

RONALD REAGAN AND ABORTION

By
Warren M. Hern

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Warren M. Hern, a physician, is Director of the Boulder Abortion Clinic

The appearance of Ronald Reagan, Jr. as a speaker at the National Democratic Convention to advocate the pursuit of stem-cell research may mark a turning point in the effort of Democrats to pry anti-abortion voters from the clutches of the Republican Party. Cultural conservatives, who have followed the siren of anti-abortion fanaticism into the Republican camp since Ronald Reagan was nominated for the presidency in 1980, also accepted opposition to stem-cell research as part of Republican theology. But something new was possible after Reagan's death in June: reality began to intrude into this corner of public affairs. And who a more credible messenger than his own son, who cannot be accused of defiling his father's memory? On the contrary, the younger Reagan carries his own and his mother's message of love that gently pushes aside the ideological obstacles to the use of science to relieve human suffering.

The paroxysm of public adulation that accompanied the passing of Ronald Reagan unfortunately reminded those of us who care for women of some things about him and his policies that were not so admirable for us.

The first thing that Ronald Reagan said at his first press conference on the day after he was elected in November, 1980, was that he was going to "make abortion illegal." This encouraged Senator Strom Thurmond to state on the Today Show two days later that he would seek "the death penalty" for doctors who do abortions.

Reagan was propelled to the Republican nomination in 1980 with the strong help of Jesse Helms, who led the movement to purge pro-choice Republicans such as Mary Dent Crisp from the Republican Party and Convention of 1980.

On his inauguration day, Ronald Reagan invited leaders of the anti-abortion movement into the Oval Office and asked them what they wanted. For one thing, they wanted Dr. Ward Cates' head on a platter, and they got it. Dr. Cates, a brilliant scientist and physician who headed the Abortion Surveillance Unit of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, was reassigned from the critical public health work at which he excelled. He soon resigned from the government. His colleague, Dr. David Grimes, was also censored and driven from the government a few years later. The government lost an invaluable supply of expert knowledge about the most commonly-performed surgical procedure that affects millions of women and their families.

On Inauguration Day, 1981, Reagan's new Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Richard Schweiker, spoke to an anti-abortion rally and declared that the Reagan Administration would be a "pro-life" government. He then instituted the "squeal rule" that required school authorities to notify parents if their children confidentially sought contraceptives at school clinics.

During his presidency, Ronald Reagan instituted the global "gag rule" that stated that workers at family planning clinics receiving federal funds could not so much as speak to women concerning the subject of abortion, even if their lives were in danger from pregnancy. The workers – physicians, nurses, and counselors – were prohibited from using their medical judgment to give women life-saving advice.

Reagan opposed stem-cell research, sex education, family planning, and a rational approach to HIV/AIDS. Virtually every one of his appointments to health policy jobs went to people whose principal or sole qualification was fanatic opposition to abortion. To Reagan's dismay, Dr. C. Everett Koop displayed historic integrity and courage in refusing to toe the Administration line on matters such as abortion and the use of condoms to prevent HIV/AIDS.

A particularly cruel and tragic Reagan policy required hospitals receiving federal funding to maintain life support for hopelessly damaged infants surviving severely immature births whether their parents wished this or doctors advised against it.

On the international front, Reagan sent his UN Ambassador, James Buckley, to the Mexico City Population Conference in 1984 to tell desperate third-world countries that the way to deal with out-of-control population growth was not family planning but economic development.

Consciously or not, Ronald Reagan gave psychological support to the most radical and violent elements of the antiabortion movement. In 1984 alone, there were more than two dozen violent attacks on abortion clinics and doctor's offices. Reagan's FBI Director, William Webster, said that the attacks weren't terrorism because "we don't know who they are." The attacks increased rapidly in severity from 1981 and continued throughout the Reagan years. The effects of Reagan's constant attacks on abortion were felt long after and culminated in the assassination of numerous physicians and other abortion clinic workers.

By his statements, policies, and appointments, Ronald Reagan helped bring about the current poisonous divisions about abortion that are now exploited by George W. Bush and the Republican Party. Bush's attacks on stem-cell research have been part of this ideology. One of the most unfortunate consequences of this strategy has been to stifle critical scientific research that could lead to historic advances in medicine.

George W. Bush, the only American president to care less about facts and more about ideology than Ronald Reagan, is simply building on and carrying out Reagan's philosophy without regard for its consequences in human suffering, especially for women. This strategy may help give him another term as President. A second Bush term, a fulfillment of Ronald Reagan's legacy, will surely spell the end of *Roe vs. Wade* and federal protection of abortion rights.

Ronald Reagan set out to make abortion a political crime against the state. Even in death, he may yet succeed. We will remember him for that.

Warren M. Hern, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D.

Boulder Abortion Clinic

1130 Alpine Boulder, Colorado 80304 303 447-1361 bachern@msn.com

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Anthropologists, abortion and the cultural war in America. [Anthropology News](#) 46:2, February 2005. Invited contribution to the series, *Technologies of Reproduction* December 2004 – March 2005