

Dr. George Tiller's political assassination is result of rabid anti-abortion harassment

Editor's Note: Dr. Warren Hern delivered the following address at Temple Emanuel in Denver on June 11 at the invitation of Rabbi Steven Foster, Betty Serotta and the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

George Tiller, my friend and medical colleague for over 30 years, is dead of an assassin's bullet. George was shot at point-blank range with a handgun in the foyer of his Lutheran Church in Wichita,

Kansas. He was acting as an usher for the congregation at the time. The church service had started, his wife was in the choir, and George was welcoming his fellow



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worshippers to the service.

The last time I was in that church with George was at his daughter's wedding.

The assassination of George Tiller in his place of worship is horrifying, despicable and tragic for his family, friends and colleagues. He was a dedicated, conscientious and courageous physician who had endured one assassination attempt in 1993 — when he was shot in both arms — and endless harassment at his home, office and church. Kansas authorities used the coercive power of the state to hound and persecute Dr. Tiller with a variety of unconstitutional and specious charges.

For those of us who knew him, a man who served his country as a Navy flight surgeon, who provided medical care for tens of thousands of women and their families and who loved his family, this loss is incomprehensible. Those of us who were his friends and colleagues will miss his easy good humor, unfailing generosity and graciousness, and willingness to share and exchange the kind of clinical information that doctors cherish.

George took over his father's family practice in Wichita when his parents, sister and brother-in-law were killed in a plane crash in 1970. He had planned to close his father's practice and continue his plans for a residency in dermatology.

He soon found that women had come to his father for help to have safe abortions — illegal at that time. Women appealed to George to continue his father's compassion and service. At first, he refused — and one woman died from a badly done abortion. George changed his mind. He became not only a skilled family practitioner, he became highly skilled in difficult late abortion procedures. His patients came from around the world with tragically complicated pregnancies for his help.

In the highly specialized world of late abortion for women with desperate needs, George and I were each other's only peers. We talked a lot and often about our patients, families and political struggles. We skied together in the Colorado Rockies. We both had trouble staying on the trail. Somehow, we both had a tendency to resist supervision.

George Tiller was kind, gentle, considerate and compassionate. He was funny. He was devoted to his family and friends. He was not vengeful in spite of the oppro-

rium, violence and hatred heaped upon him by opponents of abortion. He was generous in every way to his friends, community and good causes. He was an outstanding asset to our society, and he was a joy to those who knew him. He was a man of peace.

But this is not just the personal tragedy of one abortion doctor, one honorable physician who took over his late father's family practice. This brutal, cold-blooded, premeditated political assassination is the inevitable and predictable result of over 35 years of rabid anti-abortion harassment, hate rhetoric, violence and intimidation.

I have some experience with this subject.

Within two weeks after starting to do abortions at Colorado's first freestanding, nonprofit abortion clinic in Boulder in 1973, I started getting obscene death threats in the middle of the night. I slept with a rifle by my bed at my house in the mountains, and I expected someone to try to kill me.

In 1982, Dr. Hector Zevallos and his wife were taken captive by the "Army of God" in Granite City, Illinois, because of Dr. Zevallos' work in performing abortions.

After two dozen clinic bombings in 1984, FBI Director William Webster said that the incidents weren't terrorism because "we don't know who's doing it."

Since those times, the anti-abortion rhetoric has been filled with descriptions of doctors as "baby killers," "mass murderers" and "child killers." The anti-



Dr. George Tiller

abortion fanatics call themselves "pro-life" while they are killing doctors and other health workers who help women. This despicable phrase implies that those of us who save women's lives are "pro-death" and "anti-life." "Pro-life" is not a neutral, descriptive term. It is a dagger of psychological warfare that is backed by hate and terror. It is a profound libel and insult to those who help women. Words kill, and the phrase "pro-life" is an obscene and grotesque sophistry. It is a cruel and vicious fraud.

Fox News TV host Bill O'Reilly, who calls himself "pro-life," made an obsession of obscenely referring to Dr. Tiller as "George Tiller, the baby killer." He repeated this epithet dozens of times. He demonized and vilified Dr. Tiller on the public airwaves. This is called "target identification." This is electronic fascism.

It is only one of many examples, others supplied by Dr. James Dobson, the former head of Focus on the Family located in Colorado Springs. In August, 1993, Randall Terry, head of Operation Rescue, went on National Christian Radio Broadcast Network and, referring to me by name and citing Scripture passages, invited his listeners to assassinate me.

How can you defend yourself against this?

Dr. David Gunn was assassinated in 1993. Dr. John Britton was assassinated in 1994. Dr. Bernard Slepian was assassinated in 1998.

Dr. Tiller is the fourth American abortion doctor to be assassinated by "pro-life" anti-abortion fanatics, and at least three other people have been murdered for the same reasons. Others, such as nurse Emily Lyons, have been maimed for life.

"The question is not, 'When does life begin?' but, 'Who is best prepared to make the decision to transmit life to a new generation: the individual or the state?'"

Dr. Tiller's assassination is the latest event in the historic pattern of anti-abortion violence. This movement says to those of us who help women: "Do what we tell you to do, or we will kill you." And they do.

We don't have to invade other countries to find terrorists. They are right here, killing abortion doctors.

What does Dr. Tiller's assassination mean? Why was he chosen by the assassin for death in the church on a quiet Sunday morning in Wichita?

What did Dr. Tiller represent to the anti-abortion fanatic who killed him?

He represented freedom. He represented individual dignity. He represented opportunity for women to become full citizens and participants in our society. He represented social change. He represented the value of the individual adult human being as opposed to state control of individual lives. He represented a thought. The man who killed Dr. Tiller tried to kill a thought.

The idea that an embryo or fetus is equal to, or more important than, the life of a cantankerous adult doctor is no longer a sick private delusion. It is a collective psychosis masquerading as religion that has become a political force threatening democratic society.

Dr. Tiller's crime was not that he killed children — which he did not — but that he brought liberty and health to women. He saved their lives and futures. That's why every doctor in America who does abortions lives under a death threat.

As I said in 1993, after the assassination of Dr. Gunn, we can only hope that Dr. Tiller's tragic and senseless murder will wake up the American people to the radical Christian right's determination to take absolute power in our society and to control its vital institutions.

The main difference between the American anti-abortion movement and the Taliban is about 8,000 miles. Also, the Taliban wants a fascist Islamic theocracy, whereas the American anti-abortion movement wants a fascist Christian theocracy.

The main difference between the American anti-abortion movement and the Salem Witch Hunts is 300 years.

Last week, we observed the 65th anniversary of the Normandy Invasion. The difference between those of us who help women by performing abortions and the guys who hit the beach in 1944 is that we get to choose and we have a better chance of surviving. It's the same issue, the same adversary, the same clash of values, the same struggle, but different weapons.

All of these historical convulsions are about power.

The question is not, "When does life begin?" but, "Who is best prepared to make the decision to transmit life to a

new generation: the individual or the state?"

In this matter, the individual woman is more competent than any government.

To its eternal disgrace, the Republican Party has exploited the abortion issue since 1974 to get power. It has been a conscious, deliberate, cynical choice of political strategy by this party, and its leadership was captured long ago by the most radical elements in the religious right. It is a mutual exploitation. The Republican agenda is about money and power. The radical religious right's agenda is about power and money. Working together, they gave us eight years of George W. Bush.

In 1994, following the assassination of Drs. Gunn and Britton and the attempted assassination of Dr. Tiller in 1993, and following the declaration of an Alabama Catholic priest named David Trosch that killing doctors who do abortions is justifiable homicide, I was being stalked by Ken Scott, a local survivalist, marksman and anti-abortion fanatic. I went to the Department of Justice and asked for help. In a report that I prepared in the fall of 1994 for the Civil Rights division of the U.S. Department of Justice, which is dated January 6, 1995, I stated:

The classic problem of democracy is that it grants great liberty to those who hate freedom.

The anti-abortion movement, and especially its appropriation of legitimate religious expression for sinister and basically seditious terrorist purposes, is testing our commitment to free speech to the limits. In fact, the use of free speech and freedom of religion by anti-abortion demagogues is dangerous to the lives and liberty of many peaceful U.S. citizens.

There is no deterrence at present for anti-abortion demonstrators, since they do not respect either civil or criminal laws or basic assumptions of Western culture.

Two weeks after I submitted my report, the "American Coalition of Life [sic] Activists" held a press conference in Virginia, home of the Moral Majority, on January 22, 1995, and announced its hit list of the first 13 doctors they wanted eliminated. I was on the list, and so was George Tiller.

The Mafia has the decency to keep its hit lists private.

George was assassinated last week. I am now, once again, under the 24-hour protection of heavily armed U.S.

marshals. They risk their lives for me. The U.S. Attorney General made that happen.

Why is it necessary for an American doctor who helps women to be protected from assassins?

What does this mean for American society? What does it mean for freedom in the United States?

When the anti-abortion fanatics finish killing off all the abortion doctors, who's next? People who read newspapers? People who write for newspapers? People who read books? Federal judges? Homosexuals? Women who don't wear veils? Members of Congress? People who preach from the wrong part of the Bible?

The American anti-abortion movement is opposed to the rule of law, a secular society, the American Constitution, representative government, personal freedom, democracy and thought.

The spirit of true freedom, the security of its citizens, the peace of civil society and the soul of America is at stake here. Dr. Tiller's assassination is the latest blow to that freedom.

Wake up, America.

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