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Diffusing Anti-Abortion Violence

Autumn in North Carolina's Nantahala National Forest is a time of peace and serenity; the sunlight shining through the leaves creates a golden canopy where the melodies of songbirds are carried for miles on the wind, and squirrels are often seen shimmying up and down tree trunks in search of acorns and nuts. However, the forest was turned upside down on this late October morning as bloodhounds and federal agents tore through the foliage, shouting and barking at one another. Eric Rudolph had been missing for just shy of a month, and everyone was frantic.

Rudolph, a 32-year-old carpenter and avid outdoorsman from Macon County, was on the run after being placed on the FBI's Most Wanted List following his indictment for the January 29, 1998, bombing of an Alabama abortion clinic that resulted in the death of a police officer. Shortly after being indicted, he was found responsible for several other bombings, including the 1996 Olympic bombing and two other blast incidents that ended with fatalities. Rudolph was a self-proclaimed anti-abortionist and believed that his use of violence was an acceptable way to "cleanse" the earth of such horrible acts, justifying his actions by stating his freedoms under the First Amendment (Rogers). Extremists everywhere are justifying their actions under the Constitution, and unfortunately, the government – both local and federal – is not equipped to prevent their actions from infringing upon the rights of others and putting innocent people in harm's way.

Anti-abortion violence, regardless of its relevance and currency, has existed long before the time of Eric Rudolph. This opposition took center stage when the Supreme Court announced its legalization following *Roe v. Wade*, resulting in the instantaneous formation of the anti-abortion movement. Many people believed that the legalization of abortion was “the ultimate betrayal of God’s will,” and the news was soon bombarded with images of lobbying lawyers and picketing protesters (Altum). While these methods of peaceful protest were people simply exercising their freedom of speech, the movement was soon joined by more extreme opposition, including groups like the Army of God (National).

The Army of God, like many of their fellow anti-abortion extremists, is an underground group that “...believe(s) that the use of violence is appropriate and acceptable as a means to end abortion” (National). Their manifesto emphasizes that murder is the only way to cure what they describe as the “abortion epidemic,” and provides members with detailed instructions as to how to target clinics with methods such as bombings, arson, and attacking patients with butyric acid (Altum). The National Abortion Federation has monitored virtually all the attacks extremists have made on reproductive healthcare facilities, and have records totaling seventy counts of arson and twenty-two bombings at the hands of the Army of God between the years 1970 and 1990 (National).

The issue with anti-abortion extremists, aside from the condoning of violence, is that they are walking a fine line between freedom of religion and domestic terrorism. Often times, these groups argue that what they are doing is on a religious basis and that their freedom of speech is protected by their first amendment rights (National). Robert Weiler Jr., an anti-abortion activist from Middle River, Maryland, used this same reasoning to justify his protests against a Planned Parenthood clinic that was being constructed adjacent to the Two Rivers Public Charter School in

Washington, D.C. Weiler positioned himself outside of the school wielding posters with pictures of fetuses and shouting, “They are going to murder kids right next door if your parents don’t do something about it.” (Heim).

Protests like Weiler’s create controversy as to where exactly the Constitution stops protecting religious acts and begins penalizing hateful rhetoric. Is exposing schoolchildren to aggressive religious propaganda harmful? Is openly haranguing a woman trying to access an abortion clinic a case of exercising the democratic right to protest, or is it a form of abuse? Many people are concerned as to whether or not protestors can get away with too much by referencing their right to assemble or claiming a religious motive. One of the most effective approaches to mediate this subject is to establish buffer zones. Many states, such as Florida and Washington, are passing these laws limiting how close demonstrators can be to a facility by requiring protests to occur at a certain distance from the building. Many anti-abortionists claim that these laws suppress their First Amendment rights by telling them where they are allowed to position themselves; however, the state governments implementing these laws explain that they aim to balance the safety of patients and employees of reproductive health clinics with the extremists’ ability to protest (National).

While buffer zones are perfect solutions for state legislatures, they do not carry the same level of effectiveness when applied on a national level, as was discovered when the anti-abortion movement turned violent in 1993 (National). Dr. David Gunn was shot and killed by an Army of God extremist outside of a clinic in Pensacola, Florida (Altum). Gunn’s death triggered a chain of 79 other attacks that would be executed throughout the remainder of the year, including one bombing, twelve counts of arson, and 66 blockades (National). In response to this wave of violence, President Bill Clinton signed the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act (FACE)

into law in May 1994, with the support of both Congress and various pro-choice groups. FACE aims to protect both those providing and receiving health services at abortion clinics while prohibiting the use of threats and physical force as a means to prevent someone from accessing a clinic. Additionally, FACE subjects individuals that have broken the law to both civil and criminal penalties. These types of laws police the areas that fall through the gaps of state buffer laws, ensuring an equal balance between the rights of all parties (National).

It is imperative to understand that anti-abortion extremists have a history rich in violence and are not afraid to stop at anything in their way. Underground organizations like the Army of God have a manifesto rooted in violence and aggression, and are quick to call upon their Constitutional rights as justification for their actions. Unfortunately, the government is not prepared to adequately intervene, allowing the extremists to continue pursuing violence. As Edmund Burke once said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

Works Cited

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