Two thousand anti-abortion activists came to Cherry Hill, New Jersey, in mid-July to attend the National Right-To-Life annual convention, "A New Birth of Freedom." They met at the Cherry Hill Hyatt to exchange literature, fetal slide shows, "I Love Life" comic books, and "precious feet" lapel pins "identical in size and shape to the feet of a ten-week-old unborn baby boy."

The rank and file of the Right-To-Life are women. Most have never been politically active before they became "pro-life"—usually through their churches. Each chapter still does its own fundraising through basketball-a-thons, swim-a-thons and selling candybars. As a result, they perceive themselves as financial underdogs in comparison with groups like Planned Parenthood who still receive federal funds.

But something is changing in the country's largest single-issue anti-abortion organization. It is becoming more radical. While many of the older members, particularly men, are happy with lobbying, writing letters to the editor and waiting for Reagan to make good on his promises, younger activists are taking a new approach. Heavily influenced by the anti-nuclear Catholic left, they are encouraging civil disobedience, picketing, and getting arrested—anything to disrupt abortion clinics.

Every Saturday, Anne Gilmartin, chairman of Life in First Essence (L.I.F.E.), from Woodside, New York, stands in front of abortion clinics with photos of aborted fetuses shouting to entering women that they are "killing their babies." Mrs. Gilmartin calls this "sidewalk counseling." Pro-abortion activists call this harassment.

"The thing is to go up to the abortion clinics outside and convince these women to save their babies," Mrs. Gilmartin said. "Every day we go there we save one or two babies."

Olga Fairfax of Methodists for Life, Maryland, also goes to the clinics.

"There are some weapons I have to have with me," she
explains. “First, a seven-by-five foot billboard of an aborted unborn child. It costs $22.95. I fold it up and carry it with me wherever I go. Then, I have a twelve-week-old fetus in a jar. I had it on my desk for four days but now—that poor poor precious unborn baby boy—now I keep him in my car. Also, the Lord gave me a free xerox machine. I prayed and I got one.”

Although no one claims responsibility for the fire-bombing of clinics that has occurred over the last decade, right-to-lifers are interested in learning civil disobedience. Some groups, like Shield of Roses, run into clinics and scream the rosary. Others look to more secular methods. Many attended a workshop on “Non-Violent Direct Action” lead by Mary O’Malley of People Expressing Active Concern for Everyone (P.E.A.C.E.).

“Our most successful demonstrations have been focused on themes—Mother’s Day, prayer vigils, days of rescue, funeral services. You can use hearses and infant caskets which are quite easily made at home. Bring pictures of dead babies and tapes of the little unborn baby’s heartbeat,” she said, encouraging her comrades to more militant activity. “In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, ‘We will wear them down by our capacity to suffer,’” she said.

Quoting King and Gandhi and making references to slavery and the Holocaust have become commonplace in the language of the new anti-abortion organizer. In fact, much of the recent anti-abortion rhetoric has taken on phrases and vocabularies usually associated with progressive causes. Jack Wilke, president of the National Right-to-Life Committee, a “pro-family” Catholic who opposes sex outside of marriage, refers to his organization as “an equal rights movement.” “We are civil libertarian,” Wilke says. “We are largely a movement of women. . . . If the ERA included the wording all women born or unborn we would support it.”

Another example of the adoption of progressive strategies is the recent use of “speak-outs” as an organizing tool. Feminists have often spoken out publicly about their experiences with illegal abortion. This year the right-to-life responded with Women Exploited By Abortion (WEBA). Their members have had legal abortions and feel permanently damaged by the experience. Their spokesperson told the press, “We see abortion as the most exploitative thing that has happened to women in the entire history of mankind. Abortion is diametrically opposed to feminism.”

Although WEBA does not support any feminist issues, new groups such as Feminists for Life and Pro-Lifers for Survival have started to make an impact on the left and the right. Pro-Lifers for
Survival is an anti-nuke, anti-abortion group that favors funded child care and supports gay rights. Their common denominator with the right-to-life movement is their opposition to abortion and their Catholicism. The activism of anti-abortion leftists such as Daniel Berrigan in the disarmament movement resulted in the elimination of abortion rights from the program of the enormous disarmament rally in New York last June. Speakers represented issues from gay rights to El Salvador but abortion was absent.

“The peace movement and the pro-life movement were made for each other,” says Feminist For Life Julie Loesch. “If they don’t work together they may both deserve to fail.” These groups co-exist on the basis of single-issue unity with right-wing groups such as Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum. Schlafly’s ad in the convention souvenir book reminded her comrades that “The winning team of Eagles has a proven record of success in . . . defeating the women’s lib plans to draft women and assign women to combat, establish federal child care for all children, and give lesbians the rights of wives.” One woman told me that even though she is a devout Catholic, she would welcome the Ku Klux Klan or a homosexual group as long as they were “pro-life.”

Slavery and the Holocaust were used as themes at this convention. Abortion was often compared to black slavery. Pro-abortion Pennsylvania assemblywoman Ruth Harper spoke against this imagery at a press conference sponsored by the Reproductive Rights National Network. “This comparison,” said Harper, “is wrong and deeply offensive to women, particularly to black women. In fact, one of the most terrible aspects of slavery was its exploitation of black women through coerced childbearing. During slavery, black women were advertised for sale as breeders and their children were taken from them and sold. . . . If comparisons are to be made at all, the anti-abortion movement has much in common with the slave owners and nothing in common with the struggle for freedom.”

The Holocaust was the primary metaphor at this year’s convention. An Auschwitz survivor gave the keynote speech calling abortion the “American Holocaust.”

“Abortion is far worse than what the Nazis did as far as I’m concerned,” said Father Thomas Crusak, a Colombian priest. “The unborn are more helpless.” Mrs. Becker of Pennsylvanians for Life told me that “It was the fact that abortion was legal in Germany in the 20s and 30s that made Nazism acceptable. It laid the groundwork for a Holocaust-abortion mentality.”
But, according to Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, professor of Holocaust Studies in the New Jersey University system, this is not historically valid. “I find it difficult to believe that the so-called right-to-life movement has the audacity to compare the genocide of six million Jews and others in Nazi Germany with the current American policy supporting abortion as a woman’s right of choice. The Nazis opposed abortion rights. Hitler considered abortion and contraception a ‘violation of motherhood’ for those he deemed fit to live—members of the Aryan race. Hitler favored sterilization and death for those deemed unfit: Jews, Communists, homosexuals, Gypsies, the mentally and physically handicapped. As a woman and a Jew, I feel a personal obligation never to allow another Hitler to dictate what I should believe or how I should live my life.”

As the anti-abortion forces enter what may be the final phase of activity before Congress votes on three bills that could severely limit or completely eliminate legal abortion, they are becoming more militant. When housewives from West Virginia are willing to be arrested twenty-two times a year to “save a baby’s life,” it seems obvious that the right-to-life is very committed and willing to take greater risks.

**COMMENTARY**

Looking back on my own reporting I can see with hindsight I was so taken with the kitsch of the anti-abortion accoutrement and iconography that I overlooked the more important fact that their speech is composed of incredible lies. Throughout, people used twisted logic, false facts, and manipulated vocabulary to construct a convoluted justification for subjugating women. By focusing on nonentities like “the unborn” and developing an entire rhetoric designed to establish them as a class of people needing rights, the anti-abortionists managed to engage in a complex and extended discussion without ever addressing the real issue at the core of their actions.

Through all this mumbo jumbo about slavery, the Holocaust, lapel pins, and appropriations of the language of liberation, no right-to-lifer who I met ever addressed why they thought that women should not be able to make their own decisions.

I also missed a hugely important historic transformation taking place right before my eyes—the introduction of massive civil disobedience techniques by Catholic leftists into the anti-abortion vocabulary. This enabled them to transform single acts of harassment into what we now know in the nineties as
Operation Rescue — a professional gang devoted to depriving rights at abortion clinics all across the nation.

Back in the early eighties, while we were busy trying to build the broadest possible multi-issue coalitions, the anti-abortion groups were busy doing the exact opposite. They were steadily constructing a single-issue movement, uniting a wide diversity of political perspectives around the unified goal of ending abortion rights in this country. These choices were more than purely strategic. The selection of tactics is not an arbitrary decision but rather one that must accurately reflect the values and experiences of the constituency in question.

Examining the strategic choices of the anti-abortion movement reveals clearly that single-issue organizing cannot work for people fighting for their freedom. For the people whose rights are being taken away, in this case women, single-issue organizing quickly becomes impossible because your reason for being politically active has to do with your actual life and how it is concretely lived. The forces united to deprive us of our rights were primarily ideological and theological. Since they were on the offensive, anti-abortionists had the luxury of acting systematically. In other words, if you need an abortion you need it right away. This involves a whole set of issues that must be addressed immediately from funding to your sense of expectation for your own life as a woman. This range of factors must be broached and dealt with within a matter of days. Furthermore, the stigma around abortion makes it an issue that many women want to avoid until the moment that it affects them personally, or they may want to forget about it after having accessed their own legal rights. For the people trying to stop abortion, a twenty-year plan to revoke Roe v Wade is a lot more efficient. Additionally, it is important to remember that the constituencies most brutally damaged by Reagan era policies came to this historical moment already in great need. Most of us had never had full citizenship. We didn’t have basic civil rights and we had no economic power. Furthermore, we had no visibility in the dominant culture and could only organize and agitate from the underground. As a result, we began our fight from a place of deprivation. In short, those under attack had a much more complicated reality of defense than the ones attempting to deprive us of our rights.

Finally, the contradiction for women of the right wing organizing enthusiastically for their own enslavement became clear for me at the convention. The right enabled women to engage in the political arena, escape the private sphere, and travel and work in a community without stepping out of their prescribed female role. They could be activists, organizers, lobbyists and fundraisers but only in the capacity of “saving babies,” the one thing that women are supposed to do.