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"Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation," Revisited

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On Saturday, June 5, 2004, President Ronald Reagan was called into eternity. The depth of America's emotional outpouring in tribute to him was testimony to his character, and to the esteem in which his countrymen held him. Sadness naturally accompanies the passing of a loved one, but the time for weeping passes. We will always miss the Gipper, but we needn't look far to see the impact he left on this country. Reagan may have taken leave of this life, but he has left us his legacy.

That legacy was one of bold achievement in domestic, foreign, and social policy. Its unifying theme was a tremendous respect for each and every human life—wherever it lived, at whatever stage of development it had reached. This sensibility prompted Reagan to insist that the Soviet Empire was evil, and to demand of a new Soviet leader that he "tear down this wall"; it also led him to proclaim that "until and unless someone can establish that the unborn child is not a living human being, then that child is already protected by the Constitution, which guarantees life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to all of us."

On January 14, 1988, Reagan made a simple yet profound presidential declaration of "the unalienable personhood of every American, from the moment of conception until natural death." Reagan articulated this principle—the Reagan Cultural Doctrine—throughout his years in the White House. He did so most notably in the spring of 1983 when—in a rare gesture for a sitting U.S. president—he submitted a soul-stirring policy essay to an intellectual journal. The article was "Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation," and it appeared in the *Human Life Review*.

The essay was typical of Reagan: clear, cogent, and filled with plain common sense. Essentially, Reagan argued that abortion violates human rights, and that it has a harmful effect on all people, not just its immediate victims. He noted that medical science, Western ethics, history, and the opinion of the American public are all on the side of life-as witnessed by their opposition to infanticide, which is closely linked with abortion. He appealed to Americans' support of human rights for all, whether born healthy or handicapped. He urged us to be souls of prayer, to work for positive change in society, and never to lose heart.

Twenty-one years later, and 31 years after *Roe v. Wade*, we need to revisit "Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation." We need to reflect on whether we are closer to-or further away from-having a culture of life. Perhaps most important, we need to contemplate what personal and legislative steps we must take to draw out the best in the freedom-loving, life-loving American spirit.

America retains her greatness and her goodness because a tremendous respect for every life continues to undergird our guiding principles. Reagan appealed to this respect for life-this culture of life-and the highest ideals in us all. It is to these ideals that we must urgently appeal today. Certainly, our culture may appear a little shaky right now-from same-sex unions in Massachusetts and San Francisco, to a comeback of eugenics, to abortion providers who give no thought to the pain of an unborn child. In fact, however, we are better than this. America's culture is better than this.

We have previously waged great cultural battles in America, and in these battles Divine Providence has led the way to tremendous victories, such as the abolition of slavery and deliverance from tyranny. True, victory is not for the faint-hearted-but America has proven herself, time and again, the home of the brave.

Reagan appropriately alluded to the struggle against slavery in his essay. He compared the fight for the civil rights of African Americans with the fight for the rights of the unborn. This analogy is just as relevant today. Reagan wrote: "This is not the first time our country has been divided by a Supreme Court decision that denied the value of certain human lives. The *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 was not overturned in a day, or a year, or even a decade. At first, only a minority of Americans recognized and deplored the moral crisis brought about by denying the full humanity of our black brothers and sisters; but that minority persisted in their vision and finally prevailed. They did it by appealing to the hearts and minds of their countrymen, to the truth of human dignity under God."

As Reagan so eloquently noted, the Supreme Court is hardly infallible. Because of the sweeping *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* Supreme Court decisions in 1973, abortion is available for all nine months of pregnancy, for any reason or for no reason at all. In *Roe* and *Doe*, seven justices unjustly dictated that the killing of the unborn is legal. This judicial activism was certainly not the voice of America but those two decisions nonetheless inaugurated an open season on the unborn; as a consequence, around 40 million babies have been killed in the womb since 1973. This statistic is all the more astonishing when you consider that the number of unborn American children killed in the past 31 years is much higher *than the total number of Americans killed in the entire history of our nation's wars*.

But bright days are ahead for our country, if we will only embrace its higher ideals. We caught a brief glimpse of what this looks like in the aftermath of 9/11. While mourning the loss of those murdered in the heinous terrorist attacks, Americans paused to reflect on the most important things-giving thanks for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Our foremost principle, enshrined in our Declaration of Independence, remains as true as ever: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life . . ." Life is beautiful, and Americans do cherish it. After 9/11, churches and memorial services were packed, as Americans recognized the continuing operation of Divine Providence within our vast world and universe.

Americans' spiritual reaction to 9/11 also manifested itself in selfless behavior. In the first few difficult days after the attacks, our nation's transportation infrastructure ground to a standstill; I heard many stories about perfect strangers driving to airports to take stranded travelers into their own homes. People turned off their televisions and spent a little more time with their families. The culture of death and its lies were spurned, because our conscience had been pricked.

This is profound evidence that the "shining city on a hill" still stands, even amidst the lashing storm of a culture of death. The shining city still has a conscience, and to this conscience we must appeal, on behalf of those who have no voice: the unborn. It is this kind of appeal that succeeded in delivering rights and freedom to African Americans; it will succeed again, in establishing protection for the unborn in their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We are armed in this appeal with the best evidence that medical science has to offer. Science is about the pursuit of truth in the service of mankind, and science tells us that the unborn child, from the moment of conception, is a human life. When those of us in the pro-life movement say that human life begins at conception, we are speaking about biology-not ideology, not belief, not ethics. Part of the difficulty in the current debate is caused by the (sometimes willful) confusion between science and ethics. Some engage in demagoguery against those who believe that all human life deserves protection, labeling them religious zealots who are trumpeting purely personal beliefs and seeking to impose those beliefs on others.

Ironically, though, it is these self-proclaimed defenders of science who are guilty of trampling on scientific truth. Nowhere is this more evident than in the debate over embryonic stem-cell research. A human embryo, unborn child, or human fetus is, biologically speaking, a young human life. To assert that it is not a life, or that it is merely a "potential life," is not a scientific statement. To assert that a human embryo is not a human life is to make an assertion of a personal belief completely unsupported by the facts of science; it is comparable to asserting that the sun revolves around the earth. Science unambiguously declares that the young human embryo is a human life.

Unfortunately, not everyone in this debate is looking at biology. But once both sides acknowledge the scientific truth-that the young human embryo or unborn child is a human life-then we can start to address what Reagan posited as the real question: "What is the *value* of a human life?" This is where the issue moves from biology, pure and simple, to ethics.

And for Reagan-as for all those in the pro-life movement-the ethical answer is just as clear as the scientific one: *The value of a human life is truly priceless*. America was built upon the founding principle that every human being is endowed by its Creator with an inalienable right to life. And this founding principle was far from arbitrary. For the Founders, the inalienable right to life, granted by Divine Providence, was the linchpin that held everything together. In a letter on slavery, written in 1782, Thomas Jefferson went so far as to ask: "Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever."

Jefferson was writing about slaves. But his statement is equally applicable to unborn children, because they, too, are undeniably human. Every human life-from the moment of conception until natural death-is sacred because, as our Founders believed, every human being has been created in the image of a living and holy God. Human beings are an end unto themselves, not a means to an end-even a good end, such as the advance of scientific knowledge.

In a passionate plea at the National Prayer Breakfast in 1994, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta said: "I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a war against the child, a direct killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another?" On the value of human life, there was no greater authority in the 20th century than Mother Teresa. She was an incredibly beautiful woman; I have never met a person with a more beautiful soul. My meeting with her was brief, but I will be forever affected by her words and the love and fire that I saw in her eyes when I helped her into her car as she departed from the U.S. Capitol in the spring of 1997. This was a woman who loved everyone. Her authoritative words should be reflected upon by every abortion provider: "Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to a married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child."

Mother Teresa may be gone, but her sisters continue to live that spirit of charity every single day. As a society, we must do the same: We must cherish *every life*. If we abandon respect for the life of the one-hour-old human embryo or the one-month-old fetus, we are truly on the slippery slope that leads to the abandonment of the positive law against murder-which is, after all, based on the premise that life is a gift of God.

Building on this insight, Reagan set a clear choice before us-a choice that is perhaps even more pertinent today. He wrote that "as a nation, we must choose between the sanctity of life ethic and the 'quality of life' ethic." In his 1983 essay, Reagan lamented the case of Baby Doe, who was legally starved to death because he was mentally handicapped; an Indiana court permitted him to be starved because he would not have been able to enjoy a normal "quality of life." This was a travesty, and Reagan was correct to abhor this instance of raw judicial activism. The very same issue is posed by the recent case of Terri Schiavo. As of this writing, Schiavo has been rescued from starvation because the American public (along with Florida Governor Jeb Bush) raised their voices in a proclamation that life is worth living, that life-even if its "quality" is below that

considered acceptable by some-still has incredible value. In her case, millions of people made it clear that the value of every human being must be defended, without exception.

Embryo, fetus, infant, child, and adult are categories of human development; they are all human life. Whether one is physically healthy or ill, emotionally healthy or ill-these, too, are categories of human life, and thus do not make individuals less worthy of protection. As Reagan wrote: "We cannot diminish the value of one category of human life-the unborn-without diminishing the value of all human life." All human life-no matter how it is categorized, or what its "quality" may be-should be esteemed and valued.

There are, of course, some callous souls in our land. Consider, for example, the lack of reverence for life displayed by the mother who "selectively" aborted two of three healthy children so that she could continue to live the kind of a life she preferred. (Her story was told this past summer in a *New York Times* article headlined "When One Is Enough.") And consider the abortion providers who testified in the recent partial-birth-abortion-ban trial in New York. In one exchange, the judge asked the abortionist: "Do you tell [the mother] whether or not it will hurt the fetus?" The abortionist responded, "The intent [is] that the fetus will die during the process of uterine evacuation." The judge persisted, "Ma'am, I didn't ask you that . . . Do you tell them whether or not that hurts the fetus?" The abortionist flippantly replied: "I have never talked to a fetus about whether or not they experience pain." Another abortionist, when asked by the judge whether partial-birth abortion hurts the baby, responded, "I don't know." The judge pressed, "But you go ahead and do it anyway, is that right?" The abortion provider responded, "Yes, I go ahead and do it."

Fortunately, this chilling extremism does not represent the feelings of most Americans. What Reagan wrote in his essay comes closer to our general attitude: "Anyone who doesn't feel sure whether we are talking about a second human life should clearly give life the benefit of the doubt. If you don't know whether a body is alive or dead, you would never bury it. I think this consideration itself should be enough for all of us to insist on protecting the unborn. . . . Obviously, some influential people want to deny that every human life has intrinsic, sacred worth. They insist that a member of the human race must have certain qualities before they accord him or her status as a "human being." . . . Every legislator, every doctor, and every citizen needs to recognize that the real issue is whether to affirm and protect the sanctity of all human life, or to embrace a social ethic where some human lives are valued and others are not."

There are brighter days ahead because the public is moving to the side of life, and our national conscience does remain sensitive. We are practical people, but we have a big heart and know right from wrong. We call our shots with our mind, informed by our heart.

Scientific advances have already contributed to this pro-life trend, by increasing our knowledge of life inside the womb. Today's 4-D Ultrasound technology leaves little doubt that a human being is alive and growing inside her mother's womb. Consider, too, the testimony of medical expert Dr. Kanwaljeet Sonny Anand in the Nebraska partial-birth-abortion trial. Dr. Anand testified that "the fetus is very likely extremely sensitive to pain during the gestation of 20 to 30 weeks. And so the procedures associated with the partial-birth abortion . . . would be likely to cause severe pain."

The public's understanding of this issue has also been bolstered by the legislative debate over partial-birth abortion, parental notification, the Born-Alive Infants Protection Act, the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, and the Human Cloning Prohibition Act. Upcoming debate over the Unborn Child Pain Awareness Act-and about the adverse impact that abortion has on women-will also reach the hearts and minds of Americans.

There is special cause for optimism in the fact that young people, more than any other demographic, are increasingly pro-life. Perhaps this is because many of their peers-more than 40 million of them-have been aborted. One of these aborted children could have grown up to be one of my own children's playmates; another could have become one of their future spouses. This is a tragedy, and our young people know it.

To be an American in the fullest sense is to be a life-loving, freedom-loving soul. Reagan concluded his *Human Life Review* essay with a great appeal for prayer and perseverance in the pro-life struggle that lay ahead. He wrote that "there is no cause more important for preserving that freedom than affirming the transcendent right to life of all human beings, the right without which no other rights have any meaning." Reagan knew that affirming the sanctity and dignity of every human life would not be an easy or painless task. Accordingly, he urged prayer, diligence, and trust in Divine Providence; and he appealed to the example of William Wilberforce, the great English statesman, whose lifelong crusade for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire was fulfilled on his deathbed. We need the same, if not more, intensity of prayer now.

Our Supreme Court's decision in *Roe* is certainly not the final word on the issue of abortion, just as the Court was not the final word on slavery in *Dred Scott*. Our system gives us the opportunity to rectify past wrongs. It is my fervent hope and prayer for America that we base our laws on what science tells us: namely, that the young human embryo is a human life. I believe that I will live to see the end of the abortion industry, and the sanctity and dignity of every human life affirmed. Until then, abortion will continue to prod the conscience of our nation. Great labors remain before us, but the rights and lives of unborn children are absolutely worth our efforts.

Reagan was our first great pro-life president, and surely others will follow in his footsteps. His legacy endures and the pro-life movement continues to make steady progress. We have come a long way since Reagan's 1983 essay, and we have a long way to go, but we are on the right track. On behalf of the unborn, let us pray and persevere; and may God bless America.

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