It was saved because inside in the pages is that article. . . . It had a photograph of the justices, and it mentions how [abortion] was to be legal and all of that. And it was Jamie’s birthday. And I sat down, I was very upset . . . I wanted to cry in a way. . . . All of these things in my per-
onomy—things that were no concern of mine, so to speak, you say “that’s somebody else’s business”—all came together in one. And being Jamie’s birthday, my very first son . . . that kind of made it a personal thing . . . almost like seeing Providence. God was saying, “Look, sister, you better see what’s going on there.” Because . . . I’m religious even though my background isn’t.

Why was the Supreme Court decision so vivid and upsetting as to make people like this woman political activists overnight? The answer can be sought in two areas: the social characteristics of the post-1973 activists and the features of the Court decision that had particular significance for them.

The new group of people brought into active participation in the anti-abortion movement by the Supreme Court decision were predominantly women with high school educations (and occasionally some college) who were married, had children, and were not employed outside the home. They were, as the earlier pro-life activists called them, “the housewives.” None of them had ever had an abortion, and only a few of them had ever had a friend who had had an abortion; the closest most of them came to actual experience in the matter was having heard rumors in high school about someone who had “gotten in trouble” and “done something” about it. Their values and life circumstances made it unlikely that they themselves would need abortions, and they were surrounded by people who shared those values. Moreover, since they were known to be devout, traditional women who valued motherhood highly, they were not likely to be on the receiving end of confidences from women who did not share these values. As one of them said, “Look, I’m a devout Catholic and people know how I stand on these kinds of things. I’m not the kind of person you would confide in if you were having an abortion.”

These characteristics explain, at least in part, why these new recruits could say that they were largely unaware of the abortion situation in California prior to the Supreme Court decision. Unlike both the pro-life and pro-choice activists who were involved before the Supreme Court decision, they had never been actively concerned with political

issues. They were not members of the League of Women Voters, they had no ties with professional associations or labor unions, they were not active in local party politics, and many of them had not even voted in previous elections. Perhaps more unexpectedly, they were not active in PTA, church groups, scouting, or other political and social activities traditionally thought of as being compatible with the role of wife and homemaker.

Partly this was because these new members had large families to contend with. Half of the people interviewed for this study who joined the pro-life movement during 1973 had four or more children. Actually, their family sizes were not substantially different from those of the people who had already joined the movement: the median number of children was 3.5 for those who joined before 1967 and 4.25 for those who joined between 1967 and 1973. But on the average, the 1973 recruits were a full decade younger than their predecessors and were thus more likely to have small children to care for.

It seems apparent that because of who these women were, abortion was simply not part of their social lives. One out of every three pregnancies in California might end in an induced abortion by 1971—but these did not include their pregnancies or those of their friends. And their relative social isolation—their lack of participation in community activities—further removed them from opportunities to interact with others who might at least have held different views.

We may now ask why the Supreme Court decision of 1973 provoked such a massive response from people who had tolerated (or at least lived with) what were in effect very liberal abortion laws for years. It will be recalled that reform physicians in California originally claimed that the Beilenson bill would do little more than “clarify” the legal grounds for the sort of abortions they were doing anyway and that the deletion from the bill (under threat of a veto by Governor Reagan) of a clause permitting abortion for “fetal indications” removed any explicit challenge to the belief that the embryo is a full human life. Pro-life people could believe, therefore, that the principle they cherished was still safe, that only the decision rules about how to weigh one life against another had been modified. Equally important, the new California law said that the abortion decision had to be made not by the woman involved, nor even by the woman and her doctor, but by a panel of three doctors—in effect, by representatives of the medical community. Thus, from the pro-life point of view, abortion was still medical,
still the taking of a human life, and still wrong, except in extraordinary circumstances.

The Supreme Court decision changed all that. It demonstrated that an unwillingness to discuss abortion in public did not necessarily imply a commitment to the sacredness of embryonic life. Moreover, the Court not only discussed abortion but finally addressed the issue of personhood in an explicit way. As the Court itself put it in *Roe v. Wade*:

All this . . . persuades us that the word "person" as used in the Fourteenth Amendment does not include the unborn . . . We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins. When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy, and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, at this point in the development of man’s knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer.4

From the pro-life point of view, this took what “everyone knew” to be fact and threw it into the realm of opinion. To be sure, the differences of opinion about the moral nature of the embryo go back to the ancient Greeks. But in America, there had been little plain-spoken public debate about the moral status of the embryo since the middle of the nineteenth century, and many mistook a century of silence for a millennium of consensus.

For those with pro-life sympathies, therefore, the Supreme Court decision contained a number of deeply disturbing symbolic messages. First, the Court had listened respectfully to and therefore legitimized an opinion that pro-life people found anathema: that the embryo is not a person but only a potential person. Second, by noting that “reasonable people” do not agree on whether the embryo is a person, the Court had in effect given both sides equal respectability. And, finally, by eliminating the right of the state to regulate what happens to the embryo, the Court had declared in effect that the embryo no longer deserves institutional protection, that its value and meaning had become sufficiently unimportant to be entrusted to the individual discretion of a woman and her doctor.

Accustomed as they were to thinking that theirs was the majority opinion, the pro-life people we interviewed saw in the Supreme Court decision a way of thinking that seemed bizarre and unreal. Something they believed to be both fundamental and obvious—that the embryo was a human life as valuable as any (and perhaps more valuable than some because it was innocent, fragile, and unable to act on its own behalf)—was now defined as simply one opinion among several. What was worse, it was defined as an opinion belonging to the private sphere, more like a religious preference than a deeply held social belief, such as belief in the right to free speech. It was as if the Supreme Court had suddenly ruled that a belief in free speech was only one legitimate opinion among many, which could not therefore be given special protection by any state or federal agency.

From this perspective, we can see why the Court decision struck many pro-life people as a “bolt from the blue,” a frighteningly radical departure from traditional views. It alerted a whole new group of people to the fact that abortion reform was a powerful movement across the nation; it validated that movement by giving it equal standing with the pro-life view; and it called into question not only beliefs about the embryo but also beliefs about society in general. Here is how three women answered the question, “How did you react to the Supreme Court decision?”

Well, I think just about like everyone else in the [Support Life] league, we felt as though the bottom had been pulled out from under us. It was an incredible thing, I couldn’t believe it. In fact, I didn’t. For a couple of months I kept thinking, “It can’t be right, I’m not hearing what I’m hearing.”

I’m a political scientist, and that’s my background. I speak not only from the tragic feeling of what is happening to women who have abortions, or [what they] are doing to themselves psychologically, physically . . . I’m terribly concerned that the Supreme Court would have presumed to have taken upon itself the right to give life to any special group of citizens. Who gave the Supreme Court the right to give life? You know it took this power by itself; now when a government [claims] the power to give life, to me this is a fascist-dominated philosophy of life.

I think we all sort of took a lot of things for granted and one of them was that our government would follow itself, wouldn’t start deviating from its original purpose, and this was such a strong deviation that it was kind of appalling to me. And it was sort of the beginning of a lot of deviations in various areas.

Why the Court chose to hear the *Roe* and *Doe* cases and why they made the decisions that they did must of course remain speculative.
Only the Court itself knows its reasoning, and it is notoriously unwilling to open the logic of its collective decision-making to public view. Nonetheless, the circumstances surrounding these cases suggest important structural factors that explain some of the Court’s actions.

On the simplest level, the Court ruled on abortion cases because abortion reform advocates had cared enough about the issue to press it to the top of the judicial system. Theoretically, it was possible that the Court could have refused to hear the cases or that it could hear them but rule only on procedural or narrowly substantive grounds. But several features of the situation made these outcomes unlikely.

First, these cases were products of a nationwide social movement: Roe (a Texas woman) and Doe (a Georgian) were supported by a number of national organizations. Reflecting the fact that the abortion reform movement was still in large part dominated by elite physicians, amicus briefs were submitted by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Medical Association, the American Women’s Medical Association, the New York Academy of Medicine, “a group of 178 doctors as amicae,” the American Psychiatric Association, “medical school deans and professors,” the American Public Health Association, and the American Association of Planned Parenthood Physicians. This elite support was augmented by the efforts of several nonprofessional groups, who saw fit to list their membership numbers in their amicus briefs: CCTA from California (see Chapter Five) claimed 5,000 members and offered 300,000 signatures, a single California chapter of NOW noted that it had 20,000 members, and Zero Population Growth claimed 300,000 members nationwide.

Thus, from the official data presented to the Court, abortion reform appeared to be a national movement that commanded widespread public support. If this movement did not get satisfaction with the Roe and Doe cases, it was doubtless prepared to argue others. More important, perhaps, the abortion reform advocates appeared to be in large part “disinterested”; they belonged to organizations that could not be called “single-issue” groups. Conversely, the justices could conclude from the amicus briefs presented to them that the pro-life movement was perilously close to what its detractors claimed it was: a small, isolated group, ideologically suspect because of the predominantly religious nature of its beliefs. Whereas the pro-abortion forces had mustered the support of over twenty “disinterested” organizations, the pro-life forces were able to deliver amicus briefs from only four groups—Americans United for Life, “Certain Physicians and Fellows of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists,” National Right to Life, and LIFE (League for Infants, Fetuses, and the Elderly)—and all four were clearly “single-issue” organizations, concerned exclusively with the abortion issue. The organizer of LIFE claimed that his nationwide group had “over a thousand” members, which hardly compared with the 20,000 members of one California women’s group, or the 300,000 members claimed nationwide by Zero Population Growth.5

Another incentive for the Court to rule on these cases was the fact that over a dozen states already had liberalized abortion laws with different and often conflicting provisions in them. Colorado’s liberalized law explicitly required residency for women seeking abortions whereas the laws in New York and California did not. California, at least on paper, did not permit abortions for fetal indications, but these were legal grounds for abortion in both New York and Colorado. Washington state bypassed the legislature entirely, passing a public referendum that in effect set only medical, rather than legal, limits on abortions. The actions of state legislatures (and lower courts) had therefore served to complicate rather than clarify the issues. What one state (or court) deemed legal was often declared illegal by another state (or a higher court). Until it offered a ruling, the Supreme Court would have to deal with a growing patchwork of conflicting state laws, each of which represented an idiosyncratic attempt to forge a new compromise from the array of competing demands.

It may also have been true that the Court simultaneously perceived the political pressures against ruling as weak. The anti-abortion movement was still largely elite, male, and predominantly Catholic and not as broadly based or as visible as the abortion reform movement. Individual pro-life activists had testified before state legislatures and taken stands in professional meetings, but the pro-life forces had so far been largely unable to present demonstrations of massive support of the kind that characterized the pro-choice movement. Perhaps more important, many of the same anti-abortion arguments, presented by the

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* To give one clear example, residency requirements ranged from none (ten of the sixteen states with ALL-type laws) to thirty days (Alaska), to four months (North Carolina), to ninety days (South Carolina), to 120 days (Virginia) (Duffy, “Effects of Changes in the State Abortion Laws”).
same sort of spokespersons, had been considered by the Court in its 1964 decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which abolished the last remnants of state Comstock laws prohibiting the dispensing of contraceptives or information about them. Despite sectarian arguments that legalizing contraception would legalize sin and promote a great social outcry, by 1964 contraceptive use was an accepted fact of life for the American public, and the *Griswold* decision aroused very little controversy. The Supreme Court may very well have thought that the same thing would happen with the abortion cases. After all, by 1973 public opinion polls showed considerable support for liberalized abortion, and the opposition to it seemed small and sectarian.

What neither the Court nor anyone else anticipated was that the *Roe* decision would mobilize a new and much stronger opposition to abortion reform. The Supreme Court, asked to adjudicate between two views of the embryo, could not. In *Roe v. Wade* it recognized the fact that abortion in the United States was no longer a question of boundaries—when may an embryo’s rights be compromised? It was now a question of principle—is an embryo a person or something not yet a person? Once the question of personhood was squarely addressed, new groups of people were mobilized into the movement because they saw this issue as one that would have important and far-reaching consequences.

**Growth and Expansion: 1973 to the Present**

From the point of view of pro-life organizations, the period since the Supreme Court decision has been one of satisfying expansion in both membership and financial resources. Before 1973 most major cities in California had only one pro-life organization (or one political group and one service and education group), but most major cities now have several, and most suburban areas have their own. But this growth is not without its price: it has brought new strains into the movement, most notably considerable friction between the “old” activists (those involved before the Supreme Court decision) and “new” activists (those involved after the decision). Some of the old activists, members of the pre-1973 movement, have drifted out of active participation. Though fatigue and organizational “burnout” were doubtless factors in some cases, the comments of early activists themselves suggest a more general explanation. A founder of the pro-life hot-line in her area had this to say:

> I don’t take a very active part in the Lifeline, and . . . I’m not always happy with the ways things have gone . . . I guess I’m pro-life in a very large sense of the word, and I found that a lot of people involved in the Support Life League are very narrow in their anti-abortion. I’m anti-abortion, but I guess I have more of an understanding of why some people do what they do, and people that are accusing other people of murder and all, those kinds of things really go against me . . . . The league people will issue a list of candidates who are pro-life, and [you’re supposed to vote for them]. Well, I’m not [going to vote] just because someone is pro-life, if he’s not a good candidate for the office . . . I’m not that kind of pro-life. I’m pro-life in that I’m interested in things like world hunger, and I’m against capital punishment, and I’m against war, and a lot of things that are broad areas of being pro-life.

This tension is explicable in terms of the social differences between old and new activists. The new activists were predominantly women homemakers without previous experience in political activities. Equally important, they were people who feared what they saw as symbolic messages in the Supreme Court decision: if babies could have personhood so quickly wrenched away from them, who might be next? These two factors explain why the movement became increasingly emotional and passionate after the Supreme Court decision. Unlike the predominantly male professionals who had preceded them, the new activists were people who had direct experiences with pregnancy. Moreover, they were people whose values made pregnancy central to their lives. Now they were faced with a Supreme Court decision that seemed to devalue not only the status of the embryo but pregnancy itself. Because of their previous social isolation, the argument to which the Supreme Court had given approval—that the embryo is not a person—was distinctly new and shocking to them. The Court’s decision, by extension, seemed to threaten the personal worth of the women who bore them and anyone else who was weak and helpless.

The social status of those people recruited into the pro-life movement after the 1973 decision also meant that they felt fewer constraints about expressing their concerns in vivid, public, and emotional ways. Early members of the movement, by virtue of being members of an elite, faced what social scientists call “cross-pressures.” Although they were pro-life, they were also physicians, lawyers, or other profes-
sionals; they were active in their professional communities and were highly visible members of their communities at large. They faced a number of pressures not to appear “fanatic” on the pro-life issue but to be “dignified” and “professional” in pursuit of pro-life goals.

Those recruited after January 1973, in contrast, faced very few of these cross-pressures. Because they had relatively few social or political ties to a larger social or professional community, they could be fearlessly “single-issue” activists. For example, virtually all of the early pro-life activists had some friends who disagreed with them on abortion. Most of the new recruits, in contrast, do not have such friends, and many spontaneously said during the interviews that they would simply end a friendship with a person who did not share their views on abortion.

**Getting Involved in the Pro-Life Cause**

Their differences notwithstanding, all pro-life people have certain experiences in common with respect to their abortion activism. In all periods of the movement’s history, for example, the recruits had grown up taking for granted the idea that the embryo is a baby. Similarly, almost all were self-recruits—in contrast to their pro-choice peers, who were typically recruited through “consciousness-raising” activities. Finally, a very large number of them made their own commitment to get involved after a personal experience that “brought the issue home” to them.

**The embryo as person**

Only four of the pro-life activists we interviewed had ever considered holding any other attitude on abortion than the one they hold now. For the rest, abortion was something they had known was wrong since earliest childhood. Over and over again, activists mentioned the same themes:

Well, as a kid you learned about it in school—you know, the various good things and bad things in life. But it was, you know, something you read about, it just wasn’t done at the time, or it was surreptitious. So I think I knew of it in that sense. . . . I went to Catholic school in the seventh and eighth grades and in the catechism classes . . . things like this were brought up. Other than that, you know, it was just like you knew there was war and murder and various other things.

I don’t know, maybe it was our background. Our religious belief does not [permit abortion], you know, it’s murder and that’s that.

I knew my background would lead me to be pro-life, because of my mother, mainly, and probably in a very small sense [because of] my faith. I’m from a faith that holds a pro-life view. However, I had never heard any discussion in my faith on this issue; I just knew it was something they believed in.

Well, of course I’m a Catholic [physician] so let’s say when you’re in school, we were taught about what things are wrong. Abortion wasn’t really a big issue, although I suppose I wouldn’t even have known abortions were being performed.

As these quotes suggest, very few of these activists remember a “big issue” being made about abortion when they were growing up either at home, in church, or at school. There was some teaching about abortion, but it was usually buried in rather abstract and theoretical terms. Those few who could remember explicit discussions about it during childhood could recall remarkably few details. For the overwhelming majority, learning about the moral status of abortion was like learning about patriotism, honesty, or love. They simply grew up with it, absorbed it in passing, and never thought about it very much. It never crossed their minds that anyone held a different opinion on it.

Although they had differing amounts of exposure to the abortion situation (the early activists tended to have more), few of them had what might be called firsthand experience with abortion itself. When confronted with evidence that abortion was widely accepted, they were first baffled and then mobilized.

**Self-recruitment: the converts mobilize**

Another feature that many pro-life activists had in common, whenever they joined the movement, is that they recruited themselves into active membership. Two-thirds of the pro-life activists we interviewed were what might be described as self-recruits to the anti-abortion cause. That is, they encountered on their own information about the abortion situation that distressed them, and then they actively sought out an organized political group that shared their values. Another 20 percent were recruited by friends who knew of their sympathies and took them to a meeting of a pro-life group. Less than 10 per-
cent were recruited in the way the typical pro-choice activist was, by being exposed to a formal presentation of arguments. In fact, even this 10 percent figure probably exaggerated the effectiveness of formal presentations because it includes people who chose to attend a pro-life meeting after hearing it announced in church and people who were already eager to respond to any opportunity for active involvement.

Once they encountered some aspect of the abortion situation that offended them, the self-recruits showed remarkable determination in finding ways to "connect" with a formal pro-life group. Shortly after the Supreme Court decision, for example, one woman, who did not own a car, heard on television about a pro-life demonstration planned at a local hospital and talked a friend into giving her a ride to it so she could join up. Several others availed themselves of pro-life "hotlines," twenty-four-hour counseling services for women considering abortions:

"I've always been against abortion. I'd written letters and things like that, but the final straw was this class I had at Cal State. . . . Abortion came up, and the teacher was saying that it didn't matter, that the child wouldn't ever know the difference. And I tried to say a few things, but I really didn't know what to say. And it just made me angry that he didn't know the facts at all. And I tried to say something, but it just didn't work. So I came home that night and it was about nine o'clock and I just said, I told my mom, "Mom, I just have to do something." I didn't know that much about the groups, but I looked up Pro-Life in the phone book, and I thought, "Oh, they won't be open at nine o'clock at night." But I just called anyway, and it was the twenty-four-hour hot-line. So I got one of the hot-line listeners and I just said I wanted to do something. They were starting a training for the hot-line just the next month, so they told me where the meeting was and I went.

While I was pregnant, somebody said something about abortions [being performed] at five months, and I was about four and a half months pregnant at the time, and I thought, "Five months! I can feel this baby kicking and moving inside of me and I just heard the heart begin to beat, what do you mean they're giving abortions at five months?" I mean, I thought what everybody else thought, that nobody had abortions after two or three months; I thought the Supreme Court said you couldn't do that. . . . One night I was sitting talking with my niece who is now at the university and we were talking about abortion. She told me that they have a clinic at the university called "Eve, a Sensitive Solution." I said, "Excuse me, but that's a bunch of bull-blank, there's no sensitive solution to murder." And two o'clock in the morning, I got on the phone. . . . I didn't know who to call, and I said to the operator, "I don't know what I want, but there's got to be something, Support Life, Life Line, Anti-Abortion, something. I don't care, any number," and this poor operator said, "Well, there's a Support Life hotline." So I said, "Give it to me." I thought, you know, like they'd have a suicide hot-line where people sit in an office-type thing, you know that movie where they have the suicide hot-line. . . . So I thought this was what I had called. I had no idea I was calling this girl out of bed at two o'clock in the morning, and she gets on the phone thinking that I'm a hysterical woman who's about to have an abortion. I said, "No, I'm not hysterical, I'm not about to have an abortion, what do I do?" So we talked till about four o'clock in the morning, and this darling girl, she told me all about it, about the movement on abortion.

Among the 20 percent of activists who were recruited by friends, several things are notable. The friends were almost always close friends of long standing: co-workers or old classmates, neighbors, people who had children in the same school. Interestingly, many of the people who were recruited this way reported that their friends never had a formal discussion with them about abortion but simply assumed that their anti-abortion values were shared.

The following comment illustrates how attitudes and events often came together to make pro-life people active in the movement:

"I've always felt very strongly about children and family, and I have a large family. . . . And I was a nurse, an R.N. I trained at St. Mary's, which had a very strong ethical code so far as medical moral ethics were concerned. And I felt very strongly and agreed with this [anti-abortion] philosophy and then when I was working at Mercy Hospital before I married, I worked in the obstetrical nursery for a period of time taking care of premature babies. Working very hard to keep them alive and then when the abortion issue came up, we were killing babies at the same stages as the babies that we were fighting to keep alive. And there was a period when abortion was becoming legal, they were fighting for the legality of abortion in California starting in 1967. Where I kept thinking, "This can't be happening, it can't be true. Why isn't someone doing something about it?" And I kept waiting for someone to get in there and fight it. At this period I had many small children and had not been one to join at all. . . . I felt I belonged at home with my family. . . . I felt very strongly about being home with my children, and so I sat back
and it kept happening and happening and I guess it finally hit me that something's got to be done, and sometimes that somebody that's got to get involved is you. So I guess I really didn't get involved until 1972–1973, and then I guess the biggest thing, the two things which would have been the impetus at the moment was the Supreme Court decision which just kind of hit many of us, like, well, we couldn't believe it would go that far. And then the other was a friendship with a local woman I knew through school, her children were in the same school and so forth . . . and she kind of pushed me to actually get into it. And she was doing some speaking at the time, and she got me to go along and speak, and I met people in the movement. I made the mistake of saying to someone, "Well, if there's anything I can do to help. . . ." So from then on, from about the time of the Supreme Court decision, it's been very much a part of my life, in spite of still having a family.

To summarize, we may say that at least 80 percent of these activists were not "recruited by" the movement. Rather, they (or their friends) independently learned something sufficiently upsetting about the abortion situation to make them seek out a group that was trying to do something about it. A highly visible public presence of the pro-life movement, therefore, helped them find what they were already looking for; but it did not create the desire to search for it in the first place. Circumstances, not the movement, did that.

Many pro-life activists would disagree with this assessment. They believe that the presentations their groups make are important recruiting tactics, and many referred to their slide show as "our most effective weapon." The slide show, which consists of intrauterine photographs taken during pregnancy, is a standard feature of the talks that pro-life groups give to church groups, women's groups, young mothers' groups, and high school and college groups. But when activists speak of the emotional impact the slide show had on them, they overlook a fundamental point: they were already "primed" to hear the message that the slide show conveys. Our interviews show that with rare exceptions, these presentations, including the slide shows, were persuasive only to people who had sought them out because they were already troubled or concerned about abortion.*

Sometimes, it is true, the presentations did play a subtle role in recruitment: they served to deepen already existing pro-life commitments or to forestall potential objections. One woman, for example, saw a pro-abortion program on television that caused her to question her own anti-abortion beliefs. In her search to clarify her opinions, she first paid careful attention to a physician who spoke against abortion at mass and then decided to attend the slide show:

Really, I was looking for answers because I knew I was against abortion but I really didn't know why. My church was against it, and I was against it because of that. But . . . when I thought of those young girls [unmarried and pregnant] who had so many problems, I had no solutions to those. You know it was . . . kind of an opportunity for me. If I hadn't seen that [pro-abortion] program on TV I probably wouldn't have given it much thought. But I was looking for answers myself because I realized how much knowledge I lacked on the subject. And then I saw the slides and I knew that all right, these are people that perhaps I can get answers from, and I knew I had to do something to stop it.

Similarly, another woman said:

I always believed that abortion was wrong. I read [a pro-life ad] in the paper that said they were showing some slides and having a workshop, and I just went to it, at St. Mary's Hospital, two years ago. And I saw how terrible abortion really is, and more, determined that it was wrong and cruel. I had always thought it was wrong, but I hadn't thought it was cruel.

Mobilizing people who already care about an issue is no trivial achievement for any political movement. Nor is the ability to bring in those who care but might hesitate to become more active because of doubts about the wisdom of the movement's stands. On this dimension, the movement's recruiting activities have certainly been successful: it has elicited commitments of heroic proportions in the defense of its views.

**Bringing the issue home**

A significant proportion of those who made the decision to become active in the pro-life cause did so because of an experience that convinced them that abortion was not simply an abstract, theoretical issue but something that was both personal and relevant. For an astounding one-third of the pro-life people we interviewed, the event that "brought the issue home" was a problem of parenthood: an inability to conceive, a miscarriage, a newborn child lost to congenital disease or
defect, or an older child lost to childhood illness. Since the pro-life group is so diverse, it is hard to tell whether this is a higher than average rate of parental loss, but it is dramatically higher than the level reported by pro-choice activists. Here are excerpts from what three people said when asked what was going on in their lives when they decided to become active in the pro-life cause:

Well . . . it very well could have been that the previous year we lost a baby, yes, we had a third child, Amy, and she was premature by Caesarean section because of the RH factor and she lived for thirty-seven hours after the C-section. Strangely enough, it wasn’t the incompatibility of blood that killed her, it was the staph infection that did it. That made me very much aware of the fragility of life in general and in particular the life of a very young child, and when my child died at an age of development when a child could be carved out of its mother’s womb and butchered, by the California law, that’s very strong . . . now you’re scratching below the surface at this point, you don’t take very long to get down to past the b.s., do you? . . . it came down home, you see, literally, it came to home, that was what was going on out there someplace was very much a reality, and that it wasn’t an academic question like whether or not we should admit Red China to the U.N.

I lost a baby, my first one, when I was just into the sixth month, and it was at the point where the baby had to be buried (according to) the church. We went to the mortuary and I grieved for that baby for a long, long time. I lost another baby very early within the next year, but it wasn’t as real to me because it was in the first few weeks. But then it was seven years before I had my first living child. . . . I don’t know if that made me feel more strongly [about abortion] . . . because, I mean, you’re at a certain level, you can’t really go beyond it. But I know that that baby was very precious to me. I wanted it so badly. I grieved for years, you know, for that baby. I still think of him and how old he would be now. So every baby’s life is a valuable thing to me. I wonder what it would’ve been like. I think women who have abortions must go through that, too.

Our first son was natural born and then we couldn’t have any more children so we went to adopt, and when we were at our interview, the man mentioned that because of abortion there weren’t very many babies available. . . . And I remember saying, “You mean they would have abortions when they knew people were waiting to adopt their children?” If they didn’t want them, you know, someone else does. I don’t remem-

ber what he said, but anyway it kind of stuck with me, and in a way it becomes like [all] abortions were my children . . . all children should be all of our children. It kind of became more personal.

It would be unfair, however, to conclude that the connection between the loss of a child and later pro-life activism is usually simple and direct. For example, one woman (who had given an earlier, out-of-wedlock, child up for adoption) angrily rejected a friend’s suggestion that her pro-life activity was related to the recent death of her infant daughter and noted the complexity of her decision to become more involved:

I remember my mother was very upset when the Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973, and I thought, well, it doesn’t mean everyone’s going to run out and have an abortion . . . I thought that [abortion] is not the way to handle [unwanted pregnancy], but I still didn’t have this activist streak in me . . . I’ve had some bitter fights with some people I’m close to about this activism. [They say that] because my first baby had to be given up for adoption and my second baby [died of] hyaline membrane disease, it’s like I’m a frustrated mother, but I’m not . . . I think this is what started my activism, so it is a result of Michelle, sort of, but it’s not that she’s dead and I’m mad and other mothers are having their babies and I could get pregnant again in a minute, I’m sure. I don’t want to right now, I’m just not healed and maybe I’ll have another baby, probably I won’t, maybe I will. But I’m not resenting anyone with babies, [I’m not thinking] “you stupid people don’t know how lucky you are . . .” I don’t know when it really just hit me [that I should become active in the movement]. But I think what snapped was the idea that my baby’s life, in a lot of people’s eyes, wouldn’t have been very meaningful [because of the lung disease]. Okay, she only lived twenty-seven days, and that’s not a very long time, but whether we live ninety-nine years or two hours or twenty-seven days, being human is being human, and what it involves, we really don’t understand.

It is important to recall that these people, like virtually everyone else in the movement, had always believed that the embryo is an unborn child; but it is also clear from our interviews that even those who were aware of the spreading practice of abortion did not always see it as a social problem; as one said, “not everyone’s going to run out and get an abortion.” More typically, they were simply unaware of the extent of legal abortion; and if they were aware of it, they saw it as the result of ignorance or the stretching of the one permissible ground for
abortion—to save the life of the mother. They did not become pro-life activists because they had lost a child. They were pro-life already, and their loss helped make them active in the movement. They were made aware, in a tragically personal way, how precious a child can be. Their perception of the disparity between the loss of a deeply wished-for child and the seemingly casual ending of pregnancies in abortion was very painful to them. Some were deeply distressed to learn that, from their point of view, more than a million children in America are lost to abortion every year because of what they considered human caprice.

Also, as one of the women we have just quoted suggests, some people hear pro-abortion arguments as saying that “damaged” babies (as well as parents who are incapable of producing “perfect” babies) are less valuable and that the death of these babies is a blessing in disguise. This again highlights the fundamental conflict of values between the pro-life and pro-choice viewpoints. For people who consider the embryo only a potential person, death at the stage of potential (or very early) personhood is preferable to a life as an actual person with “diminished capacities.” But for people who believe that the embryo is an actual person, this opinion, though often expressed with the intent of comforting a newly bereaved parent, trivializes a great human loss. More to the point, it seems to make invidious distinctions between the perfect and the not-so-perfect.

The personal effect of this contrast between “perfect” and “less-than-perfect” individuals was suggested even more directly by another group of pro-life activists, who believed that if some people (the not-yet-born) can have their lives ended by the relatively unchecked personal choice of others (pregnant women), then anyone’s life is potentially in danger. To be sure, this is a standard pro-life argument, and many of the people we interviewed mentioned the idea that abortion fosters a general “disrespect for life.” But it took something more than this belief to make activists of them. They had to perceive a connection between the embryo and some other vulnerable group with which they identified. Here is how two activists, a man and a Mexican-American woman, made such a connection:

I’ve been active in the movement since 1972, and I guess probably two things had the most effect on me in getting me involved. [The first] was this discussion I had with a guy at work. . . . He has some pretty way out political beliefs. He thinks Hitler is okay, and he was saying how most of the stuff we heard about Hitler were lies, and then he got onto abortion [and] I could just kind of see the link between what he was saying about the Nazis and his ideas on abortion. . . . As far as he’s concerned he doesn’t care whether [the embryo is] a human or not . . . Another thing that happened back in [1972] that really had a big influence was the issue in Northern Ireland. . . . The argument they’ve always used for not uniting the two countries is because of economic reasons. Now the [Irish] Republic is the poorest nation in Western Europe, and the part controlled by the British is the second wealthiest in Western Europe. . . . You listen to every single argument for abortion, and it will have the same central theme, that we should be killing babies because from an economic standpoint it’s to our advantage to do so. And I just kind of see a link between the two issues because to me, Ireland just proves that a just society with a lower economic standard of living is better than an unjust society with a high economic standard of living. So these two issues to me are the same.

As I said, [I’m] working with the low-income and the non-English-speaking people of the [agricultural] area. I guess I’m considered a Chicana activist. I grew up in the area picking fruit, “migrant workers” I guess we were called in those days. . . . It’s been a long hard battle in obtaining any type of rights or recognition, or just normal human rights, you know having come from a family that just grew up picking fruit, and realizing that you would never get anywhere. And so that is what is in the forefront of Chicano activism, the fact that we’ve had to fight so hard for every little right we’ve had. The only right that the system is so willing to give freely, no questions asked, are free abortions. And so right away we start getting suspicious, it’s a natural conclusion for us. . . . We see that the thrust of the [environmental] movement is to get rid of the poor. . . . We have the environmental groups who are saying that the only way to deal with the immigrant problem—in this case, they are referring to the undocumented aliens from Mexico—is either to catch them before birth or after birth. [They are] in favor of funding abortions for low-income people . . . [in other words] kill them off before they even get a chance to multiply.

For people who are not pro-life supporters, the logic that links abortion to the genocidal policies of the Third Reich, to the treatment of the Irish by the British, and to the treatment of minorities or handicapped people in this country may seem baffling. But to pro-life people, who have grown up taking it for granted that the embryo is a child, abortion in principle defines all embryos as “nonpersons” or persons who lack equal rights.

In fact, supporters of abortion do believe that any rights embryos may have are weaker than the rights of actual persons. Pregnant
women, by virtue of being full rather than potential persons, are entitled to end their own pregnancies because their rights "outrank" the weaker rights of the embryo.

It is precisely this logic that deeply offends all pro-life activists. Because they were not on the whole exposed during childhood and youth to the idea that embryos belong to a different moral category than persons already born, the abortion reform movement strikes them as a sudden and capricious rejection of centuries of "respect for unborn life." At times in the abortion debate, this argument is used in a tactical way, to justify a continuing rejection of abortion: if opposition to abortion has such a long social pedigree, only very weighty causes can justify changing abortion laws. But this argument has even deeper emotional and social roots. For people who really do believe that embryos have always been treated with respect—and our data suggest that almost all pro-life people believe this—the wide acceptance of abortion in American society is truly frightening because it seems to represent a willingness of society to strip the rights of personhood from "persons" who have always enjoyed them. If the rights of personhood can be so easily taken away from babies (embryos), who among us will be next?

The presumed stripping of personhood from embryos has other frightening and horrifying dimensions for pro-life people. It is probably safe to say that in our society (as in most), the relationship between mother and child is assumed to be the most intimate, most sacred, and most self-sacrificing relationship of all. To people who assume that the embryo is a child, the logic is clear: if even this most sacred, least "worldly," least "useful" relationship can be disrupted, no relationship is safe. As one mother said: "If a baby can't be safe in his mother's womb, where can he be safe?"

Given this assumption, not only the death of an embryo but the rationale of its death is offensive to pro-life people. For them, pro-choice logic would permit the development of a totalitarian society like Orwell's Animal Farm where "some are more equal than others." Abortion seems to place the "convenience" of some over the very lives of others, and these others can be defined as having "lesser lives" by another social group. Embryos can be defined as less valuable because other people—the women carrying those embryos, politicians who want to cut welfare rolls, eugenicists who want only the "best" babies born—have selfish reasons for doing so. Embryos, like newborns, in-