
Commentary; The Thirty Years War; To be against abortion is not to be against feminism; [HOME EDITION]

Norah Vincent. *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Jan 22, 2003. pg. B.13

Full Text (665 words)

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Is the phrase "pro-life feminist" an oxymoron? The newly rechristened NARAL Pro-Choice America -- formerly known as the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League -- would like you to think so. With two Supreme Court justices poised to retire, a cagey "anti-choice" president itching to replace them and a simpatico Congress at the wheel, the feminist establishment is very nervous.

In recent weeks, it has been gearing up an all-out public relations campaign aimed at undecided women voters and, more important, the six major Democratic presidential hopefuls, all of whom attended NARAL's fund-raising dinner in Washington on Tuesday, the eve of the 30th anniversary of *Roe vs. Wade*. The distaff lobby is playing the sex card and the message is clear: Abortion is going to be the litmus test in 2004, and if you're not pro-choice, you're anti-woman.

The blistering irony of this unquestioned association between feminism and legalized abortion is that it flies in the face of history, logic and experience. It may come as a surprise to many people, for example, to learn that the earliest women's rights advocates, also known as "first wave" feminists, adamantly opposed abortion. In the Revolution, her newsletter, Susan B. Anthony called it "child murder" and "infanticide." Mary Wollstonecraft denounced those who would "destroy the embryo in the womb or cast it off when born." Elizabeth Cady Stanton, organizer of the first U.S. women's rights congress, in 1848 in Seneca Falls, N.Y., also condemned abortion as "a disgusting and degrading crime."

When you consider what abortion really is biologically, it's hard to refute our foremothers on the issue. The reasoning is simple and syllogistic. The womb is one of the defining features of the female animal. The defining feature of abortion, meanwhile, is a denial or negation of the womb, because its sole purpose is to stop the womb from fulfilling its normal function.

Thus abortion is the ultimate negation of the female animal and therefore the ultimate misogynistic act. This is a singularly feminist argument because it emphasizes a woman's interest rather than a fetus'. It is on this woman-centered foundation that modern pro-life feminists, some of them refugees of the vehemently pro- abortion "second wave" feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s, build their case against abortion.

Far from seeing legalized abortion as offering women more choices, exiled apostate second-wavers like Serrin Foster, president of Feminists for Life of America, see it as a choice that has been made for many women: a cheap, quick fix that allows society to shirk its responsibility to provide affordable day care, housing, counseling and prenatal checkups to students, the poor and abandoned women. Many of these women opt for abortion because they lack the financial, emotional and institutional support to carry their pregnancies to term. Abortion, says Foster, is "a symptom of, not a solution to, the continuing struggles women face in the workplace, at home and in society."

On this issue, the second-wave feminist establishment -- as represented most visibly by NARAL and the National Organization for Women -- does not speak for all women or all feminists, nor should it presume to when seeking to define the terms of the 2004 presidential debate. Feminism is not monolithic and never will be if it remains true to its founding principle that a woman has a mind of her own and the right to express it freely.

There is a third wave in feminism, represented by the generation of women now in their 20s to mid-30s who have challenged the orthodoxy of their predecessors on abortion as well as date rape, sex and body image. Other third-wavers have wholeheartedly embraced the second-wave agenda. Both are the future of feminism. Both must be welcome under the umbrella of a diverse movement whose only common concern is that all women's voices be heard and that their votes not be taken for granted by the political party in whose pocket they reside.

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Norah Vincent is a columnist in Yardley, Pa.

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Section: *California Metro; Part B; Editorial Pages Desk*
ISSN/ISBN: 04583035
Text Word Count 665