

# The Politics of Life—and Politics

by Daniel McCarthy

*"If a woman of her own accord drops that which is in her,  
they shall crucify her and not bury her."*

—The Assyrian Code, c. 2000 B.C.

## Unplugged: Reclaiming Our Right to Die in America

by William H. Colby

New York: Amacom; 272 pp., \$24.95

## How the Pro-Choice Movement Saved America: Freedom, Politics, and the War on Sex

by Cristina Page

New York: Basic Books; 236 pp., \$24.00

## The Party of Death: The Democrats, the Media, the Courts, and the Disregard for Human Life

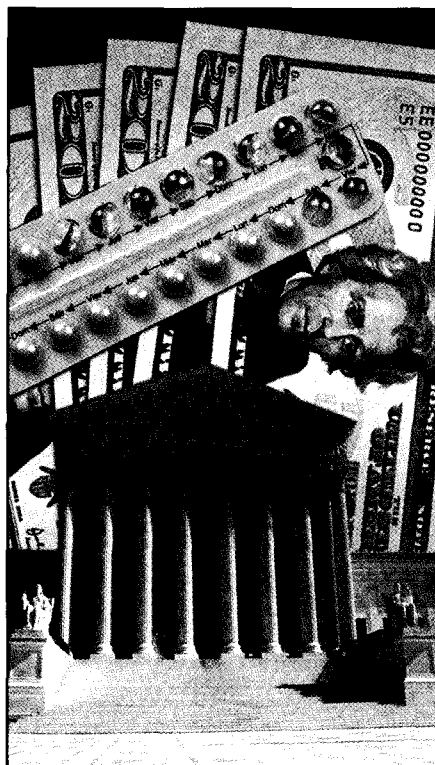
by Ramesh Ponnuru

Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing,  
Inc.; 303 pp., \$27.95

Ancient history is worth keeping in mind when confronting the claims of the pro- and anti-abortion and euthanasia camps, since both tend to couch their arguments in terms of abstract universal human rights, rather than appeal to tradition, faith, and history.

The Greeks and Romans, who believed that a father should decide whether to admit a newborn child into his family, were not "pro-choice," any more than Jews and Christians were "pro-life." Nothing like individual rights, one way or the other, entered the picture. Nor was infant exposure—thinkers such as Epictetus notwithstanding—primarily a philosophical question. The practice, or the abhorrence of it, derived from ancient tradition and

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was but one facet of a larger way of life.

What was true of infanticide was broadly true of ancient opinion about abortion and suicide as well. The Hippocratic Oath, with its injunctions against physicians assisting in suicide or providing a pessary or other means of abortion, did not reflect the prevailing ethos. In *Roe v. Wade*, Justice Blackmun was at least correct when he wrote, "Greek and Roman law afforded little protection to the unborn," while "with the end of antiquity a decided change took place. Resistance against suicide and against abortion became common"—under Christianity.

History is not Ramesh Ponnuru's strong suit. There are scant citations within *The Party of Death* from any authority older (or wiser) than Immanuel Kant. Theology is not his strong suit, either: Last year, Ponnuru told *Doublethink* (in the words of profiler Jason Mattera) that "he doesn't

understand the proscription of homosexual conduct in Scripture." As Ponnuru is a political journalist, he has turned to a guru, Princeton legal scholar Robert P. George, for philosophical instruction.

The ideology Ponnuru derives from George and a handful of other sources is a mixture of tautology and egalitarianism. "The argument for the sanctity of life is straightforward. If human beings have intrinsic dignity and worth, then they have this dignity and worth simply because they are human beings," he writes.

These rights—and to have any rights at all must be to have the right not to be killed—cannot depend on particular qualities that some human beings have and others do not. They cannot depend on race, or age, or sex; nor can they depend on stage of development or condition of dependency.

If they do, "the notion that all human beings are created equal becomes a self-evident lie." Ideological democracy is at stake: *Roe*, Ponnuru tells us,

violates the principle of human equality that is the moral basis for democratic self-government, and specifically for American democracy. . . . Other countries have grounded freedom and equality in the requirements of social peace; America has grounded them in those of moral truth ("We hold these truths . . .").

Ponnuru's rights theory leads directly

to absurdities. If “to have any rights at all must be to have the right not to be killed,” does it follow that a condemned prisoner has no rights at all? Ponnuru opposes capital punishment (as do I), but that hardly resolves the problem. Does a soldier—let’s suppose he is a volunteer, fighting in a just war—have a right not to be killed, and does his government commit an injustice by jeopardizing that right in sending him to fight? If the soldier has surrendered his right not to be killed, has he thereby surrendered all his other rights as well?

Even more risible than the implications of Ponnuru’s rights theory are its foundations: There are none—besides the consequentialist claim (feeble even so far as those go) that, if we believe we can make distinctions about which humans deserve certain rights, then “the notion that all human beings are created equal becomes a self-evident lie.” We may not like the idea that the words of the Declaration of Independence are untrue, and such a view might not be popular, but none of that tells us anything about whether people actually are “created equal” and possess certain universal rights from conception on.

Ponnuru’s approach throughout *The Party of Death* is dry, coldly rationalistic, and abstract—qualities that led his *National Review* colleague John Derbyshire to call his ideology a “frigid and pitiless dogma.” Undercutting his own method of argument, Ponnuru acknowledges that the most effective anti-abortion messages have been those that are the most emotional. Ultrasound images have made the humanity of life in the womb (at least past the earliest stages of development) difficult for even some abortion-rights advocates to deny; the Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation’s feel-good *Life: What a Beautiful Choice* television campaign cut into support for abortion in the polls and sent NARAL into a panic; and partial-birth abortion graphically demonstrated the violence of killing the unborn. Such emotional appeals are limited, but not nearly so limited as the ersatz rationalism of *The Party of Death*.

The book, not surprisingly, is a partisan tract. The author rakes over the coals the usual (and eminently deserving) suspects: the Democrats, the courts, the liberal media; but he fails to take a serious look at the iniquities of the Republican Party. It was a Republican-majority Supreme Court, after all, that gave us *Roe*, and a Republican-majority Supreme Court has affirmed it ever since. Had Ponnuru wanted to advance the political fortunes

of the pro-life movement, he would have targeted Republicans as well (why not start with Giuliani, or perhaps a good look at the real Mitt Romney?), since they actually have something to fear from pro-life voters. Pro-lifers have no leverage in the Democratic Party; if they were willing to fight, they might have some in the GOP. Ponnuru and his ilk, however, have kept them focused elsewhere. His choice of subject matter follows the same logic. Abortion, euthanasia, Terri Schiavo, and embryonic stem cells are all issues that bind short-sighted pro-lifers to the Republican Party; as such, they are suitable topics for Ponnuru. The death penalty and just war (Ponnuru has all along been a booster for the war in Iraq), on the other hand, are not so good for the GOP—so they are ignored.

Ponnuru’s admirers have insisted that *The Party of Death* is essential reading for pro-lifers. There is little in the book, however, that has not been said before. Did you know, for example, that *Doe v. Bolton* effectively legalized even the third-trimester abortions *Roe* claimed could be prohibited by state law, by defining a woman’s “health” so broadly as to make most restrictions meaningless? Yes, you probably did, if you have paid any attention to the abortion wars that have been waged over the last three decades—if, say, you have ever read an issue of the *Human Life Review*. Not everyone has, of course, but how many Americans who have not already made up their minds about abortion are going to read *The Party of Death*?

The pro-abortion side produces some deeply unconvincing literature of its own, including Cristina Page’s *How the Pro-Choice Movement Saved America*. Four years ago, Page, who works for the New York chapter of NARAL Pro-Choice America, coauthored an op-ed in the *New York Times* with a pro-life woman. What could two women on opposite sides of the abortion divide find to unite them? In this case, it was their agreement that health-insurance companies should be legally compelled to provide contraception. Page was astonished at the negative reaction to this proposal from pro-lifers, and that astonishment motivated her to write this book. Despite the title, Page has little to say about the pro-choice movement, or even abortion. She does, however, underscore something about the real character of the pro-choice movement—it’s not just about abortion, nor even abortion and contraception, but

about taxpayer-funded and government-mandated provision of those things. The pro-choice movement is a socialist movement. Most of the examples Page gives of pro-life assaults on the availability of condoms or birth-control pills involve pro-lifers defeating efforts to provide those things for Third World countries at the expense of U.S. taxpayers, or to force American insurance companies to include birth-control pills in their coverage. If birth control isn’t free, America isn’t free, or so it seems for Page.

Page does not like “conscience laws” protecting the jobs of pharmacists (and others) who refuse to sell “morning-after” contraception or other birth-control pills. Such laws arise not from pro-life Christians’ opposition to contraception—there are no conscience laws that apply to the refusal to sell condoms—but from their opposition to abortion: They fear that the morning-after pills (which are typically a larger than normal dosage of standard birth-control pills) or other kinds of hormonal contraception will act as abortifacients, causing the death of fertilized eggs either by preventing implantation in the womb or by causing implanted eggs to abort. Against that belief, Page cites a study by the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* that found “no direct evidence exists showing that implantation is prevented by progesterin-only methods.” But even if the study is mistaken, Page’s grievance is legitimate: No sales clerk or pharmacist has any kind of a “right” to veto his employer’s policies and frustrate a customer. If an employee really thinks something sold by his employer is unconscionable, he should simply quit. If we choose to go down the road of “conscience laws,” we will likely see legislation enacted to protect the supermarket jobs of Muslim checkout clerks who refuse to let customers buy bacon.

Page, like Ponnuru, frequently fails to realize how the things she reports in her book undercut her argument. Is the pro-life movement really in a position to turn back the clock on the availability of contraception in the United States, as Page warns, when (as she writes) 85 percent of self-described American Catholics believe they should be allowed to practice artificial birth control, and “82 percent of all American women born since 1945 have used the Pill”? What exactly does Page think anticontraception pro-lifers can achieve? It’s hard to imagine that Page believes her own claims.

She, like Ponnuru, has difficulty com-

ing up with an argument for her position on abortion. One might wonder whether her relentless focus on contraception suggests an unwillingness, as well as an inability, to defend a woman's right to kill her child *in utero*. Alas, no: It turns out that, unlike Ponnuru, who stays away from hard cases and uncomfortable conclusions in his book, Page is willing to defend her position *in extremis*. Abortion is fine by her, even in such cases as that of the Michigan boy who beat his girlfriend's stomach with a baseball bat—with her permission—over the course of weeks in order to induce miscarriage. Page blames such barbarities on a dearth of available information about legal abortion.

Unlike the first two books considered here, William H. Colby's *Unplugged: Reclaiming Our Right to Die in America* is better than expected. The title gives the impression that the book is a brief for euthanasia or, at the very least, an impassioned argument for terminating life support for the terminally ill, or permanently comatose or vegetative. That impression is reinforced by a look at Colby's background as a lawyer who represented the Cruzan family of Missouri in their efforts to end the tube-feed-

ing of their comatose daughter, Nancy. The Cruzan case ultimately went to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1990 and helped establish the so-called right to die.

Although Colby does not conceal his own opinions about Terri Schiavo, Nancy Cruzan, and similar cases, *Unplugged* is not about a right to die and has little to say about euthanasia. Colby's goal is to convince the reader to devise a document granting "durable health care power of attorney" to a spouse, parent, or other relative or friend. Who wouldn't prefer to have an immediate family member making decisions about life-support for him rather than leaving those decisions to courts, legislatures, or—as in the case of Terri Schiavo—the likes of Randall Terry and Jesse Jackson?

Colby devotes his first three chapters to a dispassionate, factual account of the Terri Schiavo story: what happened to her; how her case wound through various courts (of public opinion as well as law); and what measures other branches of the Florida and federal governments took to intervene. He follows those chapters with accounts of other life-support cases—Quinlan, Cruzan, Busalacchi (Colby was involved in the latter two)—and a handful of historical vignettes about the devel-

opment of resuscitation and life-prolonging technologies. Later chapters examine the "institutional glide path" of hospitals in dealing with end of life (or end of brain function) cases and the alternatives that hospice treatment can provide.

His chapter on feeding tubes tries to examine why, culturally and emotionally, artificial nutrition is different from other forms of life support—why, for example, patients removed from feeding tubes are said to be starved when no one says that patients removed from dialysis are poisoned or that patients taken off of ventilators are asphyxiated. (Technically, all of those descriptions are accurate.) People who believe that providing the irrecoverably comatose or vegetative with nutrition is categorically different from providing them with air will not approve of Colby's approach, even as painstakingly neutral as he tries to be.

One important question that receives little consideration in *Unplugged*—and which is, admittedly, a question that even the best medical minds in the country may not be able to answer definitively—is just how much brain function is necessary for a person to be capable of consciousness. The matter is not directly relevant to Colby's work, since he makes it clear that he supports terminating life support for conscious patients in some cases. (He says that, should he be struck by Alzheimer's and become demented to the point where he no longer eats, he does not want to be tube fed.) Consciousness was one of the issues at stake—morally, if not legally—in the Terri Schiavo case, however, and it is something that many of Colby's readers will probably wonder about. Most proliferators, at least those with any knowledge of biology, will not object to terminating life support for the brain dead. Medically speaking, a person without brain activity is not brain dead. A body in which only the brain stem functions, however, most certainly is mentally dead.

*How the Pro-Choice Movement Saved America* and *The Party of Death* are preoccupied with spurious rights and imagined threats—and, ultimately, with political power. Neither of those books addresses the way people really live their lives or how communities, and shared values, come into existence. Colby's book, on the other hand, does connect to reality, not by trying to persuade readers to particular existential or ideological views, but by providing a sensible bit of legal advice useful to latter-day Christians and non-Christians alike.

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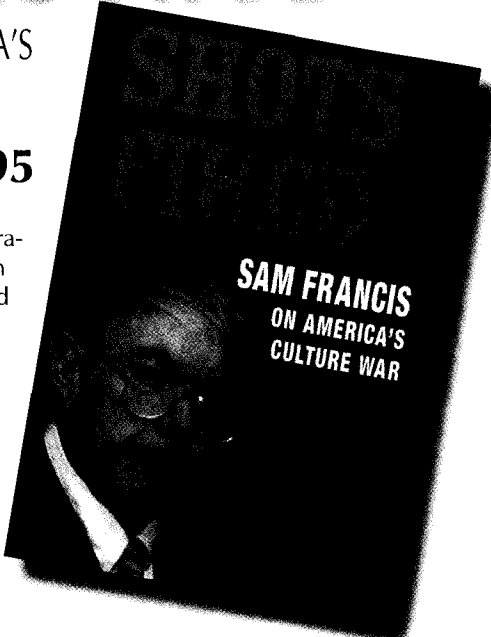
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# The Greatest Revolution

by Tobias J. Lanz

**Food Is Different: Why We Must Get the WTO Out of Agriculture**

by Peter M. Rosset

New York: Zed Books; 163 pp., \$17.50



Most people throughout the industrial world see cheap and readily available food as simply another modern amenity, such as electricity or running water. Few understand that agriculture has always been political, because it is tied to human survival. Even fewer know that the world is currently undergoing one of the greatest agrarian revolutions in history: one in which small farmers, *en masse*, are being driven out of business and off the land by large farmers and agribusiness, creating widespread political, economic, cultural, and environmental chaos.

The instruments of this revolution include the World Trade Organization (WTO), regional trading agreements such as NAFTA, and the European Union. These promote international agricultural trade over domestic agricultural equity and stability. Up until the early 1990's, almost all governments followed supply-management policies that kept agricultural prices high through price supports, set-asides, and loans. These policies were never perfect, but they allowed small farms to thrive and helped stabilize rural societies—always an important political goal, especially in developing countries with large and impoverished rural populations.

These policies began to change with globalization. Large producers and their host countries—namely, the United States and the European Union—began aggressively to promote policies that increased supplies to lower prices, thus making them competitive on the world market. They used the WTO and other international agreements to gain access to world markets and force governments to change their agricultural policies to accommodate free trade. As a result, trade barriers have fallen, the volume of global trade has risen, and large farmers and agribusinesses are making record profits. But this rapid policy shift has devastated small farmers and rural communities through-

out the world.

Free-market advocates see these changes as simply another consequence of competition and a movement toward greater market efficiency. But this is a false understanding. These new agricultural policies and trade agreements have shifted government support away from the small to the large producers. One such policy in the United States is direct payment to farmers for lost income resulting from falling prices. This compensation barely covers production costs, forcing many smaller producers out of business. Large producers can still make hefty profits because of their greater economies of scale. They also receive the bulk of income subsidies. In 2003, the wealthiest one percent of American farmers received an average of \$215,000 per year, compared with under \$9,000 per farmer for the poorest 80 percent.

As farm incomes dwindle, more farmers go out of business. (Two thousand went under in Europe every week from 1995 to 2000, and farm foreclosures are at all-time highs in America.) Lower farm profits also reduce land prices, so even when small farmers want to cash out of farming, they lose. Naturally, large farmers buy up cheaper land, which only increases their control over production and supply and their market power.

These changes in agricultural policy have had an even greater impact at the international level. Because of massive subsidies, large firms can sell their goods on the world market at up to 60 percent below production costs. Even Third World peasants, with far lower land and labor costs, cannot compete with this “free trade” onslaught. These firms (hardly farms) are dumping their excess production on world markets. In Third World countries, the social consequences are worse than in America or E.U. countries, because there are no economic alternatives for poor peasants who lose their farms. They flood into already overcrowded cities or enter international immigration streams (legal or illegal).

Peter Rosset, an agronomist and food activist, has spent years working in rural Mexico, where he has seen the effects of free-trade policies firsthand. Because of her proximity to the United States and the warm relations between Mexican and American government and corporate elites, Mexico has borne the brunt of this global revolution. Over one million farmers have been forced out of business over the last decade, and countless mil-

lions have left the countryside for the cities, or the United States, for good. Many send money back home to support their family farms so they can stay in business. These laborers are subsidizing their Mexican farms with money made in America, where the government subsidizes the big businesses that destroyed Mexican farms in the first place.

Agriculture is the last economy being transformed by industrialization and commercialization, and Rosset argues that this should not happen. Food production differs from other forms of production because it is so closely linked to human health and survival. In addition to providing nourishment, a stable food economy sustains social and political stability in rural areas and preserves cultural traditions and the environment. Rosset argues that food is more than a commodity; it is the foundation of a complex web of social and ecological relationships that are simplified and ultimately destroyed when big businesses (and big government) reduce agriculture to mere production for the market.

Rosset's goal is food sovereignty, which would be based on creating government programs and markets that support small producers and rural communities over the interests of big corporations. With the right policies, small producers can provide stable food supplies at reasonable prices and higher quality than large producers can. Rosset realizes that subsidies are viewed with suspicion in America and Europe. However, he explains, some type of government support is necessary in agriculture more than in any other economic sector, given the inherent risks involved. The real question is, Who benefits from these policies? Rosset argues convincingly that policies that support small farmers are most critical in restoring equity and stability in agrarian economies the world over.

Rosset discusses the social, cultural, and environmental benefits of local food economies. He fails, however, to address the significance of sound food economies to national security: Local and regional agriculture reduces risks to food supplies. Food is now grown far from its ultimate place of consumption. Most food consumed by Americans travels over a thousand miles to its final destination, making it vulnerable to war, disease, natural disasters, economic downturns, and even terrorism.

Rosset explains well the technical aspects of agricultural policy and global