

OPPOSITION & INTIMIDATION

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The Abortion Wars & Strategies
of Political Harassment

Alesha E. Doan

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For Spencer Thomas

*May you grow up in a world where life and choice
are valued together at every stage of your development.*

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PREFACE

One of the distinguishing features of the abortion conflict compared to other social debates of our times is the level of protest, harassment, and violence generated over this issue. Journalists, physicians, and activists on both sides of the debate have talked about the spectacle occurring outside of clinics across the nation. Media frequently cover the confrontational aspects of the abortion debate at the expense of the “less dramatic” (but important) policy developments surrounding abortion politics. Media pundits and pro-choice politicians discuss these tactics in terms of personal acts of harassment, completely devoid of any political implications.

As I started studying in the PhD program at Texas A&M University, I became intrigued by the lack of scholarly attention (particularly the relative absence of political analysis) given to the activities taking place outside of clinics. As I completed my first year at the university, a rather fortuitous event occurred in a nearby town. The Planned Parenthood in Bryan, Texas, announced its plans to build a new clinic facility that would be equipped to provide abortion services for its clients. Prior to its announcement, Planned Parenthood had been running a family planning clinic in town for twenty-four years. During this time, the clinic did not generate any significant attention from religious organizations, interest groups, or the media. It operated in relative obscurity and provided services to men and women from the community and university.

Within days of Planned Parenthood’s announcement, a group of local citizens went to the construction site and started to pray. Many pro-life supporters turned for direction to one particular woman, who had been involved with pro-

life groups since she was in high school. This woman ended up forming, directing, and leading the Brazos Valley Coalition for Life (BVCL) for several years. Over the course of this project, Planned Parenthood in Bryan, Texas, has gained notoriety; it quickly became the most heavily protested abortion clinic in the country. The battle unfolding outside of the clinic's doors is simply one illustration of the dedication that activists on both sides of the conflict possess, the intractability of the conflict, and the scope of the abortion "war" that continues to play out across America.

Quickly after Planned Parenthood's announcement I approached Planned Parenthood and the BVCL (as well as smaller local organizations involved with the abortion conflict) and began conducting interviews with activists on both sides of the issue. I also spent hours being an observer at the Coalition's events as well as the clinic's events and daily operation of services. Over the years I spent hundreds of hours conducting interviews with pro-choice and pro-life leaders, physicians, nurses, community educators, activists, clients, and law enforcement agents. Many participants in my research did not want their names or organizational affiliations used, some only felt comfortable having their first names used, and others were willing to have their whole names and affiliations used (this is reflected in the interviews' notation).

I ended up conducting interviews from September 1998 to August 2000 and then again from November 2003 to March 2004. Several of the activists I interviewed have gone on to gain national prominence in their respective movements. I was fortunate enough also to conduct interviews with leaders involved at the national level of the conflict. Although the interviews used throughout this book primarily represent one clinic in Texas, I believe (based on my interviews and research) there is much commonality between local direct action groups and national direct action groups. The difference appears to be one of magnitude (that is, differing levels of resources), but the goals remain the same: dealing with the urgency of abortion by trying to eliminate the need for services and to end the delivery of those services. I use the interviews to bring depth, meaning, and understanding to aspects of the abortion conflict that cannot be captured through a quantitative analysis. I believe interviewing those most intimately drawn into this conflict was imperative for understanding the strategies (and their implications) used in this social-political conflict.

The interviews and observations provided a close-up view into the dynamic and iterative relationship between protesters and the targets of their protest. I

witnessed how quickly the abortion conflict can be socialized and spread to other organizations that are forced to become involved in a battle they do not want to participate in, and finally, how quickly the dynamic between the opposing sides can intensify and escalate. This part of the research helped me reconceptualize unconventional political participation, particularly those activities that blur the lines between legal and illegal, appropriate and inappropriate activities, with the purpose of changing the behavior of nongovernmental actors. I wanted to examine the intent, goals, and outcomes of using politically harassing tactics that cannot easily be compartmentalized into behavior that is either legal and sanctioned, or illegal and rejected. Currently, there is a gap in our knowledge as to what political harassment is, why it is used, and what impact it has on its targets.

Throughout the book I weave in the words of activists to more clearly illustrate different nuances to the abortion conflict. The interviews bring the various dimensions of the debate to life and I want to give a special acknowledgment to the participants in my research who so generously and graciously shared their stories and time with me. During my interviews I was often moved by pro-choice and pro-life supporters' beliefs in their respective sides of the issue as well as their respective dedication to the cause. I also want to acknowledge the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) and express my gratitude for allowing me to use the unique data gathered by the institution. Without the use of AGI's data, a systematic and empirical analysis of the outcomes of anti-abortion activities would not have been possible. Any errors should be attributed to the author.

I want to thank Jim Reische for his persistence and belief in this project. It has been a pleasure working with Jim and the University of Michigan Press. On a personal note, I want to thank Don Haider-Markel for all of his help and encouragement with this project over the years. He continues to be a great mentor and friend. I also want to thank my family. They have been unfailingly supportive of me and have always been my best friends. Finally, I want to thank Tom Farrell for being a warm, loving partner and father. I could not have finished this project without his support. And I cannot end without thanking Spencer for making us laugh and appreciate every day in a way we never knew was possible before he joined us.