“The Civil Rights Movement of the 1990s?”: The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Struggle for Racial Justice

By Richard L. Hughes

Abstract In 1964, Claude and Jeanne Nolen, who were white, joined an interracial NAACP team intent on desegregating local restaurants in Austin, Texas as a test of the recently passed Civil Rights Act. Twenty-five years later, the Nolens pleaded “no contest” in a courtroom for their continued social activism. This time the issue was not racial segregation, but rather criminal trespassing for blockading abortion clinics with Operation Rescue. The Nolens served prison sentences for direct action protests that they believed stemmed from the same commitment to Christianity and social justice as the civil rights movement.

Despite its relationship to political and cultural conservatism, the anti-abortion movement since Roe v. Wade (1973) was also a product of the progressive social movements of the turbulent sixties. Utilizing oral history interviews and organizational literature, the article explores the historical context of the anti-abortion movement, specifically how the lengthy struggle for racial justice shaped the rhetoric, tactics, and ideology of anti-abortion activists. Even after political conservatives dominated the movement in the 1980s, the successes and failures of the sixties provided a cultural lens through which grassroots anti-abortion activists forged what was arguably the largest movement of civil disobedience in American history.

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On the evening of July 3, 1964, Claude and Jeanne Nolen walked through the doors of the aptly named Dixie Grill, a restaurant in Austin, Texas, with a reputation for strict adherence to the South’s racial segregation. The Nolens, who were white, entered the restaurant with Volma Overton, black president of the local chapter of the NAACP, and another black activist. Armed with the belief in the “troubling” nature of racial segregation and the knowledge that President Lyndon Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the previous day, the “nervous” foursome ordered drinks amid what Jeanne later recalled as “ugly stares” and “threatening” questions from the white customers. As part of an interracial “NAACP team” testing Austin’s compliance with controversial civil rights legislation, the Nolens, who were served that night, jumped at the opportunity to promote racial integration and provide what they later referred to as a “marked challenge” to the southern way of life.¹

Twenty-five years later, in 1989, the Nolens, by then both in their late sixties, pleaded “no contest” in an Austin courtroom for their continued social activism. This time the incident did not revolve around issues of race, but instead involved abortion, a practice that Claude referred to as an “outrageous assault on liberty.” Filled with an “obligation to do something” despite being rather shy and private people, the Nolens were arrested on six separate counts of criminal trespassing with the militant anti-abortion group Operation Rescue. Refusing to even pay a fine used to compensate local police, Claude and Jeanne served eight-month sentences in prison for, in Claude’s words, “resist[ing] the state” and blockading “baby-killing centers.”²

The Nolens’ impressive resume of social activism provides an instructive window through which to understand the development and growth of the anti-abortion movement and how some

²The St. Edward’s University Hilltopper (Austin, Texas), February 5, 1990, 1; Nolen interview.
Americans approached abortion in the years after *Roe v. Wade* (1973). Although activists with a background in the civil rights movement were only a tiny fraction of Operation Rescue, a group dominated by politicized conservative Christians with a questionable commitment or understanding of nonviolent civil disobedience, their influence was substantial. The ability of anti-abortion activists to appropriate much of the tactics, rhetoric, and ideology of the civil rights movement contributed to the growth and direction of the movement in the years after *Roe* and speaks to the complicated and unpredictable legacy of the turbulent sixties.

It also reminds us of the complexity of social activism within American history. While the Nolens were undoubtedly devout Catholics, their religion as the sole source of their activism does little to explain their behavior in relation to most American Catholics who were not involved in civil disobedience or even strongly opposed to abortion rights. Specifically, the social activism of the Nolens and others emerged from the creative ways in which many Americans perceived abortion, religion, and social change through the lens of American race relations and the civil rights movement. Raised in the 1920s amid the South’s unyielding commitment to Jim Crow, the Nolens later attributed their identity as southern white liberals to their relatively progressive families and, in the case of Claude, experience as a soldier in the Pacific during World War II when he was struck with the “obvious connections” between the racism of Germany and Japan and the South’s racial inequality. After the war, Claude studied southern history at Louisiana State University and, as a historian, explored “Negro suppression” at the hands of racist whites in the nineteenth century. Years later, after he had accepted a position at St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas, it was not surprising that, in attempting to “teach the truth,” he offered the school’s first black history course in 1969. Four years later, he and his wife joined the anti-abortion movement with, in their minds, a similar commitment to promote human rights and social justice.3

Of course, the historiography of abortion in American society leaves little room for activists such as the Nolens. Historians have

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Fortunately, recent scholars have demonstrated similarities between conservatives during and after the sixties. Studies such as Rebecca Klatch’s \textit{A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s} stress striking similarities between Students for a Democratic Society and the conservative Young...
Americans for Freedom as the turmoil of the period served shaped a generational identity that transcended politics. Similarly, the story of how the anti-abortion movement appropriated the rhetoric, ideology, and tactics of the civil rights movement reveals creativity as opponents of abortion forged a vibrant, effective, and controversial movement from the rich and complex legacy of American activism and the sixties.5

While the Nolens explained their activism in both 1964 and 1989 in terms of their personal commitment to human rights and social justice, the story of how the civil rights movement shaped the anti-abortion movement began in Selma, Alabama, with Chuck Fager, a young white civil rights worker for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In January 1965, six months after the Nolens entered the Dixie Grill, Fager arrived in Selma as, in his words, a “green white kid from the North,” hoping to work for the SCLC. Fager stayed in Selma for over a year and later referred to his experience as “going to school” with lessons in nonviolent civil disobedience and the role of religion and race in American culture. By the time he left Selma, Fager had been arrested three times and spent an evening in jail with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reverend Ralph Abernathy.6

After leaving Selma, Fager avoided service in Vietnam by receiving Conscientious Objector status. He became a Quaker, moved to Boston, and continued to write, publishing books on the civil rights movement and articles in small local publications. By January 1973, Fager added a “visceral conviction” that abortion was “less a mark of liberation than a barometer of oppression” to his positions on race and war. Summarizing his position in a feature article written three weeks before the Supreme Court issued its ruling in Roe, Fager criticized a “political economy” that perceived nonwhites, women, the poor, the Vietnamese, and the unborn as less than fully human. He concluded that while abortion should not be criminalized, radicals should work

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toward “the revolution,” after which abortion, not unlike racism, would be deemed a barbaric relic of the past.\textsuperscript{7}

A year later, while Fager promoted his book entitled, \textit{Selma, 1965: The March That Changed the South}, an antiwar activist contacted Fager to let him know that his article on abortion had indeed struck a chord with local members of a student group named the National Youth Prolife Coalition (NYPLC). Only loosely affiliated with the established, powerful National Right to Life Committee, the NYPLC included activists, mostly Catholic and white, who opposed abortion as well as the Vietnam War and capital punishment. The organization asked Fager to conduct a workshop in Boston on civil rights activism in the summer of 1974.\textsuperscript{8}

In Boston, and a few months later in New York City at NYPLC’s national conference, Fager described the role of nonviolent civil disobedience in the civil rights movement and the possibilities of using similar tactics against abortion. According to Fager, the lengthy struggle for racial justice only succeeded when activists converted the enemy through nonviolent suffering. Led by King and the SCLC, activists responded to the violence of racial oppression with peaceful protest and a commitment to challenging unjust laws. It was an effort that, combined with television coverage, changed the hearts and minds of millions of Americans. The workshops were well attended and left the activists inspired both by past efforts they were too young to have participated in and the possibility of creating an anti-abortion movement that moved beyond rhetoric and legislation.\textsuperscript{9}


Despite experience in the Air Force ROTC as an undergraduate student, Fager applied for and received the CO status as a non-religious pacifist before he met students and staff members from Friends World College in New York and became a “convinced Friend.”

\textsuperscript{8}Charles Fager, \textit{Selma, 1965: The March That Changed the South} (New York: Scribner, 1974); Fager interview.

\textsuperscript{9}Fager interview.
As Burke Balch, a college student who attended the workshops and worked for the National Right to Life Committee, later remembered, Fager’s presentation led to the conclusion that anti-abortion activists should “nonviolently place themselves between the fetus and the knife.” Suffering on the part of activists was crucial since the fetus, unlike African Americans at Selma, was hidden from view in the years before routine sonogram tests. Furthermore, the tone of Fager’s speech also reflected a more disruptive approach to activism that had emerged in the years following Selma. Peaceful protest was no longer enough. Activists after the late sixties were now expected, as Fager later recalled, to “gum up the machinery” of abortion.

If discussions of Selma and the consciousness of Americans were abstract, the national meeting in New York also offered concrete connections between the struggle for racial justice and against abortion. Presentations reflected that, in 1974, the rigid political divisions concerning abortion associated with later decades had not yet emerged. The meeting’s thousand participants packed an auditorium to hear black civil rights veterans Reverend Jesse Jackson and Dick Gregory, as well as Dolores Huerta of the United Farm Workers, condemn abortion.

Reverend Jackson’s participation was just one of many speeches throughout the 1970s in which he, according to political scientist Allen Hertzke, “spoke vigorously against abortion.” As the best-known civil rights activist in the 1970s, Jackson “addressed pro-life rallies and even issued an open letter to Congress” criticizing abortion. To abortion opponents, his most visible stand came in an essay entitled “How We Respect Life Is Overriding Moral Issue,” published in the Right to Life News in 1977. In this essay, Jackson outlined his opposition to abortion and expressed skepticism about recent efforts at population control. “It is strange,” Jackson wrote, “that they choose to start talking about population control at the same time that Black people in America and people of color around the world...
are demanding their rightful place as human citizens and their rightful share of the material wealth of the world.”

Elsewhere, Jackson was more explicit in connecting abortion rights with slavery. Referring to the importance of the right of privacy in *Roe v. Wade*, he argued: “If one accepts the position that life is private, and therefore you have the right to do with it as you please, one must also accept the conclusion of that logic. That was the premise of slavery. You could not protest the existence or treatment of slaves on the plantation because that was private and therefore outside your right to be concerned.”

Jackson’s public comments were not the first to connect abortion with slavery. With memories of the civil rights movement still fresh, Americans in the seventies, both white and black, explored the heritage of slavery on numerous levels. Scholars re-evaluated slavery and American race relations. Black history and literature entered school curricula for the first time. As Jackson’s essay went to press in January 1977, millions of Americans watched a television mini-series based on Alex Haley’s best-selling book *Roots*, which traced the author’s family history back to West Africa.

Not surprisingly, America’s interest in slavery and black history influenced the debate over abortion within months of *Roe*. Writing in the *Fordham Law Review*, Robert Byrn called the Supreme Court decision “An American Tragedy,” claiming that *Roe* was part of a judicial tradition of degrading human life that included *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857), the Supreme Court decision that held that blacks were not citizens and slaves


were property.\(^\text{15}\) Building on the analogy, ethicist Paul Ramsey, writing in *Commonweal* in 1974, asked Congress to amend the Constitution to reverse *Roe* similar to nineteenth-century amendments that negated *Scott*. The next year, Walter R. Trinkhaus’s evaluation of *Roe*, entitled “Dred Scott Revisited,” compared America’s reluctance to perceive the unborn as human to the inability of older generations to recognize that “a human being of African descent was a person.” An attorney and anti-abortion activist, Trinkhaus concluded that both *Scott* and *Roe* derived from the “same sterile reasoning” that based the decision on the “prevalence of a practice at the time.” Thus, he claimed that *Roe* concluded, regardless of ethical considerations, that abortion should be legal because of society’s demand for the procedure. According to Trinkhaus, opponents of abortion simply wanted to “extend the due process and equal protection clauses [of the Fourteenth Amendment] to prenatal life.” Finally, journalist William F. Buckley predicted in 1976 that “100 years from now Americans will look back in horror at our abortion clinics, even as we look back now in horror at the slave markets.”

In 1984, Dr. Jack Willke, founder of the National Right to Life Committee, published a book entitled *Slavery and Abortion: History Repeats*, based on one of his best-known addresses. Willke centered his analysis on two comparisons: the relationship between the *Scott* and *Roe* decisions and between the abolitionist and anti-abortion movements. Readers skimming the first chapter found a large chart that declared:

SLAVERY
Dred Scott 1857
7-2 decision
Black non-person
Property of Owner
Choose to Buy-Sell-Kill
Abolitionists Should
Not Impose Morality
On Slaveholder
Slavery is Legal

ABORTION
Roe v. Wade 1973
7-2 decision
Unborn Non-person
Property of Owner (Mother)
Choose to Keep or Kill
Pro-Lifers Should Not Impose Morality On Mother
Abortion is Legal

Willke also compared grassroots anti-abortion groups to the American Anti-Slavery Society and suggested the two efforts shared a religious origin, committed individuals, tactics to change public and Congressional opinion, and persecution at the hands of a dominant culture intent on perpetuating injustice. Claude Nolen shared such a view as, years later, he concluded anti-abortion activists were “almost universally insulted” and considered a “nuisance” in ways similar to how Americans often perceived abolitionists as “single-issue people, fanatics, [and] troublemakers.”

By the mid eighties, the powerful analogy of slavery and abortion reached the White House. When progress on the anti-abortion front appeared to stall during Ronald Reagan’s first term, the president sought to shore up his support among anti-abortion activists with a book entitled Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation. The book’s introduction wasted no time in linking abortion with the plight of slavery in America’s past: “Mr. Reagan’s testament is a historic document, instantly memorable if only because it evokes the moral passion of Abraham Lincoln against Slavery.” In the book, Reagan’s essay argued that Americans fought the Civil War to protect the lives of black slaves and that Lincoln was the “great champion of the sanctity of all human life.” He continued: “As a nation today, we have not rejected the sanctity of life,” and he predicted that Americans would

18Willke, Slavery and Abortion, 14–15, 73.
19Nolen interview.
overturn *Roe* just as the Civil War overturned *Dred Scott*. The same year Americans Against Abortion, a group based in Texas, organized a massive “Petition for Life” to be presented to Reagan on the anniversary of Lincoln’s birthday, February 12, 1986, “in honor of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.”

While the slavery metaphor linked abortion with the long struggle for racial justice, adding the more recent civil rights movement to the historical argument was more effective in promoting civil disobedience. Anti-abortion efforts, Reverend Francis Meehan wrote in 1978, were a “humane and liberal” response to a social injustice not unlike slavery or the civil rights movement. He argued that “liberals, the churches, and even intellectuals” had historically supported slavery and other social evils due to cultural biases. According to Meehan, Rosa Parks’ decision to challenge racial segregation was instructive, as she did not “count heads to see if the atmosphere was right” for change. It was up to the opponents of abortion to recognize that “racism toward the race of children of the womb” demanded similar “enlightenment.” Indeed, Claude Nolen, as a southern white liberal with an impressive background as activist for racial equality, stressed the “egalitarian” nature of abortion opponents and praised southern white activists for transcending their racial bigotry in order to protect the life of an unborn black child.

Once again, the metaphor of abortion and racial injustice arose in the White House when, just two days after his inauguration in 1981, Reagan invited a group of anti-abortion activists to the Oval Office. One participant, Jack Willke, publicly reminded both activists and journalists how President John F. Kennedy summoned black leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr., to the

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20Ronald Reagan, *Abortion and the Conscience of a Nation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Incorporated, 1984); Celeste M. Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 49–50. Although Reagan was the book’s author, it is more likely that someone else in the Reagan administration wrote his contribution to the book, the chapter entitled “Americans Against Abortion.” John Cavanaugh-O’Keefe Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. The undated document preceded the planned event and it is unclear whether the petition was ever accomplished.


22Nolen interview.
White House in the days preceding the August 1963 March on Washington. Willke claimed that Reagan’s invitation was a “signal, because we were the first citizens group in the White House. The one historical parallel is when the civil rights leaders were brought into the White House under Kennedy.”

The appropriation of aspects of the long struggle for racial justice and equality by abortion opponents extended into the legal realm as well. In 1984, Americans United for Life sponsored a conference of anti-abortion activists to develop a legal strategy to overturn Roe. The strategists—lawyers, clergy, and other activists—found inspiration in a meeting convened in the early 1930s at which Thurgood Marshall and other NAACP attorneys determined the organization’s legal course in the decades leading up to the Brown decision of 1954. The NAACP, which until then had stayed away from educational cases, debated strategies and concluded that it would concentrate its resources on a legal and incremental challenge to racial segregation in schools. Thus the opening session of the conference in 1984 was entitled “Brown v. Board of Education and Its Lessons.” The participants stressed that abortion, like racial segregation, could be best attacked through gradual legal challenges to convince courts to reassess the immorality of Roe v. Wade.

Just as the NAACP’s legal strategy to challenge racial segregation gave way to direct action, abortion opponents during the civil rights movement and the sixties increasingly looked for ways to forge a movement in the streets. Within a year of Fager’s speech, some in his young audience were ready to apply the

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24E.R. Shipp, “Foes of Abortion Examine Strategies of N.A.A.C.P.,” New York Times, April 2, 1984, A15; Michael Davis and Hunter R. Clark, Thurgood Marshall: Warrior at the Bar and Rebel on the Bench (New York: Carol Publishing, 1992), 61–68. Although anti-abortion activists were correct in identifying pivotal meetings of the NAACP in early 1932–33, it is unlikely Marshall played a significant role or was even present. Marshall was still a law student at Howard University and did not emerge in his later role as NAACP attorney until 1936. Instead, Charles Houston, dean of Howard University’s Law School and Marshall’s mentor, served as chief counsel during the formative years of the organization’s new legal strategy. Gorney, 435–438.
lessons and rhetoric of the sixties to the anti-abortion movement. Burke Balch and a small group of young activists organized the first sit-in at an abortion clinic in 1975, at Sigma Reproductive Health Services in Rockville, Maryland. Inspired by Fager’s presentation but in need of more specific direction, the group asked Balch to research civil disobedience. In the Library of Congress, Balch found a manual on civil disobedience developed by a Quakers in the 1960s. The result was a series of training sessions and a “Logistical Plan” that covered such topics as what to do inside the clinic, picketing outside, literature, “handling the press,” and nonviolent resistance while being arrested. The plan acknowledged the “turmoil” inherent even in nonviolent protest and stressed that “WE MUST KEEP OUR COOL!” Finally, the contributions of Fager and the Quaker manual from the 1960s ensured that, at least until Operation Rescue in the late 1980s, protests at abortion clinics were called “sit-ins” after the protests of organized labor and the civil rights movement.25

In contrast to later public demonstrations that emphasized the role of conservative male leaders in the anti-abortion movement, the initial sit-in in Rockville was noteworthy for its relative diversity. The group was predominantly female and included a number of individuals, including Balch, who considered themselves agnostic or atheists. Moreover, they were “fully aware that the issue was being tainted by religious arguments” and accusations of anti-feminism. As a result, the group stressed “secular arguments” of human rights and limited its civil disobedience within the clinic to six female activists. After songs, prayers, and three hours of discussion with reluctant local police, the women, who would later call themselves the “Sigma Six” in an attempt to “capture some of the mystique of the antiwar movement,” were arrested for trespassing. In disrupting the clinic’s

25“Logistical Plan for August 2, 1975,” John Cavanaugh-O’Keefe Papers, Madison, Wisconsin; Risen and Thomas, 61–62. While the Rockville sit-in was notable because it was the first organized attempt in the wake of Roe to apply the lessons of early activism, some observers have identified the first sit-in as involving five students and no arrests at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Dallas in 1970. The effort received scant attention and appears to have offered little inspiration to later anti-abortion activists. For more information, see Risen and Thomas, 21–22.
daily operation, the small group made its point about the need to expand the effort against abortion and the need to risk arrest in doing so.26

However, the first sit-in was also a failure in one significant respect. Favorable national news coverage was crucial for Fager and other civil rights workers in Selma. Even before the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement emerged as the first “television war” with its battles and violence dominating the news. Individuals from Reverend King to Selma sheriff Jim Clark became national figures based largely on the ability of television to illuminate the conflict over racial segregation. In contrast, the first sit-in in Rockville received only a brief article a month later in the Washington Post that mentioned their conviction for trespassing. The press was uninterested and, in 1975, sit-ins at abortion clinics were simply too novel to attract much attention or a planned response from police. Regardless, the small group of activists in Rockville had quietly and peacefully ushered in an era of direct action protests against abortion that would arguably, by the 1980s, develop into the largest movement of civil disobedience in American history.27

The two individuals most responsible for bringing anti-abortion civil disobedience to national attention and the Nolens to prison were John Cavanaugh-O’Keefe and Randall Terry. Both activists drew heavily from the heritage of the civil rights movement in the years between the Rockville sit-in and the late 1980s. Cavanaugh-O’Keefe, who journalists would later refer to as the “Father of Rescue,” was a devout Catholic with experiences in the Vietnam antiwar movement.28 From 1977 through most of the 1980s, Cavanaugh-O’Keefe led an organization called the Pro-life Nonviolent Action Project (PNAP) to encourage individuals and organizations throughout the nation to conduct nonviolent sit-ins at abortion clinics. His first sit-in

26Balch interview; Risen and Thomas, 61–62. According to Balch, the attendance at most meetings was two-thirds female.
27Risen and Thomas, 61–62, 68.
was in Norwich, Connecticut in January 1977, and PNAP boasted of a dozen sit-ins nationwide during the year, with more in 1978. Cavanaugh-O’Keefe was arrested no less than thirty times in the next decade and PNAP laid the foundation for a national grassroots movement.29

If Catholicism and the war in Vietnam were crucial to Cavanaugh-O’Keefe’s philosophical stance on abortion, the civil rights movement shaped much of the way he and PNAP crafted a national effort at nonviolent civil disobedience. A year after Roe, as he became disappointed at the passivity of the anti-abortion movement, he read Strength to Love, Martin Luther King’s collection of sermons. Cavanaugh-O’Keefe was “very impressed” and, when he embarked on his career as a leader of sit-ins in 1977, he distributed picket signs with the phrase “Strength to Love” and the protesters sang the civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome.”30 Although Cavanaugh-O’Keefe later claimed, “I don’t think anybody besides me understood those signs,” King and the civil rights movement became ubiquitous in PNAP’s literature. “A Peaceful Presence,” PNAP’s first pamphlet printed in 1978, proclaimed that “a change of hearts [concerning abortion] will not occur without suffering.” The pamphlet explained that a “sit-in involves our implicit assertion that our capacity to endure suffering is greater than the abortionist’s capacity to destroy.” Cavanaugh-O’Keefe then emphasized in bold letters that “With Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., we must come to believe that ‘unearned suffering is somehow redemptive.’”31

Later, when discussing abortion with a man who owned property leased to a clinic in 1982, Cavanaugh-O’Keefe suggested

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30 At least one revision of “We Shall Overcome” ended with the verse:
   You must save the children,
   You must save the children, today.
   Oh, deep in your heart, you must believe,
   That you must save the children, today.
John Cavanaugh-O’Keefe papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
that the landlord read King’s famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” to illustrate the dangers of passive compliance with abortion. He quoted King as stating, “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.” In a later newsletter, PNAP described a sit-in at a hospital that stood on the grounds of King’s alma mater, Crozer Theological Seminary, near Philadelphia. Skilled at drawing persuasive contrasts, PNAP’s literature described how the “books that young King had studied…before a career of preaching the liberating Good News of the South were now replaced with suction machines.”

Much of Cavanaugh-O’Keefe’s interest in King stemmed from a hope that the slain civil rights leader’s example provided a solution to the deadlock over abortion. In numerous publications, he explained his fascination with King’s ability to move beyond the “apparent polarization between blacks and whites.” Cavanaugh-O’Keefe wrote that King “opened my eyes to a possibility” that “prolifers could find a way of getting past the recent polarization between children’s rights and women’s rights.” The key was that just as racial justice also helped whites, the anti-abortion movement could free supporters of abortion from the complicity in murder.

In 1978, Cavanaugh-O’Keefe attracted more attention from the mainstream anti-abortion movement with his workshop on the role of nonviolent civil disobedience at the national convention of the National Right to Life Committee. The workshop was unusually crowded with leaders from across the nation and activists from the Catholic communities that dominated the large and active anti-abortion movement in St. Louis. Cavanaugh-O’Keefe explained that while the ideal sit-in included efforts to counsel pregnant women and educate the public, PNAP also stressed that the central function of any sit-in was preventing abortions by “placing your body between the abolitionist and his weapon, so that no child will die.” Such efforts included occupying waiting rooms or even chaining oneself to operating tables. From a philosophical standpoint, Cavanaugh-O’Keefe argued, a sit-in involved

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32Cavanaugh-O’Keefe, letter to Kevin O’Grady, April 20, 1982; Alektor: Newsletter of the Prolife Nonviolent Action Project.
33Cavanaugh-O’Keefe interview.
“taking the child’s place” to protect its rights and prevent violence. In contrast to much of the civil rights movement, which included demonstrations to change laws or raise awareness, PNAP’s goal was “to save lives right there that day.”

Seven years later, Cavanaugh-O’Keefe remained frustrated with PNAP’s lack of significant growth. During the 1985 March for Life rally in Washington, he and other anti-abortion leaders carried a small coffin to the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court to pray, recruit, and ultimately, face arrest when a young man emerged from the crowd and exhorted the protesters before disappearing. Years later, when Cavanaugh-O’Keefe viewed a videotape of the protest, he realized that they had “radicalized Randall Terry” on the steps of the Supreme Court. More importantly, civil disobedience within the movement, according to Cavanaugh-O’Keefe, “needed a used car salesman to make it work,” and Terry was a “recruiter par excellence.”

As a young evangelical minister from a family in Rochester, New York, with a strong progressive background in race relations, feminism, and the peace movement, Randall Terry was especially well situated to recruit cultural conservatives to the kind of civil disobedience usually associated with the sixties and progressives. His family was steeped in progressive traditions as his grandmother “fought racism at every opportunity” and his aunts “agitated” for progressive change in race relations, feminism, and the peace movement. After he dropped out of school and experimented with drugs, Terry eventually embraced evangelical Christianity. Terry began preaching to women entering abortion clinics in Binghamton, New York, and eventually opened a “crisis pregnancy center” to persuade and perhaps harass women to reject abortion. Promoting “traditional Christian values” in an attempt to rid American culture of the secular evils

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34Cavanaugh-O’Keefe interview; “Peaceful Presence.” St. Louis was an attractive location for the National Right to Life Committee’s annual conference and Cavanaugh-O’Keefe’s workshop as the city’s large Catholic population led some of the largest anti-abortion campaigns in the period between PNAP and Operation Rescue. See Risen and Thomas 132–155.
35Cavanaugh-O’Keefe interview.
36Cavanaugh-O’Keefe interview; Risen and Thomas, 217–239.
of feminism and humanism, Terry had, according to journalist Susan Faludi, begun “by identifying with sixties ideals; [and ended] by declaring war on them.”

Determined to move his campaign against abortion toward civil disobedience, Terry claimed, “We were being too nice.” Terry also dropped the civil rights term “sit-in” in favor of “rescue,” which was more acceptable among a conservative movement less comfortable with overt references to sixties activism. The new term connoted the saving of lives and originated from Proverbs 24:11: “Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.” Terry conducted his first “rescue mission” in Binghamton in 1986; then he quickly turned his attention toward mobilizing a national rescue campaign led by evangelical churches. He named his effort Operation Rescue in 1988 and, as historian/commentator Garry Wills observed, the “decidedly male, lay, young,” and evangelical organization encouraged massive protests at clinics coast to coast. Activists overwhelmed clinic staffs and, when faced with police, locked arms in solidarity or went limp so law enforcement had to carry them into custody. Over 200 protesters were arrested in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, in 1987. Next, a campaign in New York City resulted in over 1,600 arrests and unprecedented donations and media coverage. “Pro-choice” supporters reported rescues every weekend between May 1988 and May 1989, with estimated arrests during the period of over twenty thousand. Rescues took place in 64 cities on April 26, 1989, alone. In 1990, estimates claimed that Operation Rescue brought 35,000 arrests and that 16,000 additional protesters risked arrest. In contrast, less than 4,000 civil rights activists were arrested in the twenty months following the sit-ins in 1960.

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At no point was Operation Rescue more visible than at the 1988 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta. The “Siege of Atlanta,” as Terry called it, lasted for three months and, despite poor planning, produced over 1,300 arrests and received the public approval of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Falwell gave Terry a $10,000 check and proclaimed “nonviolent civil disobedience is the only way to bring an end to the biological holocaust.” Activists, including Jeanne Nolen from Austin, arrived in Atlanta by the busload and, led by Terry, entered into a lengthy game of “cat and mouse” with the police. Terry concealed the locations of protests at clinics and activists unveiled the “Atlanta crawl” in which protesters crawled under police barricades on their way to the clinic doors. Nolen, who spent five days in an Atlanta jail and at a nearby prison farm, discovered that the campaign “produced feelings of excitement, nervousness, happiness, despondency, and satisfaction.” Capitalizing on such emotions and unprecedented opportunities for media coverage from new cable stations such as the Cable News Network and the Christian Broadcasting Network, Operation Rescue brought the anti-abortion movement to the American consciousness.

Operation Rescue not only produced a campaign of civil disobedience that may have surpassed the civil rights movement in terms of sheer numbers, it also appropriated the language and tactics of the struggle for racial justice. Terry referred to Operation Rescue as the “Civil-Rights Movement of the Nineties,” and his supporters altered the lyrics to the civil rights anthem “Eyes on the Prize” to include “Be a hero—save a whale, save a baby, go to jail.” A gifted speaker, Terry peppered his speeches and writings with references to King and the Underground Railroad, the effort before the Civil War to smuggle slaves to freedom. He claimed to find inspiration in the life of Calvin Fairbank, an abolitionist who had served two lengthy terms in prison for transporting slaves to Canada and

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41 Risen and Thomas, 271–286; Cavanaugh-O’Keefe interview; Ginsberg in Solinger, Abortion Wars, 231.
whose life, according to Terry, demonstrated the “need to obey God rather than men.”

In defending civil disobedience to both supporters of abortion rights and more timid sections of the anti-abortion movement, Terry borrowed King’s comment about the need for “creative tensions.” He argued that the arrests and nonviolent suffering of Christians in the South were crucial in bringing about the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He argued that anti-abortion protests could bring about the “social tension necessary to bring about political change” and end abortion. When faced with lagging support and mounting criticism of the Atlanta campaign, Terry imitated King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” with his own letter urging renewed support for civil disobedience during a short stay in an Atlanta jail.

Terry’s references to King were indicative of the evolution of the slain civil rights leader in the collective memory of Americans by the 1980s. While groups such as the SCLC continued to stress the idea of King as a revolutionary, many Americans reduced his legacy to that of a moderate with a benign dream of racial unity. The “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” in 1963 became simply the “March on Washington.” References to King’s opposition to the war in Vietnam and his calls for substantial economic reform faded in favor of his “I Have a Dream” speech. By the time Terry formed Operation Rescue in the late 1980s, King’s birthday was a national holiday and conservatives evoked King’s dream of a “color-blind society” to oppose affirmative action.

44Terry, “The Civil-Rights Movement of the Nineties;” Risen and Thomas, 256, 303, 306. Unknowingly, Terry’s early release in Atlanta and a number of other times also mirrored King’s difficulties in Albany, Georgia, in 1962. In both cases, the leaders received criticism from grassroots activists who claimed the release equaled a weakness and hypocrisy. Some of Terry’s criticism stemmed from the fact that he had been arrested more than thirty times but had spent less than ninety days in jail before Atlanta.
Although a staunch conservative, Terry explained that activists in the “labor movement, the civil rights movement, Vietnam protest, and gay liberation” provided important “lessons of history” and models of grassroots activism needed in the anti-abortion effort. Of course, there was little doubt as to which side of the political divide Terry stood; he was hostile to feminism and gay rights, and his comments about a commitment to racial justice convinced few of his opponents and offended many. Furthermore, both sides of the abortion debate criticized Operation Rescue. The National Right to Life Committee, mocked by Terry for its passivity, refused to publicize Operation Rescue’s efforts, and Jack Willke, its former president, argued that Terry had damaged the movement as the media portrayed Operation Rescue’s “demonstrations as a bunch of kooks, religious fanatics.”

In addition to charging that Operation Rescue was hostile toward women and their reproductive rights, the political left also criticized the organization for lacking an understanding of nonviolence. Too often nonviolent protests involved harassment, threats, destruction of property, name calling, and, according to Philip Green, “assaults on women.” Writing in Commonweal, Charles DiSalvo called Operation Rescue “Uncivil, Unloving, and Unconvincing,” while Molly Yard, president of the National Organization for Women, criticized Terry for attempting to “wear the mantle of civil disobedience of the 1960s.” More importantly, the movement remained almost exclusively white as the movement’s appropriation of the legacy of the struggle for racial justice failed to motivate blacks despite relative ambivalence toward abortion rights.

Furthermore, anti-abortion activists such as John Cavanaugh-O’Keefe questioned Terry’s understanding of nonviolence. He later concluded that Terry’s nonviolent pledges meant only that Terry “was not going to hit anyone today,” a far cry from a “turn away from violence” toward “redemptive suffering” and a broader sense of social justice. Nonetheless, there was also a recognition that Terry and Operation Rescue had tapped into

\[\text{Ginsberg, “Saving America’s Souls,” 575.}\]
something. As an article published in socialist and pacifist periodicals stated:

Our reaction to scenes of antiabortion activists engaging in civil disobedience outside abortion clinics is probably similar to many on the left: ‘What are they doing using our tactics?’ One major factor may be uncomfortable for many of us to admit: many of them are us.47

Indeed, as the common thread running through the experiences of Claude and Jeanne Nolen, Chuck Fager, John Cavanaugh-O’Keefe, and Randall Terry demonstrates, the anti-abortion movement drew considerable strength from progressive activism and leaders, regardless of political bent, who were skilled in appropriating the rhetoric of racial justice, the tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience, and the ideology of individual rights from the civil rights movement. Placing the anti-abortion movement within the larger historical context reveals that the movement’s social activism developed from a small effort dominated by grassroots activists from the Catholic Left to arguably the largest movement of civil disobedience in American history fueled by the addition of evangelical, cultural conservatives. The emergence of Roe in 1973 meant that both the supporters and opponents of abortion rights were, in a sense, veterans of the sixties who perceived abortion and their social activism, at least in part, in terms of the collective memory of the struggle for racial justice. The movement’s appropriation of the relatively recent struggle for racial justice empowered activists such as the Nolens to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain and grow the movement. More importantly, it also resonated with many Americans increasingly supportive of limiting or abolishing abortion rights.

While the malleability of the memory of the civil rights movement helped create a crusade against abortion and reduce abortion rights since 1973, the distortion of that memory and the complicated legacy of American social activism were also at the center of the movement’s greatest failures. Unfortunately,

in the twenty-five years between the Nolens’ efforts to promote racial integration and their prison sentence for opposing abortion, their efforts at a peaceful challenge to abortion shared center stage with harassment, arson, bombings, and murder. Just as the civil rights movement turned frustration into “Black Power,” the Black Panthers, and a painful reevaluation of the principle of nonviolent social change, some opponents of abortion evoked a violent and destructive crusade. Once again, the tortured struggle for racial justice loomed large as John Brown, the radical abolitionist who one historian referred to as the “Father of American Terrorism,” served as inspiration. Brown and his followers murdered five slavery sympathizers in Kansas in 1856 and, after his attack and arrest at Harpers Ferry, Virginia; he became a martyr for the abolitionist cause. In a legendary statement before the court that ordered his execution in 1859, Brown justified his actions as the will of God:

Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life … and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded … I say let it be done!  

In 1994, Paul Hill, an ordained minister from Florida, murdered a doctor named John Britton and a staff member in front of an abortion clinic. Despite outrage from most circles, Hill remained defiant, as did his supporters throughout the trial. Hill argued that he had a “responsibility” to kill Britton, and his statement to the jury before receiving the sentence of death echoed Brown:

You may mix my blood with the blood of the unborn and those who have fought to defend the oppressed. However, truth and righteousness will prevail. May God help you protect the unborn as you would want to be protected.  
