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An Insightful New History of the Pro-Life Movement

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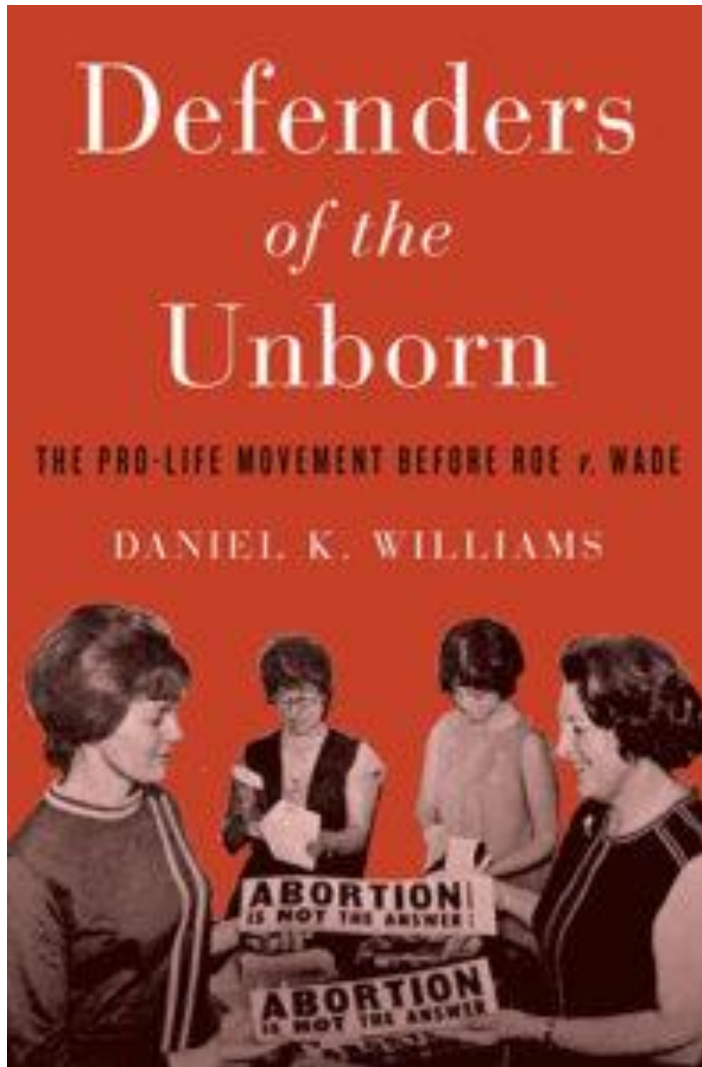


In recent years several books have been published that chronicle—either as history or memoir—the efforts of those committed to ending legalized abortion. One of the first was my own *Abandoned: the Untold Story of the Abortion Wars*, followed by the late Dr. and Mrs. John C. Willke’s *Abortion and the Pro-Life Movement: An Inside View*, and a lesser-known work by James Trott, *Was that Thunder? A Memoir of Pro-Life Rescue, 1988-1997*. A history of the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision is offered in Clarke Forsythe’s 2013 *Abuse of Discretion*. Soon to be published is Joe Scheidler’s much anticipated *Racketeer for Life: A Memoir of a Career Pro-Lifer*. A few histories of the activist-end of the pro-life movement came out in the 1990s and early 2000s such as *Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion War* with its false interpretation of the rescue movement as precursor to clinic bombings and killing of abortionists, and the pro-abortion sarcastic diatribe *Targets of Hatred: Anti-Abortion Terrorism*. Add to this Cynthia Gorney’s even-handed *Articles of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars*, published in 2000.

This year sees a unique treatment of the pro-life effort in Daniel K. Williams’ [Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-life Movement Before Roe v. Wade](#). This is a balanced, impeccably researched examination of the development of a social movement and, while told in a factual, straight-forward style, nevertheless brings to life the personalities of those first alarmed by the push to legalize abortion and their early strategies. This is an

important work—first, because it is absolutely unique. It is the first history of the right-to-life movement exclusively concerned with its pre-*Roe* response to abortion.

Secondly, *Defenders of the Unborn* reveals that for decades the pro-life effort was dominated by progressives allied with Democratic Party social welfare principles—demonstrating that the philosophical roots of the pro-life movement are based in a classically liberal idea of human rights and social justice—and thus cannot be dismissed as an off-shoot of neo-conservative Republicanism. The book seeks to demonstrate that historians “mischaracterized both the chronology of the pro-life movement and its ideological origins” and thus are unable



to “explain why it remains a potent political force today.” The book iconoclastically reveals that indeed, many who advocated legalized abortion in the pre-*Roe* days were mainstream Republicans. Read the book to find out who! And lastly, *Defenders* is important for providing a perceptive explanation of the social, moral, and cultural forces that eventually led to the Democratic Party embracing abortion-on-demand thus forcing the pro-life movement to politically shift its allegiance to the Republican Party.

Williams argues that earliest concerns about abortion dating back to the 1930s were tied to opposition to the growing acceptance of contraception. Those who were most outspoken, nearly exclusively so, were Catholics—and most Catholics at this time were loyal Democrats as well. Already on page 19, Williams’ acute analysis is evident:

The Catholics who opposed contraception and abortion were strong advocates of relief for the poor. Indeed Catholic clerics of the 1930s, who embraced a theology of social obligation and care for the less fortunate that papal encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) had mandated, often outpaced the New Deal in their call for government programs, aid to the impoverished and a living wage for workers. But in contrast to Protestant, Jewish, and secular liberals, Catholics believed that care for the poor was incompatible with the promotion of birth

control or sterilization, whether voluntary or coerced. In their view, the entire Catholic program of social justice depended on a regard for human life that the contraceptive movement threatened.

The push to legalize abortion in the 1930s was spearheaded by medical professionals concerned about women’s health, in particular the dangers women faced from illegal abortions. Soon this push expanded to therapeutic abortions, abortion for hard cases such as rape, incest, fetal deformity, and eventually abortion for psychiatric indications. It is important to note that the movement was essentially motivated by concern for women’s health and not about individual rights. Abortion law reform—in other words, removal of legal protection for the unborn, received a significant boost when in 1959 the American Law Institute supported abortion law liberalization and endorsed a model abortion code that would permit abortion in certain circumstances.

The first to oppose this advancement of legalized abortion were Catholic doctors, lawyers and clergy—all men whose opposition was tied to opposition to contraception as well. Most who opposed abortion in these early years saw that the two practices were, in their hostility to life, inherently bound together. However, if opposition

to abortion was to succeed socially and politically the right-to-life movement needed to divorce itself from its formal crusade against contraception. It also needed to become a movement with diverse membership and leaders—namely more women, African Americans, Protestants and Jews.

Williams's provides a fascinating history of the founding of pre-*Roe* pro-life organizations, in particular the National Right to Life Committee organized in 1968 under the direction of the young "liberal social reformer," Fr. James McHugh, who in the 1960s was sympathetic to a change in Church doctrine banning contraception. He saw the need for the movement to "sever its connection" with Catholic opposition to birth control and the Catholic Church itself even though the NRTL Committee was thoroughly Catholic and initially funded by the Catholic bishops. A growing awareness took place that defense of the unborn needed to be grounded in human rights and constitutional arguments—in a "rights-based language of secular liberalism" that would appeal to those outside the Church and be a return to considering the "fetus" as a person deserving of legal protection, an idea embraced by secular liberals before abortion became a "contentious political issue."

The earliest advocates' of the right-to-life of the unborn were social liberals with ties to the Democratic Party such as Eunice Shriver, sister of John F. Kennedy, and her husband Sargent Shriver, and liberal Methodists Fred and Marjory Mecklenberg, founding members of Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life (MCCL). Back in the 1960s Fred was even a member of Planned Parenthood. The movement had leaders within its ranks who protested the Vietnam War such as Ann McCracken who headed up the New Brunswick, N.J. Birthright office.

By the late 1960s, fueled by the Sexual Revolution and the rise of feminism, the abortion liberalization movement shifted from advocating limited abortion based on ALI model legislation to a demand for abortion as a woman's right. Abortion was now about personal autonomy and individual rights as articulated in the 1965 Supreme Court's contraception case, *Griswold v. Connecticut*. Added to this were the proponents of population control. Williams explains that in the 1960s nearly all mainline Protestant churches supported elective abortion, not only the expected Unitarians, but even the American Baptist Convention. Williams notes: "While population control advocates sought to reduce global poverty by curbing birthrates, pro-lifers cast themselves as true defenders of the poor. They wanted to give impoverished women the resources to care for their children." Most of the poor did not want elites to limit their fertility argued Randy Engel, Catholic journalist, mother of five, and advocate for Vietnamese refugees, but "wealthy industrialists, eugenics advocates, and elitist groups" such as John D. Rockefeller III's Population Council pressured them into accepting contraception and were on the verge of doing the same with abortion.

In the early 1970s the Catholic vote was still important to the Democratic Party—so important that 1972 Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern named pro-life Democrat Thomas Eagleton as his running mate—and when he resigned, Sargent Shriver. After the *Roe v. Wade* decision the pro-life movement poured itself into passage of a Human Life Amendment (HLA), but already signaling its future, the Democratic Party platform, under pressure from feminists, stated that it was "undesirable to attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution to overturn the Supreme Court decision in this area." The majority of Democratic legislators worked to defeat the Amendment. Williams' book provides an excellent chronicle of this post-*Roe* era, explaining how the Democratic Party became the party of "abortion rights."

After *Roe*, the vast majority of pro-life Democrats would not oppose the Court's decision, seeking instead to limit the "need" for abortion through private pregnancy aid centers and social programs. Even Sargent Shriver in 1975 adopted the "personally opposed—but" position, saying on *Meet the Press* that he agreed with the Court's ruling—advocating aid to women as the way to reduce the abortion rate. He was bewildered when pro-lifers abandoned his bid for the presidency in droves, including the politically liberal Marjory Mecklenberg, exclaiming that he had done more than just about anyone else to champion the pro-life cause.

The political shift of pro-lifers away from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party came in the early 1970s when the GOP party platform opposed *Roe v. Wade* and in 1975 Ronald Reagan declared his support for the HLA.

Williams wonders whether the pro-life movement may have allied with the political left if, in the years immediately following *Roe*, it primarily focused on strategies to reduce the abortion rate, rather than reversing the Court's decision itself. He recognizes however that for pro-lifers, simply reducing abortions leaves unaddressed "the fundamental question of whether unborn human life would be legally protected." He believes that the movement's insistence on the right-to-life as a universal human right is the reason the movement continues to endure.

As an historian Williams bends over backwards to maintain an objective, neutral stance towards the subject matter of his book. Thus as a strict chronicle this book is exceptionally valuable especially in the way it provides a new historical perspective. In his quest to provide that "unbiased" report of the pro-life movement, Williams deliberately holds back reflections on whether the movement actually made the *right* political choices. But this is a history and not a cultural/moral critique of abortion as such. Perhaps his most important observation has to do with the movement's opting to advocate the right-to-life as a human rights issue—abandoning the link between abortion and sexual ethics. Williams most certainly sees the dilemma pro-lifers face in this regard. He concludes that a return to such a link toward the end of the twentieth century was a political liability in a culture that had fully embraced the Sexual Revolution. In his view, the movement's success is primarily the result of casting abortion in rights-based language—and certainly raises the question of whether the right-to-life of the unborn can ultimately be secured without the movement also addressing the moral/cultural milieu. And while Williams is content to only describe the dilemma, he raises an issue pro-lifers need to confront head on.

This reviewer completely appreciates the emphasis Williams' places on the right-to-life movement as a rights-based cause. Years ago I completed a manuscript entitled *Social Liberation and the Pro-Life Cause* and argued that the pro-life movement was *in essence* a liberal movement—not a conservative one. Too distracted with writing a dissertation in graduate school I never sought a publisher—except for one chapter "The Pre-Born and Prejudice" that appeared in an anthology. However, the fact is, the injustice of abortion is the fruit of a distorted sexual ethic that begins with a philosophical disconnect between sex acts and procreation.

Thus should the pro-life movement succeed only to politically outlaw abortion—the battle over respect for life will not have ended. Williams does acknowledge that the pro-life movement remains: "Both a campaign for human rights *and* a battle against the Sexual Revolution." He is willing to discuss the latter as a "political liability." But whether it is a political liability or not, the fact remains that an important dimension of the pro-life cause is to change the culture—a task that may take decades if not centuries—if it will even happen at all. It will certainly not happen if the movement for the sake of political expediency approaches abortion as strictly a human rights issue regarding the right-to-life of an oppressed people-group while leaving unattended disordered sexual behavior and attitudes that lead to the doorway of abortion clinics. Politics is after all, only one aspect of the war over abortion.

Williams' book provides historical lessons and insights valuable for understanding the development of the pro-life movement. For instance, he devotes several pages to the initial use of so-called "graphic images"—now called "abortion victim photos" (AVPs)—that such images convinced many even prior to *Roe v. Wade* that abortion needed to be opposed. That use of AVPs is hotly debated today. Pro-lifers who deride their use would do well to consult this history. And while he observes the political need to separate the right-to-life from sexual morality, ironically pro-lifers once again, as in the earliest days of opposition to abortion, see a connection between abortion and sexual ethics—which Williams notes runs the risk of placing pro-lifers outside the mainstream. *Defenders of the Unborn* is a true piece of scholarship and a significant contribution to the growing corpus of historical writing about the movement that seeks to end abortion.



By **[Monica Migliorino Miller](#)**

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