How the press short-circuited the abortion debate

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In Texas we tell the story of an old-time Dallas lawyer, Col. R. E. L. Knight, who arrived home very late one night. When Mrs. Knight asked for an explanation, Colonel Bob said he had been worrying about Mrs. Bishop, an old and ill woman, a friend of the family, so he had stopped in for a long chat.

"That was very thoughtful of you," said Mrs. Knight, "but the odd part of it all is that Mrs. Bishop spent the evening right here. She went home only a few minutes ago."

Colonel Bob simply shook his head and remarked sadly, "That may be. Nevertheless, I think I shall stick to my story."

There will be no resolution to the abortion debate as long as the debate continues to be short-circuited by press bias and judicial dictatorship.

The Colonel's faulty logic is echoed by today's secular media when responding to proof of their bias. There **is** clearly an anti-Christian bias among the American journalistic elite. Surveys have revealed it. Press distortions during the debate over **The Last Temptation of Christ** showed it. My book *Prodigal Press* gives many examples and explains how that bias developed. And yet, leading journalists typically stick to their story: "No bias. Fair treatment for all."

To counter that claim, Christians must document accusations of bias with thorough research. In this article I will examine one particular way that bias has appeared and crippled the American democratic process for over two decades now. I'm talking about coverage of the abortion debate.

My local newspaper, the Austin *American-Statesman,* recently ran an editorial charging that Operation Rescue and other anti-abortion demonstrations exemplified "the single-issue politics of obsession" and were "emotionally pitched to the point that rational discussion is rendered impossible."

For fifteen years now, the bias evidenced in that desire to choke off debate has persisted.

That editorial contained many distortions. It described the pro-life position as a "minority" view, and did not note that anywhere from three-fifths to four-fifths of Americans, according to various surveys, do not support the **Roe v. Wade** position. It argued that abortion-on-demand "is the only practical way to handle the matter without inviting a host of problems," but did not note that the present policy has **already** created a host of problems, including demonstrations and counter-demonstrations (and, most significantly, over twenty million deaths).

For now, though, let's agree with that editorial statement about the debate becoming emotionally pitched so that rational discussion is difficult. We could argue about which side in the debate has been shouting the loudest, but I'll concede that the Christian, pro-life side has been pretty cantakerous recently. But what is the alternative when the two forums that should be havens of fair play—the press and the courts—have been so biased that the only open venues left may be the streets?

There was a time, during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, when the "rational discussion" called for by the *American-Statesman* was taking place—in legislatures, in state election referenda, at colleges and universities. Sometimes, the pro-abortion side won: In 1970, the New York legislature by one vote legalized abortion. Sometimes, the anti-abortion side won: In state referenda during 1972, 61% of Michigan voters and 77% of North Dakota voters said "no" to abortion. Sometimes, understandably, the debate was very emotional—but there was a debate, and both sides had the opportunity to be heard.

Furthermore, the shrewd pro-abortion folks wanted the debate to go on. Alan Guttmacher, head of Planned Parenthood, hoped to build a pro-abortion consensus, but he knew that would take time. He **wanted** the issue to be ventilated in the press. He did not want the courts to short-circuit the process. Guttmacher's goal was to make widespread abortion legal for generations to come, not just to gain a quick victory that would prompt a backlash.

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But, as I learned in the course of researching my recently-published book, *The Press and Abortion,* many journalists, coming off an anti-Christian mindset and wanting to impose their will on others, were not so shrewd. They wanted to make abortion seem easy and opponents of abortion seem nutty. They used the news pages, where people expected fair play, to tell Dick-and-Jane stories of happy killing. In 1970 the Omaha *World-Herald* quoted "Betty" describing her abortion experience: "I had to stay quiet for 15 minutes. When I got up, I felt like a brand-new woman. I felt so happy." The *Long Island Press* quoted "Susan" telling the abortionist when the operation was over, "Oh, thank you, thank you." The reporter added, "Within the next half hour she will have some cookies and a soft drink in the recovery lounge, fill out a few forms, pay a fee of $200 and be on her way back home"—probably skipping, the article seemed to suggest.

The San Francisco *Chronicle* told how a typical young woman "came back from her abortion smiling and saying, 'I feel fine... let's go to lunch.'" According to that article, the abortion "procedure is so simple and over so quickly that [women having abortions] have no feelings of guilt." Many studies since then, along with the growth of groups such as Women Exploited by Abortion, have exploded the myth of guilt-free abortion.

News stories on abortion from 1970 through 1972 typically portrayed pro-abortionists as merciful and anti-abortionists as closed-minded. The Memphis *Commercial Appeal,* under a headline "Hand of Mercy Extends in Abortions," indicated that pro-abortionists counseling pregnant women "are answering these women's needs." When pro-abortion groups circulated petitions for unrestricted abortion, many newspapers gave the phone numbers of the groups and proposed that readers sign up. Some newspapers presented how-to guides to abortion, complete with free advertising for Planned Parenthood, which had taken an ardently pro-abortion position, and telephone numbers for abortion referral services.

The Cleveland Press quoted a local abortionist as saying, "I enjoy helping people and therefore I enjoy doing abortions."

I give hundreds of other examples in my book, but the general thrust shows the accuracy of Judge John Noonan's appraisal:

> The press was for the abortion liberty. Virtually every major newspaper in the country was on its side, as were the radio stations, the news commentators, the disc jockeys, the pollsters, the syndicated columnists, the editorial writers, the reporters, the news services, the journals of information and the journals of opinion. With the notable exception of three or four syndicated...every major molder of public opinion in the press was pro-abortion or indifferent to the issue. There was a massive barrier through which any news or opinion contrary to the liberty had to travel.

The press, in other words, let down not only the anti-abortion side, but the shrewder pro-abortion people as well—and the American public generally. There was no real debate.

Then came **Roe v. Wade,** which in January, 1973, turned the abortion world upside down. The Supreme Court mandated abortion anywhere without restriction during the first three months, abortion in hospitals without restriction during the next three months, and abortion in hospitals following paperwork during the final three months. Justice Harry Blackmun in his decision wrote that he was refusing to declare when human life began, but in practice his decision did exactly that by leaving human life without protection until birth. Hunters do not shoot at an object in the forest if it **may** be a human being: Blackmun was saying that, as far as he was concerned, it was okay to blast away at a baby in the womb because it really is not a baby.

Many studies...have exploded the myth of guilt-free abortion.

The most influential U.S. newspapers, instead of expressing concern about judicial tyranny, all cheered. The New York *Times* called Blackmun's decision "a major contribution to the preservation of individual liberties." The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* called the edict "remarkable for its common sense" and "its humaneness." Many journalists wiped off their crystal balls and predicted an end to the abortion debate that they had been trying to kill. The Des Moines *Register* said goodbye to "emotion-charged hearings" on abortion. The Louisville *Courier-Journal* praised the Court's "bold and unequivocal decision." The Milwaukee *Journal* declared that "politicians and policemen and judges" would no longer have to be concerned with the "distractive" issue.

News pages followed the slant of the editorial columns: Abortion, it seemed, was part of the 1960s and early 1970s agenda and was now a dead issue. Just as Soviet leader Brezhnev proclaimed in the mid-1970s that a nation brought under Communist control would never be allowed to leave it, so newspapers stated or implied that there was no turning back on abortion. We could call this the "Brezhnev Doctrine" of abortion, and newspapers held to it. The Milwaukee *Journal* reported that the abortion issue was "resolved." The Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* hailed abortion as a growth industry, "a booming reality at Fort Worth hospitals." The San Antonio *Light* provided free publicity for a Planned Parenthood Wine and Cheese Feast. The Atlanta *Journal* gave the address and telephone number of a "pregnancy termination clinic" that it described as "a clean modern facility." (So, too, were Hitler's gas chambers.)

Many newspapers misinformed readers by reporting that the Supreme Court legalized abortion only during the first trimester. They did not explain that, according to **Roe v. Wade**, abortion could not be prohibited at any stage of pregnancy. That press-created, mistaken understanding exists among many Americans to this day. But the obvious press goal after **Roe v. Wade** was to end the abortion debate, even when many people wanted it to go on. The Houston *Post* waxed sarcastic about "naively simplistic" anti-abortionists who "post the gory pictures on the wall." A Cleveland *Press* headline right after **Roe v. Wade** read, "Everyone seems calm about abortions here"; several days later, there were large anti-abortion protests.

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Many newspapers, instead of dealing with the real issues, tried to refurbish the image of abortionists. A Chicago *Sun-Times* profile of one abortionist called him "a long-time civil rights advocate" and noted that he was director of the finance committee for Operation PUSH. The Cleveland *Press* quoted a local abortionist as saying, "I enjoy helping people and therefore I enjoy doing abortions." The Detroit *Free Press* described one abortionist as a saint who had undergone persecution but has persevered for humanitarian reasons.

Abortion coverage immediately following the **Roe v. Wade** decision could have been handled very differently, and in a few cases was. One Milwaukee *Journal* article, "Abortion Business Here is Brisk and Efficient," described first the women in crowded abortion business waiting areas, and then the men: "About 30 men stood or sat against the walls, looking worried, guilty, or just stony eyed. 'The casket faced brigade,' an assistant at the clinic called them. The air was hot and thick with smoke. 'It's like cattle,' one girl said as she left after her abortion." But such articles were rare, and were overwhelmed even in their own newspapers by pro-abortion coverage.

For fifteen years now, the bias evidenced in that desire to choke off debate has persisted. For example, during the 1976 campaign the Washington *Post* called the abortion issue "overblown," the Los Angeles *Times* urged "proper perspective," and the Boston *Globe* wanted to place "the abortion question in perspective," which meant off page one. The press sermonizing on news pages was extreme. The Chicago *Sun-Times* even ended one news story with the reporter's homily about how "women who elect abortion show love...Abortion as love may be a bit much for anti-abortionists to understand, but the current movement is to regard abortion as a positive experience." Such statements represent not journalism, but seduction.

However, the seduction has not been fully effective. It has succeeded in fooling many people as to what **Roe v. Wade** allows, but it has not eliminated the opposition of most Americans to widespread abortion. And yet, that opposition has few major media outlets. What happens in a democratic society when debate is short-circuited by judicial tyranny and press bias? The answer, we are seeing, is that the battle goes on in the streets, with demonstrations and sit-ins and the other techniques that many newspapers now decry.