

The politics of abortion—a big business



THE ABORTION for all times in all
PROFITEERS circumstances.

By Ellen Warren
Sun-Times Bureau

WASHINGTON—The nationwide battle over abortion has become a giant business. Organizations on both sides of the controversial question spend millions of dollars and incalculable hours to elect candidates, defeat others, influence legislation and stir the national conscience with their points of view. It is a battle that promises to get bigger, more sophisticated—and more expensive—as fledgling groups as well as the entrenched veterans become more adept at fund-raising and hardball politics in forums ranging from city councils to the Congress of the United States.

From Massachusetts to Oregon and at many points in between the battle lines have been drawn and, in the words of one of the more strident abortion foes, a zealot named Nellie Gray, "We're fighting a war!"

PUTTING ASIDE THE HIGH emotions and moral controversy in the question of abortion—a question on which both sides say there is little room for compromise—this is the story of the politics of abortion today in America.

It is a warm fall evening in Washington, 1978, and Nellie Gray is at work in the crowded space that formerly was a basement apartment in the pink brick town house she owns near Capitol Hill. A retired civil service employe and ex-Army corporal, she cranks away at the duplicating machine next to an old mahogany dining room table that serves as work space.

It is a critical time for her as she prepares final mailings for the sixth annual "March for Life," an annual show of force she conceived and leads down Pennsylvania Av. in Washington every Jan. 22—the anniversary of the historic 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion.

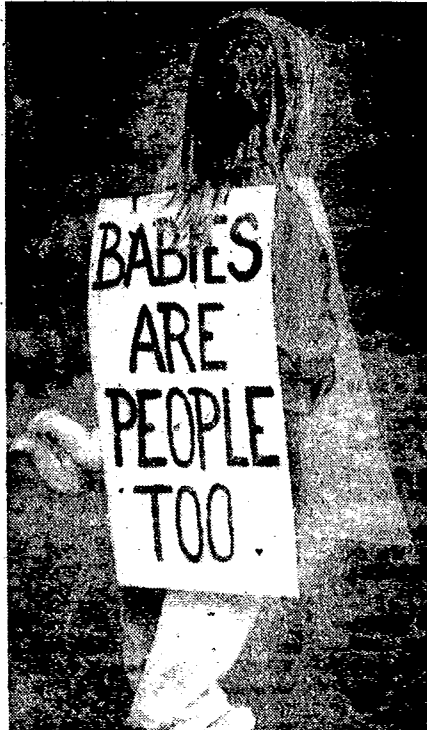
Last year, more than 100,000 anti-abortion troops streamed down the wide boulevard of the nation's capital, then fanned out through House and Senate office buildings delivering thousands of California-grown long-stemmed red roses to legislators, a symbol of their pro-life cause.

ON THE FOURTH FLOOR of a bank building a few blocks from the White House, in a warren of bright and crowded offices, the women of the National Abortions Rights Action League are now beginning to assess the outcome of the 95th Congress and its effects on the country's abortion posture.

"Our successes?" said chief lobbyist, Carol Werner. "This year: zip."

Never before, she asserted, has Congress chipped away at the Supreme Court decision

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Thirteenth in a series

as it did this year, curbing federal spending for abortions not only for poor women through a near total cutoff of Medicaid abortion funds, but for Peace Corps volunteers, and U.S. military personnel and their dependants as well.

Werner's job is to try to prevent this type of legislation by lobbying legislators, especially in the House where, unlike the Senate, anti-abortion congressmen are a clear majority.

SHE TELLS THE STORY of a high-ranking Illinois congressman who told her that, though he votes anti-abortion, he supports the pro-choice position of the rights league.

"I agree with you totally. My wife agrees with you," he told Werner. "But, there are more Roman Catholic churches in my district than any other district in Illinois. I don't want to spend the rest of my political career going around trying to justify my position to every Holy Name Society in my district."

"I understand," said Werner. "The problem is that we understand. We're at the point where we cannot afford to understand any longer."

Abortion certainly is not only a Roman Catholic issue. But, it remains true that the church is staunchly opposed to abortion and spends large sums at local, state and national levels, to fight abortion and its proponents.

Like all anti-abortion groups, the church's chief goal is to obtain passage of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution, a human life amendment, that would outlaw abortion for all times in all circumstances.

WILLIAM J. COX, a 31-year-old Notre Dame graduate, heads the Catholic anti-abortion effort as executive director of the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment, the lay lobbying arm of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The lobbying group is almost entirely funded by contributions, from dioceses and archdioceses across the country for a total budget of about \$300,000 a year.

(In its four-year history, the Chicago Archdiocese has contributed about \$65,000 to the group, Cox says. In 1977 and 1978 to date, the amount totals \$15,000.)

"We haven't gotten everything we want," said Cox, assessing the group's successes in



Controversy still rages

ALTHOUGH THE U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973, the controversy still rages, with both sides pouring money into political action groups which aim to either preserve or overthrow the court's decision. Both pro-choice and anti-abortion groups claim morally uncompromising positions, symbolized in public protests by such placards as left. (UPI, Sun-Times Photos)

the latest congressional session. But, "It appears that we've been able to cut the public-funded abortion from 300,000 a year to 2,800."

There are four major thrusts of the anti-abortion battle: elections at all levels; cutoffs of state and federal funds for abortions; state legislative calls for a national constitutional convention, and congressional efforts to pass a human life amendment.

Although many professional pollsters insist that candidates' stands on abortion will not win or lose the election for them, the intensity and visibility of proponents on both sides have made most politicians take the issue seriously.

WITHIN THE PAST YEAR or so, both sides, hampered by federal laws that prohibited them from attempting to influence elections and sensing the growing importance of the ballot box if they are to prevail, have set up national political action committees to channel money to sympathetic candidates for the U.S. House and Senate.

In the first test of their clout, in the 1978 elections, both the rights league committee on the pro-choice side (which spent about \$75,000, the majority going to 57 U.S. House and Senate candidates in 25 states) and the anti-abortion Life Political Action Committee (\$20,000 to 23 candidates in 16 states) are claiming victories.

The most talked about win on either side this year is the defeat, with a major assist from the anti-abortion groups, of liberal Sen. Dick Clark (D-Iowa). Pro-lifers also take credit for the primary defeat of another liberal Senate aspirant, Democratic Rep. Donald M. Fraser, who was knocked out of the race in an upset in Minnesota. In both races, hundreds of thousands of brochures, some paid for by the Life Political committee, were distributed—sometimes outside churches on Sunday morning—outlining Fraser and Clark's pro-choice views.

Anti-abortion forces also cheered the defeat of Republican Edward W. Brooke in Massachusetts, the Senate's eloquent pro-choice spokesman. The over-all defeat of five liberal senators early this month and the general centrist movement of the Congress also may lead to more restrictive federal abortion legislation in the future.

IN ADDITION to the small sums they distributed, both national action committees can

get on phones with anti-abortion or pro-choice groups in every state and bring out volunteers to work for or against the candidates they target.

There also is a growing awareness that the abortion fight may be won not in Washington but at the grass-roots level.

"Fifty six, 57 per cent of the people who finally get to Congress come from the state legislatures," said Joe Barrett, a politically savvy Maryland suburbanite who is vice chairman and political director of Washington-based Life committee, which spent more than \$100,000 this year working only for statehouse candidates.

Increasing the number of statehouse pro-lifers, Barrett points out, will eventually increase the number of anti-abortion congressmen. Furthermore, state legislators, can and do influence national abortion policy. For example, 13 state legislatures (Illinois is not among them) have called for a constitutional convention to consider adding a human life amendment to the Constitution. Twenty-one more states are needed.

Most anti-abortion groups concede that if such an amendment is eventually enacted it will not be by way of the constitutional convention route. But they see these statehouse calls for a convention as one more way to pressure the U.S. Congress to vote out an amendment. As of last January there had been 65 separate efforts in the U.S. House and Senate to enact the amendment, but all remained stalled in subcommittees headed by pro-choice Sen. Birch Bayh (D-Ind.) and Rep. Don Edwards (D-Calif.). Edwards and Bayh rank high on the anti-abortion groups' political hit list.

FOR THE PRO-CHOICE people, Illinois Republican Rep. Henry J. Hyde is one of the chief foes. It is his name that is attached to the first successful congressional effort to weaken the 1973 Supreme Court abortion decision, and the expression "Hyde Amendment" has become the shorthand reference for most of the recent anti-abortion legislation passed by Congress.

In 1976, Hyde was successful—much to his own surprise—in attaching an amendment to the Labor-Health, Education and Welfare Department budgets that prohibits use of any federal Medicaid money for abortions "except where the life of the mother

Note to readers

Safe and compassionate abortion care is obtainable in the Chicago area. Reliable abortion counseling should be sought from family physicians. Other organizations that are prepared to respond to women's health questions are:

- Planned Parenthood Assn., 55 E. Jackson, 322-4240.
- Health Evaluation Referral Service, 2757 N. Seminary, 248-0166.
- The Women's Switchboard of the Midwest Women's Center, 800-972-5404.

Strength of anti-abortion groups is growing

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would be endangered if the fetus were carried to term."

Late in 1977, and again in 1978, a Senate-House compromise on the existing Hyde language resulted in a prohibition on federal spending for Medicaid abortion except when the mother's life is endangered or "for the victims of rape or incest, where such rape or incest has been reported promptly to a law enforcement agency or public health service" and in those instances where "severe and long-lasting physical health damage to the mother would result if the pregnancy were carried to term when so determined by two physicians." That is the law today.

The District of Columbia and six states (Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Michigan, North Carolina and Washington) thwarted the intent of the Hyde amendment by agreeing to pick up the entire tab for all Medicaid abortions. Previously, federal and state governments shared the cost of those abortions on a complex formula which resulted in a state paying 10 to 50 per cent of the cost.

All other states—including Illinois which is under a court order to do so—fund certain Medicaid abortions under certain circumstances. Illinois and eight other states, for example, pay for the full cost of Medicaid abortions deemed by a doctor to be medically necessary.

STATISTICS GATHERED by HEW and analyzed by Planned Parenthood's research arm, the Alan Guttmacher Institute, show that Medicaid abortions have declined by 96.8 to 99.2 per cent in 22 states with restrictive laws similar to the 1976 or 1977 Hyde amendments.

This offers considerable encouragement to anti-abortion groups such as the National Right to Life Committee, based in Washington, the largest non-secular anti-abortion group, which claims 11 million members and an annual budget of about \$500,000. That is slightly less than the \$624,486 in receipts tallied by the pro-choice rights league in the first nine months of this year. League membership has increased more than eight fold in the past year, from under 9,000 dues-paying members to 50,000.

The growth of the opposition worries both sides, including the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, a group of 27 religious organizations (including Catholics for a Free Choice) of 13 denominations, based in Washington. "Things are going to get worse before they get better," said Patricia A. Gavett, national director of the coalition, which spends about \$250,000 a year lobbying, education and grass-roots organizing.

In addition to congressional action this year in revising the Hyde amendment affecting Medicaid abortions, Congress adopted those same Hyde standards for the Defense Department budget, thereby limiting abortion funds for military women and military dependants. There were 26,000 of these abortions in the last fiscal year.

Other measures to restrict abortions approved by Congress this year include the Pregnancy Disability Bill requiring private employers to include coverage of pregnancy and related conditions in their health insurance plans but not requiring them to include abortion coverage.

FINALLY, THERE WAS a threat to vote the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights out of business unless congressmen approved an amendment that prohibits the commission from studying or gathering facts about U.S. abortion policy. They approved the restriction.

"I feel lousy," concluded Gavett of the Religious Coalition, a project of the United Methodist Church. "I don't think we've had any national successes."

Gavett's remarks came, however, before pro-choice proponents chalked up one victory this election season when vot-

ers in Oregon rejected a ballot proposition—the first time the question has ever been on a state ballot—which would have cut off state funds "for abortions or programs or services that promote abortion."

Undaunted by the Oregon defeat, Judie Brown, director of public relations for the National Right to Life Committee, cites the Illinois pro-life network as one example of why the anti-abortion position will prevail and Congress will pass a human-life amendment—by 1981, she predicts.

The Illinois Federation for "Right to Life, affiliated with the national, includes 162 anti-abortion groups in that state alone.

"We've got what it takes," said Brown, "and we're going win."

NEXT: Inside an anti-abortion group.

