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the HUMAN LIFE REVIEW



Democrats for Life

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Part I. What They Face

On June 25th, at a festive dinner in Washington, D.C., the Democratic National Committee raised \$1.7 million for next year's presidential campaign. The Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel was decorated to look like a political-convention hall, and the Democratic presidential candidates were out in force. One of them, Representative Richard Gephardt of Missouri, revved up the 700 diners against Republicans: "Let's go! We're going to beat them!"¹

That same night, at a much smaller dinner in a modest hotel at the foot of Capitol Hill, the Democrats for Life of America held their own fundraiser. Their reception and dinner had much less pizzazz, but the roughly 50 attendees had a great time. Towards the end of the evening, Rev. Caesar LeFlore of Chicago told them he'd almost wished he could skip the closing prayer, because "I just wanted us to keep on enjoying one another." But he did pray mightily on behalf of those present, asking for strength and boldness so that they could "champion the cause of life."² Earlier Senator Benjamin Nelson of Nebraska, former two-term governor of his state, had told the group that his pro-life convictions represented "my belief, my feelings, my commitment for a lifetime before I ever decided to seek political office." His pro-life commitment was, he said in his address, "as natural to me as sunlight is in the morning . . ."³

The Democrats for Life are looking for more candidates like Senator Nelson. Started several years ago, they have experienced slow growth on a shoestring budget. They now claim nearly 20 state chapters but, like many small groups, prefer not to say how many individual members they have nationwide. But the Texas chapter, which appears to be the largest, has nearly 400 people on its mailing list. Michigan's Choose Life Caucus, which plans to affiliate with Democrats for Life, has around 70 members. Last March the Colorado chapter had only 10-15 members, but hoped to have 40-50 by the end of this year.⁴

In the past, pro-life Democrats started with high hopes but gave up in the face of party intransigence. Michael Schwartz, a leading pro-life activist and a Democrat, believes this effort is different. "The main difference," he said, "is Kristen Day." Day, a former congressional staffer in her early 30s, is the executive director of Democrats for Life. "Kristen knows what she's doing," Schwartz said. "She has pretty good connections. She works hard. . . . She's taken things one step at a time. She's built solidly and then picked up the next brick."⁵

Schwartz and others hope the group will soon sponsor a political action committee (PAC) to raise serious money for pro-life Democratic candidates. Such candidates are financially strapped because many Democratic-leaning PACs refuse to support candidates who oppose abortion. And pro-life Democrats who have liberal records on labor and budget issues cannot expect the heavy support from business PACs that pro-life Republicans receive. Lois Kerschen, a Texan and former Democrats for Life president, said in an interview that the first thing a candidate says is "I need money." She added, "Moral support is wonderful, but they need the money, too." Karen Wheeler, a California attorney and Democrats for Life activist, stressed the same point. "If pro-lifers really want to make a difference," she said, "they had better open their wallets, because Lord knows the folks on the other side open their wallets regularly and write fat checks."⁶

What They Are Up Against

The Democrats for Life clearly need all the help they can get—financial and otherwise. At this writing, all of the 2004 Democratic presidential candidates support abortion down the line. Six of them, speaking at a fundraiser for NARAL Pro-Choice America last January, proclaimed their loyalty to the abortion cause. Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut said the candidates probably would disagree on many issues, "but not this one." Howard Dean, former governor of Vermont, declared that "I'm running because I don't like extremism, and I think extremism is taking over this country." (He apparently didn't think *he* was being extreme when he said of partial-birth abortion: "This is an issue about nothing.") Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts summed up his own position with the following litany: "No overturning *Roe v. Wade*. No packing of the courts with

judges hostile to choice. No denial of choice to poor women . . . No more cutbacks on population-control efforts around the world.”⁷

In the weeks following the NARAL event, more candidates entered the race. Democrats for Life president Carol Crossed and her colleagues had hoped that one of them, the strongly anti-war Representative Dennis Kucinich of Ohio, would herald his pro-life convictions. Crossed, long active in anti-war as well as anti-abortion efforts, had planned to dedicate all her time to working in a Kucinich campaign. But she “was literally ill” when she discovered that Kucinich—like Jesse Jackson, Richard Gephardt, and others before him—had abandoned his pro-life position as he prepared to run for his party’s presidential nomination. Political commentator Larry Sabato suggested that the Kucinich switch should worry people on both sides of the debate. Referring to a report about another congressman who, before running for president, allegedly asked a colleague what position he should take on abortion, Sabato remarked: “If you don’t know the answer to that question in the depths of your soul, without political manipulations, you probably shouldn’t be president.”⁸

Kucinich was wrong to switch sides even from a political point of view. With all the other candidates’ competing for the votes of abortion supporters, he could have made a strong appeal to anti-abortion Democrats, even picking up many who might not agree with him on other issues. And it would have won him points for character and courage—qualities people really do care about.

The Democrats for Life also face a discouraging situation in Congress. They can count on only four or five Democratic votes in the Senate, and around 30 in the House (although they pick up more Democrats on issues such as partial-birth abortion and human cloning).⁹ Democratic leaders in Congress defend abortion with great vigor—and always, of course, under the banner of women’s rights. Now they are working overtime to keep an abortion lock on the third branch of government, the courts.

What Difference Does It Make?

For some 20 years, many right-to-lifers considered it useless to challenge the Democratic Party’s support of abortion. Their failure to do so helped guarantee that the party would embrace ever more extreme positions over the years. Consequently, the situation today is far worse than it might have been had a large contingent of pro-lifers decided to stay in the party and fight.

Some Republican pro-lifers, believing their party will control both the White House and Congress for decades to come, may think Democratic intransigence unimportant. They may be right. But then again, they may be dead wrong. The country could turn against

President George W. Bush, as it turned against Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter—the four presidents defeated or driven from office between 1968 and 1980—and as it turned against Bush’s father in 1992. There are no guarantees in politics, and it is a great mistake to entrust a movement’s future to one political party. As an ancient philosopher said, “A ship should not ride on a single anchor, nor life on a single hope.”¹⁰

Small though their numbers may be, the pro-life Democrats in Congress are crucial to legislative victories. Without them, Democratic Representative Bart Stupak of Michigan said recently, the National Right to Life Committee “cannot pass one piece of legislation in the U.S. Congress.” Prolifers must retain what little strength they still have in the Democratic Party and build on it until they have a real opportunity to change party policy. An interim goal might be a party platform that is neutral on abortion. The ultimate goal, as Lois Kerschen has said, should be “two pro-life parties.”¹¹

Looking back at a time when the situation was more promising, and understanding why it deteriorated so much over the years, may suggest strategies for retaking lost ground. The record shows that abortion opponents missed many opportunities to influence policy. It also shows that some Democratic leaders are more ambivalent about abortion than most people realize.

When Pro-Lifers Had Strength within the Party

In the 1970s, there was major opposition to abortion within the Democratic party—even after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. In 1977, for example, the right-to-life movement could count on 10-20 Democratic votes in the Senate and over 100 in the House.¹² Pro-life Democratic senators included both moderates, and prominent liberals such as Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, Jennings Randolph of West Virginia, and William Proxmire of Wisconsin. Thea Rossi Barron, a Democrats for Life board member who was the National Right to Life Committee’s first lobbyist, especially remembers “that wonderful senator, Tom Eagleton, who was always pro-life” and who was “the real leader, the floor leader” for the cause in the Senate. In the House, she could rely on Democrats James Oberstar of Minnesota and Romano Mazzoli of Kentucky as floor leaders; Democrat Daniel Flood of Pennsylvania, who championed pro-life riders on appropriations bills; and many others. All of this added up to real strength in a Congress then controlled by the Democrats.¹³

Many liberal Democrats in Congress strongly supported legal abortion, however. Believing that poor women shouldn’t be denied a medical procedure their middle-class and wealthy sisters could easily afford, they sought to guarantee taxpayer-funded abortions. While liberal Democrats and their allies lost most funding battles at the national level, they were successful in New York, California and 15

other states (usually winning through the courts rather than in the legislatures).¹⁴ It is a great irony that Democrats supported the killing of scores of unborn children who would have grown up to be Democrats. This may explain some of the difficulty Democrats are having in winning elections today.

McGovern's Dilemma

There were major storm warnings for unborn children in the Democratic presidential race of 1972, the year before the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, running against the Vietnam War, upset several more conservative candidates and captured the presidential nomination. McGovern said he personally thought abortion should be a decision between a woman and her doctor, but that he didn't believe the federal government should be involved in the issue one way or the other. (Several years earlier, one of McGovern's daughters, pregnant by an unstable boyfriend, had had an abortion.¹⁵ His complicity in that event undoubtedly affected his views but at the time he was running the abortion was a family secret.)

After attacks on his personal abortion position, McGovern stressed his no-federal-involvement objection.¹⁶ But many of his convention delegates adamantly favored legalized abortion. Their strength at the 1972 Democratic national convention was largely McGovern's own doing, since he had chaired the party reform commission that devised a quota system to ensure greater participation of women, youth and minorities. Early American feminists opposed abortion, but the feminists who won many of the '72 delegate seats viewed it as a woman's right. Against McGovern's will, they forced a floor fight on a "freedom of choice" minority plank.

McGovern and his staff realized that this and other radical planks could hurt them badly in their coming campaign against President Richard Nixon. So, as one McGovern aide later wrote, "The entire McGovern floor operation . . . was devoted to defeating our supporters. McGovern's sole telephone call to us was to admonish us to do just that." They managed to defeat the abortion plank and most other minority reports.¹⁷ Still, the televised platform debates hurt the candidate a great deal.

Jimmy Carter and Ellen McCormack

McGovern's loss in the '72 general election was so overwhelming that in 1976 Democrats were willing to accept a more moderate candidate, former Georgia governor James Earl (Jimmy) Carter. Carter didn't support a constitutional amendment to overturn *Roe v. Wade*; but he did oppose public funding of abortion, which by then was a major issue in Congress.

Ellen McCormack, a pro-life activist and mother of four from New York, ran in the 1976 Democratic presidential primaries “in defense of unborn babies.” While abortion was McCormack’s main concern, her positions on other issues suggested what is now called the consistent ethic of life. She opposed the death penalty and was critical of war. Then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, she charged, “sends military aid to both Israel and Egypt and then says ‘don’t shoot each other’ . . . I really think we can do better than that.” Her comment on abortion for the poor was particularly effective: “Abortion is put forth as a solution for the poor, but I think the poor want better housing, more jobs and food on their tables. I don’t think aborting their babies makes them any happier. I think it probably contributes to their misery.”¹⁸

McCormack received enough small donations to qualify for federal matching funds, enabling her to run television advertising that reached millions of people. Her supporters, noting it was the largest pro-life educational program ever mounted, claimed some women had “chose[n] life for their babies rather than abortion” because of the ads. McCormack received 238,027 votes in the primaries, but only 22 delegate votes at the national convention. In his speech nominating McCormack, James Killilea of Massachusetts made a scorching attack on Carter, blaming the Georgian for the first-ever abortion plank in the party platform. The plank declared it was “undesirable to attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution to overturn the Supreme Court decision,” but was silent on the issue of public funding.¹⁹

Carter defeated Gerald Ford, who had supported a states’ rights constitutional amendment on abortion. As president, Carter opposed public funding except in cases of rape, incest or when the mother’s life was threatened by the pregnancy. “I do think that abortions are the taking of a human life,” he said at one point, “and I have done and will do all I can to minimize the need for abortions.”²⁰ He could have done a great deal more, though, and his rhetoric could have been far more persuasive. It’s hard to imagine his claiming, for example, that he opposed suicide and was working to “minimize the need” for it. By expressing support for *Roe v. Wade*, Carter radically weakened his stated opposition to abortion. And he rarely if ever personalized the issue by speaking of unborn children, or by describing the misery of poor parents as Ellen McCormack had done.

Major Trouble from Massachusetts

During the Carter years, Congress battled fiercely over abortion, approving funding restrictions that ultimately would be upheld by the courts, but failing to pass a pro-life constitutional amendment. Two Massachusetts Democrats made life very difficult for pro-life activists at the time. Senator Edward Kennedy, head of a family still idolized by Democrats, had made pro-life statements in the early 1970s, but later became a major (and shrill) defender of abortion. His enormous

influence within the Democratic Party and the Senate helped sell the “pro-choice” position to liberals, especially Catholic liberals.

Also helping to make it easier for Catholics to toe the pro-abortion line was Representative Robert Drinan, a Jesuit priest who wore his Roman collar while voting for abortion funding. Drinan’s activism started well before the Carter presidency and had tremendous impact on other Democratic politicians. His papers at Boston College reveal how Drinan would tell pro-life constituents that he was morally opposed to abortion while he told people on the other side that he was using his influence to block pro-life initiatives—as indeed he was. In June, 1974, Drinan wrote to an abortion foe saying he hoped “everything that is feasible can be done to protect the sanctity and inviolability of unborn life.” But in July he assured an abortion supporter that “I have voted the correct way on all of the foolish proposals” made by two pro-life House members. Drinan once told a fellow congressman that he “found those in the so-called right to life movement to be very doctrinaire, adamant and unyielding people who have never had any experience with political issues before.” And in a letter to a Harvard University professor, he wrote: “I met recently with the so-called ‘Right-to-Lifers’ in a part of my congressional district. I commended the articles which you have written to them. At least one of these individuals will in all probability be able to read them.”²¹

On another occasion, an intern in Drinan’s office reported that a woman, thinking “Congress could learn from her experience,” had stopped by to describe her devastating experience with abortion 20 years earlier. Drinan’s handwritten note to the intern was hardly pastoral: “I hope that you heard her confession,” he joked. Regarding the intern’s comment that the woman “wanted you to know her personal history,” the priest responded, “Any more interesting details?” But when Drinan later wrote to the woman, he said he regretted he “was unable to meet with you personally,” that he shared her “deep concern with this matter,” and that he commended her “for your activities on behalf of the inviolability of all human life.”²²

“The Single Issue that Our Politicians Have Feared and Scorned”

Badly bruised by Senator Kennedy in the 1980 Democratic presidential primaries, Carter was unable to fully control the 1980 convention. While he won the nomination again, he couldn’t stop—and apparently didn’t even try very hard to stop—the delegates from adopting a platform plank that supported public funding of abortion.

Meanwhile, abortion foes were flocking to the standard of Ronald Reagan, the former California governor and Republican presidential candidate. Ellen McCormack ran again—this time as an independent—and was overwhelmed by the Reagan tide.²³ There were few pro-lifers at the Democratic convention, while abortion

supporters were out in great strength. The National Organization for Women had its own whip system for floor votes, and leading feminists such as Eleanor Smeal, Betty Friedan and Bella Abzug were deeply involved in the platform fight.²⁴

Abortion supporters were so bold as to have Dr. Kenneth Edelin of Boston—best known for his manslaughter conviction (later overturned) for an abortion he had done on a five or six-month-old unborn child—speak in favor of the abortion-funding plank. Edelin portrayed public funding as an urgent need of poor and minority women, appealing to the Democrats’ traditional concern “for the poor and the downtrodden in our society.” But he had nothing to say about the poor and minority children killed by abortion; nor did he suggest any nonviolent alternatives.²⁵

Speaking out against the plank was Carol Wold, Democratic national committeewoman from Minnesota. “I am a Democrat,” she told the audience. “I am pro-life. Today my party is telling me that I cannot be both.” Wold passionately pointed out that even as she spoke, “ten children are dying from abortion. They are human and alive, tiny and unborn, just as you and I were. And those ten children are the single issue that our politicians have feared and scorned but our nation cannot avoid. For without the right to have one’s life protected, all other rights are meaningless and all other promises made by this party are cruel and hollow.”

Wold also reminded delegates that “in many states there are Democratic senators in deep trouble this year because of their pro-abortion record.”²⁶ The election returns proved her right. Their pro-abortion records, plus Carter’s loss to Reagan, helped defeat a number of senior Democrats in the Senate.

Mondale and Ferraro Go Down

While abortion was not at the top of President Reagan’s priority list, he did give pro-lifers many victories at the administrative level and certainly bolstered presidential rhetoric on the issue. Abortion opponents continued to support him, and many gave up on the Democratic Party altogether. This left abortion supporters a clear field in 1984 to pass a Democratic platform plank that not only supported public funding but also championed *Roe v. Wade* as “the law of the land,” and proclaimed reproductive freedom to be “a fundamental human right.”

Two Washington *Post*-ABC News polls, however, were showing that, while only nine percent of the 1984 Democratic convention delegates supported a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion, 46 percent of Democrats nationwide did support one. The radical difference may have been due to the fact that the delegates were far wealthier than average Democrats. Forty-two percent of the Democratic delegates

had pretax household income of \$50,000 or more per year; but only five percent of Democrats nationwide had such high income levels.²⁷ (The double-whammy for pro-lifers is that the wealthy have far more political influence than others, and they tend to be more supportive of abortion than others.)

The 1984 Democratic convention nominated Senator Walter Mondale of Minnesota for president and Representative Geraldine Ferraro of New York for vice president. Both were strong supporters of legal abortion and public funding. Ferraro, a Catholic, encountered many hostile demonstrations by pro-lifers as she campaigned around the country. She also faced a public controversy with Archbishop (later Cardinal) John O'Connor of New York and other Catholic bishops over her abortion stance.

Ferraro and many of her supporters complained that the bishops were more outspoken against her than they'd been against male Catholic politicians with similar positions. They were right about that, especially with respect to Senator Kennedy. On the other hand, two years earlier Ferraro had signed a statement promoting a Congressional briefing sponsored by Catholics for a Free Choice, the pro-abortion, foundation-funded thorn in the side of the Catholic bishops.²⁸

Mondale and Ferraro had many other political problems besides abortion. They suffered a crushing defeat in November, carrying only Minnesota and the District of Columbia in the face of a huge Reagan landslide.

Emily's List Enters the Fray

Although there was evidence that the Democratic Party's support for abortion had driven many of its constituents into the arms of Ronald Reagan, it didn't budge from its position. In 1985, wealthy activist Ellen Malcolm started a new political action committee (PAC) called Emily's List that would help keep the party in line. "Emily" is an acronym for "Early Money Is Like Yeast"; as Malcolm said, it "makes the dough rise." She established Emily's List to provide early money—and lots of it—to female candidates in the Democratic Party who supported both a "pro-choice" position on abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment. (When feminists later gave up on the ERA, so did Emily's List.)

Malcolm soon proved she could raise large sums from both women (especially professional and business women) and men. "We love men!" she once exclaimed. "They have a lot of money to donate." And she knew how to distribute it for greatest political effect. Malcolm had her donors write their checks out to her favored candidates, and then forward them to Emily's List. The checks were then "bundled" together and sent to each candidate by Emily's List,

which got credit for large infusions of campaign money—money that could make the difference between winning and losing.

In its first great victory in 1986, Emily's List helped elect Barbara Mikulski of Maryland to the U.S. Senate by raising \$150,000 for her campaign. Since then it has helped elect many other women to the House and Senate—all of them reliable votes, and often leaders, for the abortion cause. Emily's List is now the largest PAC in the country. In the 2001-2002 election cycle, it raised \$9.7 million for federal and state candidates through bundled contributions alone.²⁹

Several other key groups, while not restricting their donations to Democrats, do restrict them to candidates who support abortion. These include the National Organization for Women's PACs, the National Women's Political Caucus, the Women's Campaign Fund,³⁰ the NARAL Pro-Choice America PAC, and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund PAC.

Abortion Foes' Scorched-Earth Policy

Increasingly, Democrats in Congress faced party pressures to support abortion, and some may have felt they could never please abortion foes in any case. Many of the latter were too quick to condemn Democratic members of Congress who voted with them some, but not all, of the time. Former Right-to-Life Committee lobbyist Thea Rossi Barron recalls Representative Paul Simon of Illinois—who generally voted against abortion in his early years in the House—complaining that his pro-life constituents “would really crucify him if he missed a vote” or voted the wrong way. Simon, she laments, “was courted by the pro-abortion people and then, later as a senator, became very vocal for pro-choice . . . that's what we lost.”³¹

Representative Richard Gephardt of Missouri was a fairly reliable vote for right-to-lifers during his first years in the House. But in 1986, when he backed away from his prior support of an anti-abortion constitutional amendment (claiming that approach wasn't working and that it was time to try something else), both local and national pro-life leaders turned on him with a vengeance. They probably were right to suspect his motives, since he was planning his first Democratic presidential campaign. Yet Gephardt had said he would continue to oppose public funding of abortion, which was then the main abortion-related debate in Congress. A Democratic presidential candidate who opposed abortion funding would have been a substantial improvement over Michael Dukakis, the Massachusetts governor who won the 1988 nomination. But after being publicly blasted by right-to-lifers for having made “a political capitulation to pro-abortion activists” and having sold “himself out for personal political ambitions,” Gephardt *did* more or less surrender to abortion supporters.³² They must have been delighted to have him pushed into their arms.

Party Ambivalence and Protest

By the fall of 1987, some leading Democrats were beginning to have serious second thoughts about their official position on abortion. Although a reliable vote for the abortion forces, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan complained to some women who were lobbying him on the issue: “You women are ruining the Democratic Party with your insistence on abortion.” And Paul G. Kirk, Jr., then-chairman of the Democratic National Committee, suggested that it might be well for the next platform to avoid abortion and other hot-button issues. He didn’t want Democratic candidates to campaign against their own party platform.³³

In the end, though, the Democrats simply avoided using the *word* “abortion” in their 1988 platform, declaring that “the fundamental right of reproductive choice should be guaranteed regardless of ability to pay.”³⁴ They nominated Dukakis, a down-the-line abortion supporter who went on to lose to the Republican candidate, Vice President George H. W. Bush. Bush had adopted a pro-life position after earlier ambivalence on the issue.

Several months after the election, 50 Democratic pro-life House members declared that the platform plank on abortion was “bad public policy” and that they, “as good Democrats, simply cannot accept that plank as part of our Democratic heritage and philosophy.” Led by Representative John LaFalce of New York, they insisted to Democratic National Committee chairman Ronald Brown that the plank was “also poor politics.” The Democratic Party, they warned, “is seen more and more as the party of abortion,” and this was “a sure recipe for losing irretrievably a significant segment of our traditional base of support.”

Brown replied that he couldn’t change the platform, and anyway the party “is large enough to tolerate serious disagreement within our ranks.” Party concerns, he said, “go beyond the deeply troubling issues of choice.”³⁵ He should have told that to party leaders out in the states. The following year, for example, Stephen Settle, a county vice chairman, was considering a campaign for the Wisconsin state assembly. Some local Democrats had asked him to run, but Settle declined, noting that his “prolife advocacy made me unacceptable to the power brokers who run the show.” He added: “The party’s pro-choice politburo tolerates the proliferators it’s stuck with, but no others need apply.”³⁶

Bill Clinton and Bob Casey in 1992

Complaints from above and below were unavailing. In early 1992, as one observer wrote, the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) held a banquet to which “five Democratic Presidential candidates piously trooped to renew their vows of abortion-rights

obedience.” Senator Thomas Harkin of Iowa boasted that during his 1990 re-election campaign, “They came at me with everything they had on that abortion issue—and we stuffed it right down their throats!” If Harkin sounded like a barroom bouncer, Governor William (Bill) Clinton of Arkansas managed to sound like a preacher in a great cathedral as he intoned: “. . . in the hallowed, quiet, private rooms of people making their painful, personal decisions, the government should stay home and *Roe v. Wade* should live.”³⁷

The late Governor Robert Casey of Pennsylvania was one of many Democrats who were appalled by the candidates’ performance at the NARAL banquet. Casey had signed a law restricting abortion that would soon be upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. He thought his party’s stance on abortion was wrong in principle—and also politically suicidal. He accused the “special interests” who controlled the party of insisting on “a litmus test on abortion. . . . And every four years, those same special interests lead the misguided Democratic Party right off the same cliff.”³⁸

Casey felt so strongly about the issue that he requested time to present a pro-life case to the 1992 convention. Party leaders demonstrated the same determination to squelch dissent as they had shown in the past. In 1976, Ellen McCormack’s campaign was denied even a small space on the convention floor to distribute literature. In 1984, the National Right to Life Committee PAC had tried to place an ad in the Democrats’ convention guide, claiming the pro-life vote “can be your margin of victory.” The ad was rejected because, an official pointed out, it conflicted with the party platform.³⁹

Party officials didn’t even have the courtesy to respond directly to Casey’s request. He learned he wouldn’t be allowed to speak when he received a copy of a letter addressed to someone else. Casey thought this “a strange way to treat the Democratic governor of Pennsylvania.” He also felt there was an element of weirdness in the convention. At one point, for example, participants were supposed to hold hands, sway back and forth and sing, “Let’s build a circle of friends.” Declining to join that performance, Casey and his family watched it “with utter bewilderment.”⁴⁰

Washington *Post*-ABC News polls released just before the convention showed the number of pro-lifers in the party had sharply declined since 1984. Only 24 percent of Democrats nationwide still supported a constitutional amendment to outlaw abortion. Perhaps party leaders believed they’d already lost all the Democrats they were going to lose over abortion. One would think, however, they’d still be concerned about nearly a quarter of their members, but apparently not. The convention passed a long-winded abortion plank that supported “the right to a safe, legal abortion . . . the right of every woman to choose, consistent with *Roe v. Wade*, regardless of ability to pay” and “a national law to protect that right.”⁴¹ And it nominated

Bill Clinton for president and Senator Albert Gore of Tennessee as his running mate.

In an election that turned largely on economic issues, Clinton won in a three-way race with George Bush and Ross Perot. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention, Clinton had declared: “Hear me now; I am not pro-abortion. I am pro-choice.” It was hard to tell the difference, though, when on January 22, 1993—the twentieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*—the newly inaugurated president issued five executive orders to make the country (and the world) safer for abortion.⁴²

Party Leaders Adjust Tactics

While the Clinton-Gore administration continued to promote abortion, Bob Casey continued to protest. In early 1995, after completing his second and last term as governor, he took steps to challenge Clinton in the 1996 presidential primaries. But Casey had undergone a heart-liver transplant two years earlier, and soon concluded that he didn’t have the “extraordinary energy level required by a national campaign.”⁴³ That was a great loss for the pro-life cause, since Casey had an excellent record as governor and could have been a formidable candidate.

As the 1996 convention approached, pro-life Democrats in the House quietly lobbied party leaders to include in the platform some recognition of minority views. By now the leaders were willing to listen, perhaps because they had lost the House of Representatives in 1994—and were hungry to get it back. They agreed to include the following statement in the platform: “We respect the individual conscience of each American on this difficult issue, and we welcome all our members to participate at every level of our party.” But the platform also boasted of actions Clinton had taken to support “the right of every woman to choose,” and NARAL president Kate Michelman gave the first speech for the abortion plank at the convention. She was followed by Representative Cynthia McKinney of Georgia. “You make your moral decisions, I’ll make mine,” McKinney declared, “and let’s just leave Newt Gingrich out of it.” But pro-life Representative Tony Hall of Ohio was permitted by leaders to say a word about the “conscience clause.”⁴⁴ Renominated by the convention, Clinton went on to win a solid victory over the Republican candidate, former Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, who had missed many opportunities to galvanize pro-life voters on his behalf.

In 1998 and 2000, still eager to win back the House, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee went out of its way to back conservative and/or pro-life Democratic candidates in some conservative districts. Democratic pollster Alan Secrest remarked, “You wander in the wilderness a few years, and suddenly your pro-

life brethren don't seem nearly as threatening.”⁴⁵ A few of their candidates won, but Republicans maintained their hold on the House.

The 2000 Democratic convention nominated Al Gore and Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman. It also passed another strongly pro-abortion plank. However, the plank did keep the 1996 language about welcoming the participation of all, and added that diversity of views was “a source of strength.”⁴⁶

Gore, though, repeatedly proclaimed his determination to “protect and defend a woman's right to choose”—a “right” which now included partial-birth abortion. While he won the popular vote by a narrow margin, he lost the electoral college vote to pro-life Republican George W. Bush. There is evidence that Gore's position on abortion hurt him overall. A Los Angeles *Times* national exit poll, for example, found that 14 percent of all voters cited abortion as one of the issues most important to them. But only 12 percent of Gore voters cited it, while 17 percent of Bush voters did. Democratic leaders and pundits, however, generally ignored this aspect of Gore's loss.⁴⁷

Salvaging Something from the Wreckage

There are many lessons to be learned from the history of the Democratic Party and abortion. The most important is that pro-lifers can't win a battle if they fail to show up for it. But it is possible to salvage something from the wreckage of Democrats' deep ambivalence and lost ideals. Many old statements by leading Democratic politicians (and their key allies) can be quoted today with great effect. Their on-the-record remarks, which follow, suggest that the Democratic abortion citadel is less formidable than most people believe it to be. They also suggest good lines of argument and persuasion for pro-life educational campaigns:

Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware (former Democratic presidential candidate): “Biden said he supports the right to abortion but votes against federal funding to pay for it. ‘It's the only consistent position intellectually, which is that if you say government should be out, then government should be out,’ he said.” (1986)⁴⁸

Former Senator (and current Democratic presidential candidate) Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois: “‘Born-again Christian—that would fit,’ she said when asked about her religious beliefs. . . . She was raised a Roman Catholic, and despite her impeccable credentials as an abortion rights advocate, she said she agrees with the church's position that abortion is wrong. Her disagreement is over whether the government should decide such issues. When a horrified feminist friend informed her of renewed efforts to mobilize anti-abortion sentiment by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the Catholic archbishop of Chicago, Braun said she replied, ‘Good. That's his job.’” (1992)⁴⁹

Former President Jimmy Carter: “I think any abortions are too much.” (1977)50

Former President (and former Governor of Arkansas) Bill Clinton: “I am opposed to abortion and to government funding of abortions. We should not spend state funds on abortions because so many people believe abortion is wrong.” (1986)

“There’s a big difference between being pro-choice and being for spending tax dollars for any kind of abortion. I don’t think that’s appropriate.” (1991)51

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York: “She thinks abortion is ‘wrong,’ but, like her husband, she says, ‘I don’t think it should be criminalized.’” (1994)

“While we never agreed about abortion and birth control, Mother Teresa and I found much common ground in many other areas including the importance of adoption. We shared the conviction that adoption was a vastly better choice than abortion for unplanned or unwanted babies. . . .” (2003)52

Senator Thomas Daschle of South Dakota (Minority Leader of the Senate and a former House member): “I appreciate your contacting me to inquire about my position on abortion. I can answer your question very simply—I am against it. Period! . . . I do not believe a law can stop it. I therefore vote against federal funding for elective abortion because I view this as illegitimate promotion of abortion by the government. And I teach always, in my home and in public, that abortion is wrong.” (1986)53

Representative Richard Gephardt of Missouri (former House Minority Leader and current Democratic presidential candidate): “The Declaration of Independence asserts ‘all men are created equal.’ It follows that a person becomes such when he is created and that, in my opinion, is the factual point when life begins. . . . [On *Roe v. Wade* and a proposed constitutional amendment to overturn it:] The ruling was unjust, and it is incumbent on the Congress to correct the injustice. The amendment my colleague and I introduce today will do that.” (1977)

“I continue to be deeply opposed to abortion. Abortion is wrong. It should be stopped or reduced as much as possible. I believe that with all my heart and all my mind.” (1986)54

Former Vice President (and former Democratic presidential candidate) Albert Gore: “During my 11 years in Congress, I have consistently opposed federal funding of abortions. In my opinion, it is wrong to spend federal funds for what is arguably the taking of a

human life . . . I share your belief that innocent human life must be protected, and I am committed to furthering this goal.” (1987)55

Rev. Jesse Jackson (former Democratic presidential candidate): “. . . as a matter of conscience I must oppose the use of federal funds for a policy of killing infants. . . . I am therefore urging that the Hyde amendment be supported in the interest of a more humane policy and some new directions on issues of caring for the most precious resource we have—our children.” (1977)

“What happens to the mind of a person and the moral fabric of a nation that accepts the aborting of the life of a baby without a pang of conscience? What kind of a person and what kind of a society will we have twenty years hence if life can be taken so casually?” (1979?)56

Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts (former Democratic presidential candidate): “Wanted or unwanted, I believe that human life, even at its earliest stages, has certain rights which must be recognized—the right to be born, the right to love, the right to grow old. . . . When history looks back to this era it should recognize this generation as one which cared about human beings enough to halt the practice of war, to provide a decent living for every family, and to fulfill its responsibility to its children from the very moment of conception.” (1971)

Although acknowledging that he had voted for federal funding of abortion in some cases, Senator Kennedy suggested efforts to “reduce the incidence of abortion” and said that the “focus of the health care system should be on supporting a woman through her pregnancy, not on providing abortions.” (1982)57

Representative (and Democratic presidential candidate) Dennis Kucinich of Ohio [on President George W. Bush’s decision concerning embryonic stem-cell research]: “I think the president did the best he could at the moment,’ Kucinich said. ‘But his decision was flawed in the sense that it allows the use of cells that were obtained from destroyed human embryos. You can’t have it both ways,’ he added. ‘You can’t on one hand encourage the destruction of life and on the other hand say you’re doing it to save lives. Science should help sustain life without taking life.’” (2001)58

Kate Michelman, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America: “We think abortion is a bad thing. No woman wants to have an abortion.” (1993)59

These remarks could be incorporated into a strikingly effective brochure. They could also be displayed on billboards to greet delegates as they sweep into Boston next July for the 2004 Democratic National Convention. This would give the delegates—amidst all the parties and glitz and self-congratulation—something to

think about.

The second and final part of this series will consider suggestions from politicians, activists and others on what Democrats for Life should do to change the Democratic Party.

NOTES

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