

Protect Abortion Rights

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OP-ED

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BOULDER, Colo. - The 14th anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion, finds us with a continuing paradox. In private, abortion has become an essential and integral component of women's health care and the care of families. Publicly, we remain deeply divided, and further legal protections, including perhaps a constitutional amendment, are needed to preserve a woman's right to obtain a safe abortion.

There is no way to describe adequately the private anguish of a woman seeking an abortion or the fear she faces. Antiabortion harassment has intensified those fears and that anguish enormously, but women continue to seek abortions in large numbers. Most estimates indicate that about 1.3 million American women seek abortions every year – one out of three pregnancies. In some cities, the number of abortions nearly equals the number of live births.

Meanwhile, a growing number of doctors specialize in providing abortion services, and several hundred clinics around the country make this service their primary activity. Physicians frequently encounter pregnancies in which severe medical complications or fetal anomalies make abortion the treatment of choice as well as the treatment desired by the pregnant woman.

The gradual legalization of abortion, culminating in 1973 in *Roe v. Wade* and in *Doe v. Bolton* (which struck down restrictions on facilities that can be used for abortions), has resulted in one of the great public health advances of the 20th century. It has brought remarkable improvements to the health of American women and has made the operation one of the safest medical procedures in America. The availability of safe abortions has contributed to dramatic declines in maternal and infant mortality.

However, this extraordinary success has led not only to widespread relief from suffering but also, regrettably, to widespread public controversy – controversy inflamed by President Reagan himself. Dozens of abortion clinics and doctors' offices have been bombed and destroyed during the past six years, and the bombings continue. In December, some determined citizens placed 15 sticks of dynamite in the Planned Parenthood of New York City's Margaret Sanger clinic, where abortions are performed. People would have died without prompt and courageous action by city firemen.

There are healthy signs that the public is finding antiabortion harassment increasingly distasteful. Many candidates who openly embraced the antiabortion fanatics lost important elections in November, and that was no accident. Pro-choice sentiment worked strongly against them. Pro-choice activists worked hard with others to elect qualified candidates who support reproductive freedom. This trend should continue.

How about a constitutional amendment?

On the other hand, the President remains abortion's chief national opponent. He has consistently used opposition to abortion as an ideological litmus test for appointing Federal judges: meanwhile, the Supreme Court is only one vote away from overturning *Roe v. Wade* and its progeny. Whether Mr. Reagan's current difficulties will impede his ability to work his will with the new Democratic Senate in judicial appointments remains to be seen. Many hope that he will not have an opportunity to appoint any new Justices to the Court.

Given this fragile legal environment, we must think of ways to protect permanently a woman's right to make a legal choice as well as a physician's ability to help her. One such remedy would be a Reproductive Rights Amendment to the Constitution. It would not by itself quell opposition to abortion, but would codify an important right and protect necessary medical activity from political attack and partisan exploitation.

A bill introduced by Representative Pat Schroeder, Democrat of Colorado, would make it a Federal crime to commit violence against a health service facility or those associated with it. The bill is aimed particularly at protecting abortion facilities. This is an immediately feasible and urgently needed step consistent with the long term of providing constitutional protection for reproductive rights. □

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