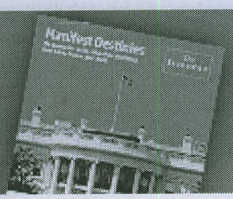
Special audio edition



The Economist

Lexington

A life and choice matter

Apr 29th 2004
From The Economist print edition

The battle over abortion provides some intriguing lessons about American politics

Get article background

YOU have to hand it to the pro-choice movement. Last Sunday's march in Washington, DC, was a triumph. The abortion-rights movement not only succeeded in conjuring up one of the biggest marches in American history, with 1m people crowding on to the mall, a seething mass of deep purple and hot pink. It also succeeded in updating its image a little, recruiting hundreds of thousands of fresh-faced college students to march alongside wrinkled feminist icons such as Gloria Steinem.

But shift your attention from the sheer spectacle of the march to the reason why people were there and the story changes from triumph to retreat. The reason why so many people descended on Washington was that, more than 30 years after *Roe v Wade*, the court decision safeguarding abortion rights, they feel those rights are being curtailed. And the reason why those rights are being curtailed is that the pro-life movement has repeatedly outmanoeuvred the other side. The battle between these two forces is a microcosm of the wider battle between liberalism and conservatism: the conservatives have transformed an apparent lost cause into an agenda-setting battle cry.

A decade ago, pro-lifers were seen as cranks. Pro-life vigilantes murdered abortion doctors, firebombed clinics and threw every insult under the sun at the Clintons, who were busy extending abortion rights.

Today the picture is very different. In 2003 a survey of college freshmen by the University of California, Los Angeles, showed that only 55% of them thought that abortions should be legal, down from 67% in 1992. Last November, when George Bush signed a law banning partial-birth abortion, this first federal restriction on abortion for 30 years passed the Senate by a lopsided majority of 64-34.

The most obvious reason for the change is that pro-lifers have captured the political establishment. Republicans control all three branches of the federal government as well as a majority of seats in state legislatures. The party is also much more hostile to abortion than it has ever been before. There are a few pro-choice Republicans left—Arnold Schwarzenegger and Colin Powell, for instance—but their numbers are in sharp decline.

The pro-lifers have also got a lot cannier. You don't need to be all that clever to realise that shooting people in the name of life is a losing strategy, even if you justify it on the grounds that "quite a number of babies' lives will be saved", as Don Treshman, the leader of Rescue America, once did. That rhetoric is now soft-pedalled. Even though the pro-lifers' long-term goal remains the same—the repeal of *Roe v Wade*—they have attacked by stealth rather than full-frontal assault.

The pro-life movement has shifted the debate from a lofty, widely supported principle (should women have the right to choose?) to much more specific questions. Do women have a right to abort their fetuses in the third trimester? Can an underage girl have an abortion without her parents' consent? Should taxpayers' money be used to finance abortions? These tactics have made the pro-choice people look like extremists: defending partial-birth abortion is a lot harder than defending the principle of choice. The tactics have also allowed state legislatures to impose umpteen restrictions on abortion, such as waiting periods, Medicaid bans and parental-consent laws.

In the meantime, the pro-lifers have tried to change the culture that underpins *Roe v Wade*. George Bush has remarked that he doesn't think that "the culture has changed to the extent that the American people or the Congress would totally ban abortions." But conservatives are still having some success in this slow-motion culture war. Frances Kissling, a long-time pro-choice activist, admits that it is much easier for people to see themselves as "pro-life" than it was a decade ago—thanks to advances in neo-natal care, improvements in sonograms and the increasing popularity of adoption.

All this has required a remarkable combination of patience and opportunism. The pro-life movement has gradually constructed a network of institutions, from James Dobson's Focus on the Family behemoth in Colorado Springs to tiny think-tanks in most state capitals, that keep the anti-abortion fires burning and spot mistakes by their opponents. William Saletan, the author of "Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War" (University of California Press, 2003), describes how the pro-lifers used the pro-choicers' arguments about limiting government intrusion into people's private lives to undermine the case for public subsidies for abortions for the poor.

To the barricades

Yet things are not all going the pro-lifers' way. The number of marchers this weekend is a sign of the roadblock being erected in front of the slowly advancing conservative machine. Indeed, conservatives may yet regret that they have not been stealthy enough and have stirred up opposition that will cost them dear. The marchers were united by a palpable hatred of the Bush administration. ("Abort Bush in the first term", read a typical banner.) Pro-choice groups are already planning a massive voter-turnout campaign for this November's general election.

And this roadblock is being erected at a time when the pro-lifers are still far from their real target. They may have succeeded in changing abortion policy at the margins (particularly the margins inhabited by the poor). But the thing that really upsets them—the constitutional right for women to have abortions—still commands solid support. And, for conservatives, this seems part of a worrying pattern in domestic policy. Right-wingers have succeeded only in implementing the easy part of their ideas (cutting taxes

rather than shrinking government, for example) and yet half the nation is nevertheless up in arms. Just imagine the outcry if conservatives start trying to implement the difficult things—like banning abortion completely.

Copyright © 2009 The Economist Newspaper and The Economist Group. All rights reserved.