

‘Us versus Them’: Abortion and the Rhetoric of the New Right¹

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This paper analyses America's anti-abortion movement from a rhetorical perspective. It examines the rhetorical tactics used by conservative elites to galvanise the movement and traces their effect on the movement's response to anti-abortion violence in the late 1980s and early 1990. It concludes by arguing that the fusion of populist dichotomies and religious justifications had an ultimately negative effect on the movement, despite initial successes.

It engages with a number of historiographical debates surrounding the emergence of the New Right and its place in the wider American political tradition. By analysing the anti-abortion movement, its motivations and its actions, this paper will argue that although the movement invoked a number of long-standing conservative themes, its invocation of populism relied on new rhetorical devices whose resonance derived from opposition to sixties liberalism.

Historiographical debate also revolves around the relationship between New Right activists and the Republican party, some arguing that conservative grassroots activism dragged the GOP to the right, others that social issues were manipulated by Republican elites for electoral gain. It will argue that, at least in the case of the anti-abortion movement, the fundamentalist and evangelical Christians who joined the fray in the late 1970s

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did so at the urging of the New Right and their pastors, rather than as part of a spontaneous grassroots uprising.

Following the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) that a woman's right to privacy extended to reproduction, legalised abortion became a hugely divisive issue in American politics. Opposing it became one of keystones of the resurgent conservative movement known as the New Right. Emphasising the social issues (such as abortion, school prayer and sex education) that came to characterise many Republican campaigns from 1970s onwards, this movement departed from traditional conservatism in the emphasis that it placed on the need for government action to uphold traditional normative values. This article examines the movement's rhetorical construction of the abortion issue in two parts: first, the successful mobilisation of conservative Christians against *Roe*, and secondly, the New Right's rhetorical response to anti-abortion violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Tracing the use of rhetorical tactics outlined below, this essay will analyse the New Right's anti-abortion crusade as a rhetorical event (a period of political or social tension in which two or more rhetorical camps vie to define the terms of the debate, and thus its outcome). It will also engage with the recent historiography of the movement, and ask exactly how 'new' was the New Right?

This article argues that the New Right arose as a consequence of the social dislocations that they perceived to have occurred in America since the sixties. References to 'the sixties' do not denote the literal period 1960-1969, but rather the period of liberalisation in areas of race, gender and religion, driven by the federal government and Supreme Court, that began around 1960 and continued on into the next decade.² In these terms, 'the sixties' represents a concept rather than any specific time scale, and it was according to this concept that the New Right dichotomised American politics. For them, the nation was divided into two camps, 'Us versus Them', as Reagan ad-

² Recent accounts of the sixties have stressed the importance of this perception of liberalisation in the birth of the New Right and resurgence of conservatism. For a good discussion of the historiography on the sixties and its enduring and contested influence, see MJ Heale, 'The Sixties as History: A Review of the Political Historiography', *Reviews in American History*, vol. 33, no. 1 (March 2005), pp. 133-52.

ministration communications director and later prospective GOP presidential candidate Pat Buchanan put it.³ These divisions stemmed from the sixties: 'Us' were the patriotic 'Middle Americans' defined by their devotion to flag, family, and faith. 'They' were the liberals, feminists and atheists who had undermined American society through governmental activism and moral relativism. This division was the most important factor in the New Right's rhetorical conception of abortion. To the anti-abortion movement, the majority of Americans who supported *Roe v. Wade* represented evidence of the moral decay wrought by sixties liberalism. The polarising influence of the sixties, clear in so much of the New Right's rhetoric, shows that the period acted as a discontinuity, a time 'when disruptions or gaps occur in the normal course of affairs [and is] the culture in which rhetoric germinates, the soil in which it grows'.⁴

Rhetoric and the study of history

A study of rhetoric can be of invaluable importance for the historian. Wayne Booth places rhetoric at the centre of human communication, arguing that it holds 'entire dominion over all verbal pursuits'.⁵ James Herrick, another rhetorician, also points to the fundamental importance of rhetoric in society: 'If persuasion is central to social organisation, and if the art of rhetoric takes in the study of persuasion, then our lives as members of human communities are inherently and inescapably rhetoric'.⁶ A rhetorical study of historical events offers the historian a new tool of examination, examining the past with a view to analysing how messages are created, and the ways in which they are used by historical actors to shape events.⁷ As Kathleen J. Turner argues, rhetorical history is useful in that it examines traditional areas of historical enquiry in new and interesting ways.⁸

³ Ann Wroe, *Lies, Lives and the Iran Contra-Affair* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co., 1991), p. 73.

⁴ Gerard A. Hauser, *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2002), p. 124; James A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction* (London: Allyn & Bacon, 2001), p. 9.

⁵ Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷ David Zarefsky, 'Four Senses of Rhetorical History', in *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*, ed. by Kathleen J. Turner (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998) p. 30.

⁸ Kathleen J. Turner, 'Rhetorical History as Social Construction' in *Doing Rhetorical History*, pp. 4-5.

When applying rhetorical criticism to history, some of its key concepts have clear uses.

The New Right's campaign against abortion made extensive use of symbols, 'a general term referring to any mark, sign, sound or gesture that communicates meaning based on social agreement'.⁹ Language is a system of symbols rather than of literal meanings. It does not exist in a vacuum into which we reach for a word with an immutable meaning, but rather is 'the means we use to ascribe meaning to reality'.¹⁰ Consequently, our reality is a product of these symbolic systems and the way in which we interact with them.¹¹ Rhetoricians Robert Denton and Gary Woodward highlight the importance of a 'significant symbol', 'one that leads to the same response in another person that it calls forth in the thinker'.¹²

Rhetoric also acts to frame events within a certain narrative, providing 'a context for ordering the elements of an episode and interpreting its meaning'.¹³ Framing is also a factor in language use. By describing rhetorical events in a certain vernacular, rhetors (an individual engaging in rhetoric) constitute the conceptual framework with which the audience views them. For example, describing an election as a race (requiring strategies and tactics) gives the event a different conceptual framework than were one to talk of it as a debate (requiring logic and reasoned argument).¹⁴

The Christian Litmus Test: new recruits to the movement

In 1973, the Supreme Court's decision to legalise abortion in *Roe v. Wade* electrified the anti-abortion movement. This movement, which arose in the early 1960s to oppose individual states' liberalisation of abortion laws, was predominantly Catholic, included some left-wing groups, and framed abortion as part of a wider 'pro-life' campaign that also incorporated opposition to the death penalty, nuclear weapons and euthanasia. Their civil tone stressed involvement in the political process as the best way to secure the movement's goals of a constitutional amendment banning abortion. However, as fundamen-

⁹ Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹ Robert E. Denton Jr. and Gary C. Woodward, *Political Communication in America* (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 1998), p. 37.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹³ Hauser, *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*, p. 186.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

talist preachers such as Jerry Falwell broke from hermetic tradition to urge Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals into politics, the character of the movement was altered.¹⁵ Noting the Ford and Carter administrations' silence on the issue, the New Right, searching for a mobilising social issue, lighted on abortion as a symptom of America's alleged moral decay and used it in conjunction with Falwell and others to bring these newly politicised Christian conservatives into the struggle against *Roe*.¹⁶ Their cause was aided by the resurgent feminist movement's strong advocacy of legalised abortion on the grounds of female self-determination. This emphasis on a woman's right to choose enabled the New Right, anti-feminist at its core, to frame abortion within a wider context of the dissolution of the traditional family and the subsequent corrosion of Biblically-sanctioned gender roles.¹⁷

As the 1980s wore on and abortion continued unabated, more radical forms of activism began to appear. Drawing on the Civil Rights movement for inspiration, a number of anti-abortion groups began to employ direct-action techniques that aimed to restrict women's access to abortion at the source rather than through legislation. Operation Rescue, founded in 1986 by Joseph Scheidler, Randall Terry and Joseph Foreman, was perhaps the most notorious of these. Invoking God's will as their justification, they organised protests that they characterised as 'rescues' of the unborn. Activists staged pickets and blocked access to abortion clinics, held sidewalk 'counselling' sessions and often vandalised the clinics themselves. Despite the attention and new recruits that this approach brought to the movement, the divisive rhetoric employed caused problems of its own.

By mobilising socially conservative Christians in the struggle against abortion, the New Right injected a fiery religiosity into the movement that altered the fundamental premise of anti-abortion rhetoric. Both wings of the movement asserted the personhood of the foetus. Whereas the moderate wing therefore claimed that as people, the unborn were entitled to the rights enshrined in the Constitution (most importantly the right to life), for the anti-abortion activists of

¹⁵ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 189.

¹⁶ Paul Weyrich, 'Political Engagement: An Honest Evaluation', in *Back to the Drawing Board: The Future of the Pro-Life Movement*, ed. by Teresa R. Wagner (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2003), p. 139.

¹⁷ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), p. 304.

the New Right, personhood guaranteed the unborn child's status as God's creation.¹⁸ Christians were therefore compelled to come to their defence on the basis of the sanctity of all human life. Although both wings argued that this meant no compromise was acceptable, the New Right argued their case from a biblical rather than legal standpoint.¹⁹

Consequently, the evangelised movement stressed the Christian case against abortion and religiosity was the dominant tone. Higher Law justifications – the belief that 'God's law supersedes human law and the saving of life takes preference over the preservation of property' – peppered the rhetoric of Operation Rescue.²⁰ The group's literature described their 'bottom line motivation' as 'obedience to God' rather than worldly laws, and called on activists to 'stop doing battles in the name of "conservatism" or "conservative family values"'. We need to start speaking in the name of God and the Ten Commandments. We need to be unflinching and unapologetic of Who we believe'.²¹ Indeed, rescues themselves derived their names from scripture, for example the 1993 'Cities of Refuge' campaign, which was justified by God's Old Testament command for 'Israel to establish cities of refuge so that innocent blood would not be shed'.²²

Sure that God was on their side, the anti-abortionists of the New Right saw themselves as involved in a struggle against the progressive legacy of the sixties. Terry frequently spoke of abortion as merely the starting point of his campaign to restore morality in America: 'When the Lord put the vision in my heart, it was not just to rescue babies and mothers but to rescue the country. This is the first domino to fall'.²³ He claimed that 'I do not intend to stop after

¹⁸ Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 17.

¹⁹ An example of the non-New Right justifications for their refusal to compromise: 'March for Life program journal', 22 January 1983, *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, Pro-Life Movement, 2.104.

²⁰ Faye Ginsburg, 'Rescuing the Nation: Operation Rescue and the Rise of Anti-Abortion Militance', in *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1995-2000*, ed. by Rickie Solinger (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 562.

²¹ Untitled letter from Operation Rescue re: 'No Place to Hide' campaign, January 1993, *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, Operation Rescue, 2.103; 'Call to Arms', April 1993, *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, Operation Rescue, 2.103.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Faye Ginsburg, 'Saving America's Souls: Operation's Rescues Crusade Against Abortion', in *The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 3: Fundamentalisms and the State*, ed. by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 558.

child killing is made illegal. We plan to restore moral sanity to this country and bring everyone back to the Judeo-Christian ethic'.²⁴ Guest editorials in the American Life League's publications spoke of abortion as 'but a symptom of deeper evils', while literature from Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority bracketed abortion with homosexual teachers and pornography as 'some of the signs of the permissiveness and lack of moral values that have spread across our society like a fungus'.²⁵ Framing the issue as a symbol of America's moral decline, the New Right located it within the cultural struggle fought by two sides divided by their view of the sixties.

Anthropologist Susan Harding writes of the importance of the apocalyptic mindset in the political mobilisation of the Christian Right. According to the pre-millennialist dispensationalism that the majority of Christian fundamentalists subscribed to, the disruptions of the sixties pointed to Jesus' imminent return.²⁶ This apocalypticism constituted the living reality of believers and 'became the way that most Bible-believing Christians in America read current history and the daily news'.²⁷ Abortion became part of this apocalyptic struggle for salvation, and figures such as Falwell used the issue to entice fundamentalist Christians into politics. As Falwell argued, 'if Christians responded to God's call through living and political action, God would spare them'.²⁸ Abortion came to be seen as a litmus test of Christian righteousness.

It is therefore little wonder that the campaign was so often cast in apocalyptic terms. The American Life League argued that legalised abortion undermined the American family, 'the cornerstone of our society, the basis upon which nations are built'.²⁹ Biblical warnings were frequent. The League warned that 'in seeking a life of absolute personal freedom and independence without God, the child-sacrificing nations of Israel and Judah . . . ultimately lost everything.'

²⁴ Marian Faux, *Crusaders: Voices from the Abortion Front* (New York: Birchlane Press, 1990), p. 128.

²⁵ 'All About Issues', vol. 8, no. 5 (June-July, 1986), *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, American Life Lobby, 2.87; 'Cast your vote to clean up America', undated, *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, Moral Majority, 101.2.

²⁶ Susan Harding, 'Imagining the Last Days: The Politics of Apocalyptic Language', *Bulletin of the American Association of Arts and Sciences*, 48, 3 (1994), p. 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁸ Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, p. 189.

²⁹ 'Definitions: The Christian Family', *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, American Life Lobby, 2.87.

Their fate was a precautionary tale, as ‘today, in the United States, we face the possibility of a similar judgement’.³⁰ Indeed, it was the duty of God-fearing Christians to warn the nation: ‘We can neither afford, nor do we have the right, to merely wag our finger in the face of society. We must warn clearly of the consequence of offending God, just as the prophets did’.³¹ Michael D. Bray, a convicted clinic bomber who would later defend the murder of physicians, described the Christian’s role during the pre-Rapture world in suitably grandiloquent terms: ‘We are called to be actors on the stage of history before God. [...] It is the time when we do things for which we will be judged for eternity.’³² Although an extremist, Bray’s rhetorical call-to-arms was justified by the same apocalyptic scenario invoked by the wider movement; the rhetorical worlds that the two inhabited were constructed on the understanding of abortion as the Christian litmus test.

This apocalyptic tone bred warlike rhetoric. Political scientists Carol Maxwell and Ted Jeden have noted the correlation between the martial metaphors used by anti-abortion activists and participation in direct-action protests.³³ Accordingly, Operation Rescue’s protests were preceded by ‘covert intelligence’ operations; protesters were ‘troops’ and ‘soldiers’ who formed a ‘chain of command’.³⁴ As activists referred to each other as ‘war buddies’, it is unsurprising that the picketing of the Democratic National Convention in 1988 became the ‘Siege of Atlanta’, nor that Terry read Sun Tzu ‘to learn how to make war’.³⁵ Recruiting leaflets were a ‘Call to Arms’ for a ‘cultural war’, and direct-action activists were ‘pro-life Green Berets’.³⁶ These martial metaphors extended to elections. Falwell urged the movement to vote for anti-abortion candidates in 1984: ‘I need you to be a “soldier” in a war we are fighting with ballots instead of bullets!’³⁷

³⁰ ‘All About Issues’, vol. 7, no. 7 (July 1985), *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, American Life Lobby, 2.87.

³¹ Ibid.

³² ‘All About Issues’, vol. 8, no. 5.

³³ Carol J.C. Maxwell and Ted E. Jeden, ‘Commandos for Christ: Narratives of Male Pro-Life Activists’, *Review of Religious Research*, 37, 2 (1993), p. 117.

³⁴ Ginsburg, ‘Saving America’s Souls’, p. 563.

³⁵ Faux, *Crusaders*, pp. 127-8.

³⁶ ‘Call to Arms’; ‘All About Issues’, vol. 7, no. 8, *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, American Life Lobby, 2.87.

³⁷ ‘Your Moral Majority Membership Card enclosed’, undated, *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, Moral Majority, 2.101.

Abortion was starkly framed as a no-compromise issue, a fight that could not be won while there were still physicians left in America willing to perform the procedure. As the foetus was portrayed as an unborn person, consistency required that ‘exceptions break the rule’ that each and every foetus represented a human life, regardless of the circumstances of its conception.³⁸ To abandon this rule would be to abandon a ‘moral yardstick’, an unacceptable compromise for a movement so fixated upon morality.³⁹ In an untitled letter to supporters dated 4 April 1993, Operation Rescue warned that the only option the movement faced was ‘either fight or give up’.⁴⁰ The latter, of course, was unacceptable, and so activists were urged ‘never to quit – never to give in’.⁴¹ No ground would be given, as ‘Hell will freeze over before we stop’.⁴²

This rhetorical construction of abortion was successful in enticing new recruits into the New Right’s wider struggle against liberalism. Established in 1986, by 1990 Operation Rescue’s activities resulted in over 35,000 arrests, drew over 16,000 participants and gained nationwide media attention.⁴³ With increased visibility came greater funding: the group’s monthly income grew from \$5,000 per month before the Siege of Atlanta to over \$60,000 afterwards. They also attracted large individual donations, including \$10,000 from Jerry Falwell.⁴⁴ Framing abortion as an apocalyptic struggle for America’s Judeo-Christian founding values, the movement’s rhetoric proved successful in attracting media attention and recruits to the cause.

‘We’re in a war’: the outbreak of anti-abortion violence

However, a rise in anti-abortion bombings, arson and murder was to prove problematic for the movement. Violence peaked twice, with bombings and arson at their highest levels from 1984–1986, and

³⁸ ‘All About Issues’, vol. 12, no. 4 (April 1990), *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, American Life Lobby, 2.87.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Untitled Operation Rescue fundraising letter from Randall Terry, 4 April 1993.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² ‘Anti-abortion group hold “training” in Minneapolis’, *Detroit News*, 14 June 1993.

⁴³ Ginsburg, ‘Saving America’s Souls’, p. 557.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 561.

again from 1991-1992.⁴⁵ The end of the second spate of bombings also marked the start of an eighteen-month period in which five abortion workers were assassinated, beginning with the murder of Dr. David Gunn on 10 March 1993. The timing of these waves of violence is significant. Sociologist Dallas Blanchard advances the theory that the initial wave was a result of the frustration that anti-abortion activists felt with President Reagan's failure to overturn *Roe*, their dashed hopes 'the classic condition for an increase in violence'.⁴⁶ The election of a pro-choice President and Congress in 1992, allied with the stubbornly pro-choice Supreme Court, created yet more feelings of anger and resentment. After twelve years of Republican governance, the movement still only had one significant legislative victory (*Webster v Reproductive Health Services*, the 1989 Supreme Court ruling allowing individual states to impose funding limits on abortion) and further victories seemed unlikely under Clinton.

The New Right responded to the outburst of anti-abortion violence with caveats and qualifications. Although Operation Rescue released a statement following the death of Dr Gunn that said 'no prolifer advocates these things. [...] Every life is precious, and we have to speak out against violence', the party line did not hold.⁴⁷ Donald Threshman said that although 'Gunn's death is unfortunate, [...] it's also true that quite a number of babies' lives will be saved'. When given another opportunity to condemn violence in 1995, Threshman instead argued that 'we're in a war [...] Until recently the casualties have only been on one side'. A letter to supporters the next month blamed the abortion industry for Gunn's death 'because of their continual cheapening of human life and dignity'.⁴⁸ As America was 'daily being a witness to people killing people [i.e. abortion] Gunn's murder should surprise no one, nor should it stop Operation Rescue's activities as our efforts still mean the difference between life and death for children everyday'.⁴⁹ Clearly, the exculpations proffered in defence of the violence drew on the rhetorical themes outlined above. So well-dichotomised was the issue that when anti-abortion violence

⁴⁵ Dallas A. Blanchard, *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fierce Protest* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2004), p. 53.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴⁷ 'Abortion workers' fear grows', *Detroit Free Press*, 12 March 1993.

⁴⁸ Untitled Operation Rescue letter, 4 April 1993, *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, Operation Rescue, 2.103.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

did occur, it was impossible for the New Right to view these events outside of the rhetorical frame that they constructed.

When opposing abortion, the New Right engaged in rhetorical overweighing, in which ‘rhetors attempt to show that the values and interests of their side carry more weight than those of the opposition’.⁵⁰ As abortion was a literal matter of life or death in the eyes of the New Right, anything but an uncompromising anti-abortion stance was tantamount to accepting legalised murder. This maxim was applied when confronting opposing arguments, which, no matter their content, ultimately justified the murder of the unborn. Consequently, to the New Right, the only way to explain why so many Americans adopted positions that ultimately justified murder was to see this as evidence of the country’s moral decay since the sixties. The rhetorical trenches were thus dug even deeper.

This one-dimensional understanding of the issue informed the anti-abortion movement’s response to violence. All those who fought against abortion must by definition be virtuous as their values were self-evidently superior to the other side’s; one justified baby killing, the other fought against it. This was the essence of the issue. Not only did this distillation provide tacit justification for those who engaged in anti-abortion violence, it also made it impossible for the New Right to ever fully reject it.

This absolutism precluded a realistic assessment of the impact of anti-abortion violence on the movement’s image, as can be seen in Operation Rescue’s defence of their harassment of abortion workers: “‘Harassment’ is the wrong word. The correct term is *truth*. We’re telling the truth about the innocent blood that’s being shed behind closed doors’ [emphasis in original].⁵¹ A fund-raising letter from Randall Terry of the same year was similarly defiant [emphasis in original]:

In spite of all the bad press the pro-life movement has received, WE WILL NOT BACK DOWN! [...] No matter what Bill Clinton does, no matter how Congress votes, no matter what the courts do, we never, **ever** tolerate child-killing; we will never passively co-exist with the brutal murder of innocent children; we will never stop fighting

⁵⁰ Celeste Michelle Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 155-6.

⁵¹ Untitled letter from Operation Rescue re: ‘No Place to Hide’ campaign.

this holocaust until we win. **We will never surrender the children to the killers.**⁵²

The righteousness of the cause blinded New Right activists to the alienating effects of violence. *Life Advocate* magazine, reporting the arson of a Texas abortion clinic in April 1993, was unsympathetic: 'In addition to the abortuary, four other businesses were demolished. All businesses were aware that their offices were located in a complex with a child-killing facility'.⁵³ Unable to temper their rhetoric, the New Right was in thrall to the dichotomised worldview that followed, and public condemnation proved no disincentive.

In fact, criticism seems to have reinforced the movement's sense of righteousness. Only by identifying an anti-Christian conspiracy orchestrated by its liberal enemies was the New Right able to explain why the American political and legal system was so unmoved by its rhetorical appeals. Randall Terry rhetorically asked, 'can proliferators get a fair trial anywhere in this country?' when a Californian judge rejected his usual defences, accusing the judiciary of becoming 'the lapdog of the death industry'.⁵⁴ He frequently spoke of 'political and judicial persecution against the church and our religious freedoms', and of the 'blood-thirsty anti-Christ forces that prey upon our pre-born children [and wish for the] complete dissection and embalming of biblical Christianity'.⁵⁵

The election of Clinton in 1992 further reinforced this paranoia. Terry listed the numerous obstacles that the movement now faced in an April 1993 fundraising letter: 'We now have a pro-death President, a pro-death Senate, a pro-death House, and pro-death Supreme Court'.⁵⁶ Elsewhere he spoke of 'harsh treatment by police, courts, jails, media, and others'. This apparently acted as a 'refining fire that [...] greatly enhanced the character and commitment' of activists.⁵⁷ One Operation Rescue lawyer even welcomed the harsh sentences handed down to his clients as they 'purified' the movement,

⁵² Untitled Operation Rescue fundraising letter from Randall Terry, 4 April 1993.

⁵³ 'Up in Smoke!', April 1993, *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, Operation Rescue, 2.103.

⁵⁴ Faux, *Crusaders*, p.166.

⁵⁵ 'If you believe abortion is murder, you must act like it is murder', *Radicalism and Reactionary Politics*, Abortion: Anti-Abortion Literature, 2.86; 'Untitled Operation Rescue letter', 4 April 1993.

⁵⁶ Untitled Operation Rescue fundraising letter from Randall Terry, 4 April 1993.

⁵⁷ Untitled Operation Rescue letter, 4 April 1993.

declaring 'we want polarisation. We want people who are willing to pay the price. We don't want fence straddlers on things that are totally wrong'.⁵⁸ Again, we see the rhetorical overweighing that the New Right engaged in, limiting their ability to affect political change. By claiming morality exclusively for themselves, Operation Rescue and other New Right anti-abortion organisations were unable to identify the rational reasons behind their judicial troubles.

The judiciary, however, was perfectly clear. One judge, when sentencing Terry to five months in prison in June 1993, perfectly encapsulated the problems that the New Right's rhetoric created. Terry had 'demonstrated no remorse, no contrition, no respect for the law'.⁵⁹ When sentencing a group of Operation Rescue activists to jail, another judge commented that 'the militancy of this group was greater than any I have faced thus far', while another observed that 'in nine years on the bench, I've never seen people tell me that they are ready to go out and commit their crimes again'.⁶⁰ In a case brought against Operation Rescue by NOW, (the National Organisation for Women), and Planned Parenthood, the judges were clear that Terry's disregard for earlier court orders was an important factor in their decision to ban the group from blocking access to abortion clinics.⁶¹

Constant flouting of judicial injunctions against the blocking of abortion clinics drove the Clinton administration to pass the Federal Access to Clinic Entrances Act on 26 May 1994, making it a federal crime to block access to the buildings. The act was the culmination of a long campaign by pro-choice activists and rode a wave of popular disgust at the rise in anti-abortion violence.⁶² What was once a primary tactic for these groups now became a federal crime, and where 12,000 activists were arrested outside abortion clinics in 1989, the corresponding figure for 1998 was just twelve.⁶³ On the wrong side of the issue, the judiciary were ignored by the New Right, but the consequences proved severe with the loss of one of their favoured tactics for restricting a woman's access to abortion.

⁵⁸ 'Judge gives abortion protesters a painful choice', *New York Times*, 12 June 1989.

⁵⁹ 'Operation Rescue leader draws jail', *Lansing State Journal*, 12 June 1993.

⁶⁰ 'Judge gives abortion protesters a painful choice'; 'Connecticut abortion protesters clog jails', *New York Times*, 21 June 1989.

⁶¹ 'Abortion foes lose appeal on protests', *New York Times*, 21 September 1989.

⁶² 'Laws urged to protect abortion clinics', *Detroit Free Press*, 24 August 1993.

⁶³ Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, p. 300.

Despite the New Right's success in enticing newly politicised fundamentalist and evangelical Christians into the fight against abortion, its appeal to those outside these boundaries was limited. Public opinion polls consistently showed that Americans had a nuanced view of abortion that rejected the New Right's absolutism.⁶⁴ Support for a total ban on abortion has hovered at around 15 per cent since the early 1970s. A 'vast middle of public opinion approves of abortion but [is] reluctant to endorse it as a means of birth control', yet would 'still leave the decision to the woman', according to Dallas Blanchard.⁶⁵ A 1987 poll showed that 76 per cent of Americans agreed that abortion should be legal if the pregnancy was a danger to the woman's health, was the result of rape or incest or if there was a strong chance of serious defects in the baby. Just seven per cent disagreed with this position.⁶⁶ Consequently, public opinion was hostile to the moral absolutism that drove the New Right's direct-action tactics. 1991's 'Siege of Wichita', a prolonged campaign of protest against three clinics in the city, was opposed by 78 per cent of respondents to a local poll, while 70 per cent disagreed with protesting near abortion clinics and 90 per cent disapproved of blocking access to, or illegally entering, the clinics.⁶⁷ The same poll found that while 63 per cent had a positive impression of the pro-choice movement, only 37 per cent had similar feelings toward the anti-abortion movement.⁶⁸

Clearly, the absolutist rhetoric of the anti-abortion New Right failed to resonate with the wider American public. Consequently, when this absolutism was mounted as a rhetorical defence of anti-abortion violence, public sympathy for the movement as a whole decreased. Following the deaths of two abortion clinic receptionists at the hands of John Salvi on 30 December 1994, 39 per cent of respondents to a Michigan poll found that they had more sympathy for abortion-rights groups as a consequence, while 57 per cent had less sympathy for the anti-abortion movement. Furthermore, 54 per cent said that the 'federal government should do more to protect the pa-

⁶⁴ Blanchard, *The Anti-Abortion Movement*, p. 53.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Nancy Felipe Russo and Jean E. Denious, 'Why is Abortion Such a Controversial Issue in the United States?', in *The New Civil War: The Psychology, Culture, and Politics of Abortion*, ed. by Linda J. Beeleman & S. Marie Harvey (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 1998), p. 45.

⁶⁷ Ginsburg, 'Saving America's Souls', pp. 575-6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

tients and employees of abortion clinics from attacks', while 61 per cent said that the actions of pro-life groups encouraged violence.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Clearly, the New Right's anti-abortion rhetoric was successful in attracting new recruits. By portraying abortion as a symptom of the moral decay in American society since the 1960s, the New Right was able to frame the issue in a way that was particularly appealing to the fundamentalist and evangelical Christians appalled by America's liberalisation. The injection of overt religiosity into the movement led to a sense of divine dispensation and rhetorical overweighing that disregarded civic norms. Once anti-abortion violence began to rise, the New Right found itself unable and unwilling to denounce its practice, despite clear evidence of the damage it was doing to the movement's image. As a consequence, activists attracted the hostility of the judiciary and American public opinion. This led to a federal injunction and a majority of public opinion that held firm behind a woman's right to choose. Although the New Right was able to limit women's access to abortion services, according to their own stark rhetorical framing of the issue in which exceptions broke the rule, its campaign against abortion rights must ultimately be considered a failure.⁷⁰

What, then, can a study of the anti-abortion movement tell us about the nature of the New Right on a wider basis? We have seen the extent to which this resurgent conservatism defined itself as the antithesis of sixties liberalism, a view that corresponds with recent historiography acknowledging the period's importance to both left and right.⁷¹ A rhetorical understanding of the New Right also helps to answer the historiographical question posed in the introduction: how 'new' was the New Right? It is still possible for one to acknowledge the argument that the New Right had strong links with the Old Right whilst acknowledging its essential newness. Like the New, the Old Right was opposed to big-government liberalism (see its opposition to the New Deal) and advocated a vigorously anti-

⁶⁹ 'Poll: Shootings raised pro-choice sympathy', *Lansing State Journal*, 9 January 1995.

⁷⁰ Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, p. 311.

⁷¹ For example, see Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

communist foreign policy (likewise, the Eisenhower doctrine). Nor was the Old immune to the conspiratorial thinking of the ; witness the anti-communist paranoia of McCarthyism.

However, where Joe McCarthy and Robert Welch identified the hand of Moscow behind the conspiracies threatening America, the root of the New Right's conspiracy was domestic: sixties liberalism. The populism that was a key component of the New Right was instrumental in this.⁷² By depicting the liberalism of the sixties as a fundamentally un-American aberration, the movement could not help but see the sixties and its values as the result of the seditions of a liberal cabal. Reagan's epochal ascension to the presidency cemented this majoritarian self-image. Because of rhetoric's constitutive aspect, when events occurred that contradicted this construction of politics, such as the immovability of *Roe v. Wade*, the New Right, sure in its majoritarianism, was unable to see anything other than a liberal conspiracy with its roots in the sixties. This, then, was what made the New Right 'new', its majoritarian self-image that stemmed from its belief that the sixties was an aberration in American history.

⁷² Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (London: Cornell University Press, 1998).