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Have Conservatives 'Won' the Abortion War?

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Yes, argues Saletan—but don't confuse conservative with pro-life. Saletan's thesis is that Americans have settled on a position he calls "conservative pro-choice." These middle-of-the-roaders have decided to support a woman's right to abortion, while allowing for restrictions like parental notification laws, restrictions on taxpayer funded abortions, and restraints on late-term abortions. In sum, these Americans have staked out a position that is morally liberal but fiscally conservative—or, conservative pro-choice.

Saletan is an insightful journalist who covers politics for the on-line journal, Slate. In *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War*, Saletan presents a clever case for re-interpreting the abortion controversy. In making his case, Saletan delivers bad news to the pro-life movement, for he argues that we have lost the war. On the other hand, he alleges that the pro-abortion movement has, in effect, lost its soul by selling out to political expediency.

Throughout the book, Saletan refers to the two opposing sides as pro-choice and pro-life, and he means to be ruthlessly honest. He accuses the pro-choice forces of making a deal with the devil almost twenty years ago: "In 1986, halfway between *Roe v. Wade* and the election of George W. Bush, a group of pro-choice strategists developed an idea that changed the course of the struggle. They feared that abortion restrictions would roll back women's rights and condemn many women to the poverty of untimely motherhood. But they understood that most voters didn't share that concern. So, instead of talking about women's rights, the activists portrayed abortion restrictions as an encroachment by big government on tradition, family, and property."

That is Saletan's case in a nutshell. *Bearing Right* traces the progress of the pro-choice movement from Gov. Bill Clinton's administration in Arkansas through President Bill Clinton's maneuvers in the White House. In 1986, Arkansas voters turned down "Amendment 65," which would have denied tax-payer funding for abortions and added constitutional language that declared the state on the side of the unborn: "it is the public policy of the state of Arkansas to promote the health, safety and welfare of every unborn child from conception until birth."

In the end, Amendment 65 failed by only 519 votes out of more than 650,000 cast. The victory for the pro-abortion forces may have been close, but it was big. As one Arkansas columnist crowed, "Here we sit, forming the buckle of the Bible Belt, where Southern Baptists and scripture-quoting football coaches roam, and half the voters, perhaps more than half, said 'no' to a two-sentence antiabortion proposition." It was a bitter pill.

Major players in Saletan's drama include Kate Michelman, then executive director of the National Abortion Rights Action League [NARAL], and political pollsters like Harrison Hickman. Together, Michelman and Hickman put together a strategy that led to the defeat of Robert Bork's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1987. The pro-abortion

strategists, seeing Robert Bork as a certain vote to reverse *Roe v. Wade*, looked in desperation for a way to raise public concern about the nominee. They found their weapon through polling—and it was a charge that Robert Bork would deny Americans their right to privacy. As Saletan demonstrates, privacy became “the ideal fig leaf” for senators who wanted to vote against Bork, but did not want to take a public stand for abortion.

The scene then shifts to Virginia, where candidate Douglas Wilder became a model for what Saletan calls the “New Mainstream.” Wilder staked his race for Virginia governor on moderate positions that ran against the platform of the Democratic Party at the national level. Most important for Saletan’s case is the fact that Wilder broke with the pro-abortion leadership. His opponent, Republican Marshall Coleman, called for a constitutional amendment to ban abortion. Wilder ran against that proposal, but also argued for a parental consent law. Wilder’s position threw a wild card into the race, and transformed the abortion debate across the nation.

By cutting between the classic pro-abortion and pro-life arguments, Wilder created new political ground. He could pose as a moderate defender of abortion, while protecting himself on the right by arguing for parental consent laws.

The very concept of parental consent law ran against everything the pro-abortion movement had argued for years. According to the pro-abortion logic, any restriction on a woman’s [or girl’s] unrestricted right to an abortion was unacceptable. Wilder saw that pro-abortion orthodoxy as a sure recipe for electoral defeat. He bucked the national strategists and won—and politicians coast to coast took notice.

Kate Michelman and her allies had to make a fast decision. They could oppose Wilder’s compromise and lose, or they could embrace his deal and win. They chose to win. In so doing, Saletan accuses them of selling out.

This is the conservative victory Saletan identifies as the new reality, and the foundation of the “New Mainstream.” It is conservative only in that it resists any expansion of abortion rights. Make no mistake; the “New Mainstream” is decidedly pro-choice.

Bearing Right is a fascinating book, and Saletan presents a powerful case. Nevertheless, he shows a fundamental failure to understand the core beliefs of the pro-life movement. He presents the effort to outlaw partial-birth abortions as little more than politics. As a matter of fact, the fact that a huge majority of Americans support a ban on partial-birth abortions indicates that the “New Mainstream” understands the moral repugnance of the procedure.

Saletan does score critical insights on the issues of stem-cell research and cloning. NARAL and its allies came out swinging against President George W. Bush’s 2001 policy limiting federal funding for research that would destroy human embryos. NARAL and company had no obvious stake in the status of the embryo, for it had nothing to do with an abortion. But they realized that any policy that granted respect to a human embryo would, by extension, weaken their argument for abortion. As Saletan explains, they saw the Bush policy as part of “a scheme to inflate the value of embryos.”

What about the pro-lifers? Saletan corrects the pro-abortionists on this one: “The fact that pro-lifers were fighting for unborn life outside the womb suggested not that they were disingenuous but that they were sincere. They really were pro-life, not just anti-abortion.”

Defenders of the unborn will read *Bearing Right* with interest, but reservations. Saletan is no friend to the pro-life movement—not by a long shot. But he is an honest man, and his indictment of the pro-abortion movement for its political sell-out is instructive. Those who would fight against the Culture of Death must know what we face, and Saletan’s analysis helps us to see our challenge more clearly.

Regardless of the background analysis, Saletan’s case for a “New Mainstream” is compelling. All evidence suggests that most Americans are in a muddled middle ground that supports basic abortion rights but allows for limitations. Americans are unwilling to celebrate abortion as a moral good, but they have also accommodated themselves to a culture of personal autonomy and sexual liberty. Given this accommodation, they are unwilling to give up abortion as an option.

The pro-abortion movement has made its deal with the political reality. Some on the right soothingly advise that the conservative movement should do the same. Just look at the election of [fiscally conservative but socially liberal] Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California, they counsel. Who can argue with success?

Most leaders in the pro-life movement have adopted some form of incrementalism as a strategy. Americans are not ready for a total ban on abortion, and the Supreme Court shows no progress toward overturning *Roe v. Wade*. Pro-life victories have been slim, rare, and often temporary.

But the sanctity of human life is not a principle up for sale, or amenable to compromise. The pro-life movement is not primarily about politics, after all. Defenders of human life start with the conviction that human beings are made in God's image, and thus deserve full protection from conception until natural death. From this basic conviction there can be no retreat—and no deals.

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