

Attitude shift noted

Pro-lifers criticize media

WASHINGTON—In the past few years, or at least since the Supreme Court's 1973 decision on abortion, I have met few opponents of abortion who think the media have been fair to their side.

John T. Noonan, a University of California law professor and one of the most intellectually respectable voices in the pro-life movement, has documented a strong case against the media. In articles and books—the most recent work is "A Private Choice: Abortion in America in the Seventies"—he has detailed many of the distortions and omissions.

colman mccarthy

"The pro-life movement," he says, "fights against a news blackout of what is good on its side. It fights against the media propagating everything that can help the other side. It fights against a journalism which either is indifferent or hostile."

I'm troubled by Noonan's charges because for some time I have had far different perceptions. If anything, public opinion appears to be turning against the abortion ethic—and the laws supporting it—precisely because the pro-life message has been getting through as never before.

A major turnaround occurred in March 1975 when Newsweek ran on its cover a color photograph of a 16-week-old fetus. Fingers, toes, physical features and even blood veins were graphically clear. Previously, this was the picture that many people found ghastly and repulsive as it was waved on placards by marching right-to-lifers. But now it was on Newsweek's cover.

THE FETUS wasn't a lifeless tissue after all. The startling photograph, give sudden respectability from an unexpected source, couldn't help but stir those who hadn't really thought that much about abortion. It was a moment to stop and reflect: Perhaps it isn't so simple an issue, to be neatly summarized in the slogans of pro-abortionists.

If the Newsweek cover was a breakthrough, so also was a piece a year later in Good Housekeeping. Dr. Bernard Nathanson wrote "Second thoughts on Abortion from the Doctor Who Led the Crusade For It." Nathanson was

saying in a mass-circulation magazine what he had written earlier in the New England Journal of Medicine: "I am deeply troubled by my own increasing certainty that I had in fact presided over 60,000 deaths . . . We are taking life, and the deliberate taking of life, even of a special order and under special circumstances, is an inexpressibly serious matter."

This month, Doubleday is publishing "Aborting America," Nathanson's account of his years of moral struggle that has led him to believe, as Doubleday notes, that "abortion on request is wrong."

Articles along these same lines—by writers re-examining old positions and exploring new feelings—have been appearing regularly in the past two or three years.

LINDA BIRD Francke's od-ed column in the New York Times, which led to her book, "The Ambivalence of Abortion," was memorable. Last year's Chicago Sun-Times' expose on the abortion mills of Chicago was journalism at its most powerful. In the current issue of Harper's an essay called "Of Two Minds About Abortion" describes abortion foes as anything but fanatics. Instead, "they conceive of a social and moral order where citizenship has duties and passions are held in check." Among abortion supporters, "what is lacking is any sure sign of concern over the society we have, and the people we will be, once their ends are attained."

What's striking about these new media probings is where the articles appeared: from Good Housekeeping to the Chicago Sun-Times. In the minds of many in the pro-life movement, these publications are among the media that are considered the "indifferent and hostile enemy."

Yet, if any turning around of public opinion is occurring, and I am convinced it is, then the positive contributions of the so-called biased media must be recognized. After the 1973 decision, the superficial coverage of the abortion—the facile write-off that this was "a Catholic issue" or that pro-life officials inflated their numbers—was less an example of unfair coverage than coverage that was unknowing. The media were over their heads amid the moral, social and political complexities. Incompetence was at work, not bias.

If this has changed, then the chances are increased that the abortion debate can be more reasoned and less strident than what has been the sorry case until now.

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