

GOOD NEWS FOR THE FETUS

Two Fallacies in the Abortion Debate

IAN GENTLES

Many people who favor abortion base their logic on two false premises. The first is that women who want abortions will get them anyway—no law has ever stopped a woman from getting an abortion. The second, which derives from the first, is that since abortion is inevitable, it is better that women have their abortions in safe and legal hospital facilities; otherwise they will have to turn to back-alley abortions, resulting in medical problems and high death rates for mothers. Although both these propositions seem intuitively correct, evidence has accumulated since the legalization of abortion in the United States and abroad which proves them wrong. There may be a case for permitting abortion, but it cannot be based on these two claims any longer.

Let us start with the second claim—that prior to legalization of abortion, women risked horrible medical hazards which often took their lives as well as those of their fetuses. If this were true, then an argument can be made that it is better to permit women to terminate their pregnancies legally; at least the mothers' lives can be saved.

But what are the actual figures on maternal deaths from illegal abortions? Whenever one is dealing with an illegal practice, statistics are understandably difficult to come by. Nevertheless, it is relatively easier to count maternal deaths from illegal abortion than it is to count illegal abortions. That is because the body of a fetus is easily disposed of, while it is not so easy to get rid of the corpse of a full-grown woman. There are obviously many people who would like to keep illegal abortion deaths secret—the abortionist, the victim's family, and the father of the fetus, for example. Yet it is extremely difficult to persuade a doctor (who is most likely not the same doctor who performed the abortion) to fake or lie about the cause of death on a death certificate. Based on this belief, the figures on maternal deaths from illegal abortion, which show a fairly consistent pattern over a number of years, and in a number of industrialized countries, are considered to be reasonably accurate.

Figure 1 shows the number of maternal deaths from illegal abortion for Britain, Canada and the United States. Sources for this data are *Vital Statistics of the United States*, published by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare; *Causes of Death, Canada*, published

by Statistics Canada; and *Statistical Review for England and Wales*, a set of tables published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office in London.

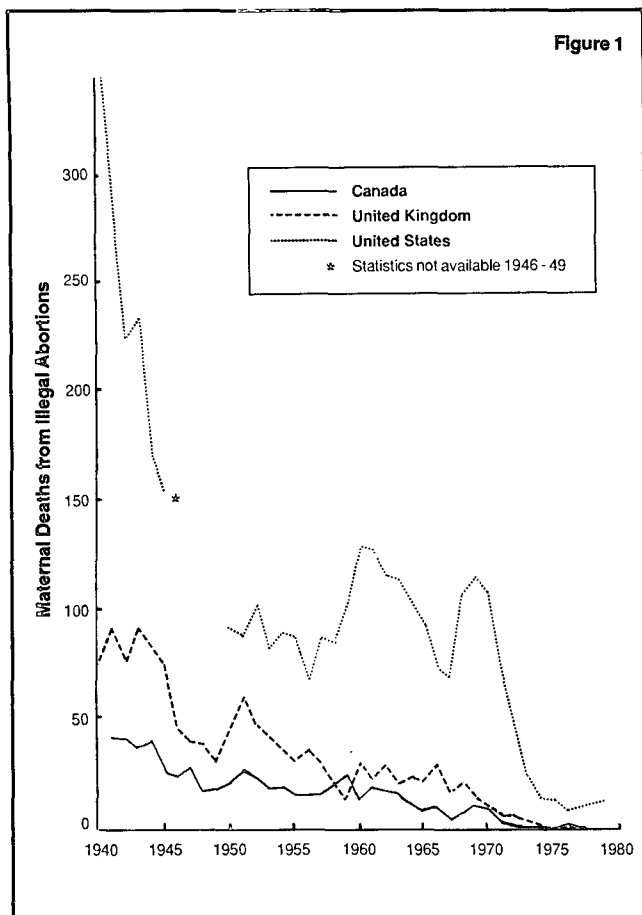
Immediately one sees that the annual number of deaths from illegal abortion for all three countries has been, since 1940, quite small. In Canada, for instance, it was less than 50; in the United States, less than 350. Even if these numbers considerably understate maternal deaths from abortion, we are still dealing with a number that pales in contrast to the image of "thousands, if not hundreds of thousands" of women dying from abortion which has been cultivated in the public imagination by the pro-choice movement.

Fewer Deaths

A second fact emerges from Figure 1 which is even more notable. The number of deaths from illegal abortion for all three countries shows a sharp, almost uninterrupted decline. This decline began almost 30 years before legalization and continues right to the point of legalization. Furthermore, shortly prior to legalization, the actual number of women dying each year from illegal abortions is negligible: 20-25 in the United States, less than five in Britain and in Canada. Again, we can assume some unreported deaths, but even so we cannot avoid the conclusion that abortion mortality had fallen to a very low figure. Whatever the rate at which we assume that the statistics understate the facts, there is no reason to assume that the bias toward underreporting maternal deaths from abortion should change from year to year. Thus, we cannot deny the *pattern* for Britain, Canada and the United States over the years.

Why did abortion deaths decline? A variety of forces were at work, but the leading factor was undoubtedly the discovery of sulfonamides, penicillin, and other antibiotics, whose use became widespread during the 1940s and 1950s. Antibiotics have been the greatest single factor in reducing infection-related mortality during the past 40 years, and therefore must also have contributed to the steep decline in abortion deaths before legalization. Hospitals were now

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able to save the lives of many women suffering sepsis after an illegal abortion. Criminal abortionists, many of whom were doctors, also became skilled in the use of antibiotics. A secondary factor was the introduction of the contraceptive pill at the beginning of the 1960s. By reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies, the pill may also have reduced temporarily the demand for abortion. Abortion deaths in all three countries would have gone down even faster during the 1940s and 1950s had not these decades also been era of rapid population increase.

Now let us turn to the *rate* of deaths from illegal abortion, in other words, the percentage of women attempting illegal abortion who died as a result of that effort. Here the most comprehensive evidence has been collected by Michael Alderson and published in *International Mortality Statistics*, available from Facts on File, New York, 1981. Alderson estimates the maternal mortality rate from abortion for Britain, Canada and the United States from 1941-1975. He assumes that abortions numbered approximately a million a year in the United States before legalization. This hypothesis turns out to be extremely questionable, but fortunately it does not affect estimates about the *percentage* of women dying from attempted abortion.

This rate, Alderson shows, sharply declines during the 35 years that he considers. For the U.S. in the early 1940s the rate per million females per year hovered around 400; by the early 1950s it dropped more than threefold to approximately 75, and by the early 1970s almost fortyfold to less than 10. The same pattern endures for the other coun-

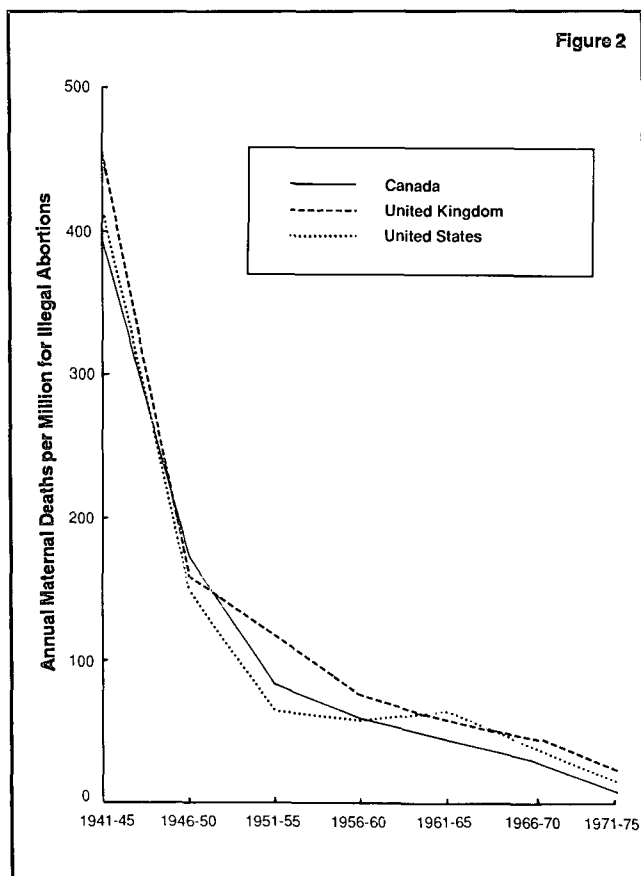
tries: all of them, by 1970, were losing fewer than 50 women per million attempts at illegal abortion.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 establish patterns that are very significant. It is possible to quibble about the figures but it is hard to deny the general conclusion. Abortion deaths, and the rate of such deaths, plummeted sharply. The notion that large numbers of women sought coat-hanger abortions in which they suffered a very high chance of death is misleading: not that no one attempted such an abortion, but it was hardly the norm. The vast majority of abortions were conducted by doctors trying to make some extra money on the side. These doctors had access to the latest in medical technology and put it to use; certainly they were not eager to cause a patient's death.

Pro-life Dilemma

Thus, an important myth about abortion must collapse in the face of the data. While this is a myth promulgated by the pro-choice movement, it should be emphasized that the facts are not necessarily congenial to the pro-life movement either. Pro-life magazines often argue that abortion is a very risky business with a high risk of maternal death. This is now untrue for legal, as well as illegal, abortions.

There exist even more significant statistics on the actual number of abortions performed before legalization. If we can estimate these numbers, we can contrast them with abortion figures after legalization, proving or disproving the widely accepted claims that "you can't legislate morality," restrictive laws will not significantly alter the incidence of abortion, women who want abortions will get



them anyway, the best the law can do is to acquiesce in what people will do anyway.

Reliable abortion figures prior to *Roe v. Wade* are not available in the United States. But they are available for some other countries, notably Britain and Canada. A similarity in the pattern of the mortality rate of abortions in all three countries, leads to the assumption that figures for the United States are proportional to those of Britain and Canada. In any event, the statistics for those two countries are revealing in themselves.

Abortion was legalized in Canada in 1969. Obviously, statistics prior to legalization are hard to come by and cannot be considered exact. Nevertheless, Canadian researchers have investigated the subject a good deal. Their data which has endured open debate and peer review should at least place us in the ballpark of the facts. Some of the most systematic and authoritative research has been conducted by the Badgley Commission on the Operation of Abortion Law.

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The Badgley Commission, through surveys and other methodology, tried to estimate the number of Canadian women who had attempted an abortion by the year 1975. This figure, which applies to all women alive in 1975 who ever attempted an illegal or self-induced abortion, came to 101,157. This, by the way, represents less than 2 percent of the female population of child-bearing age or older. Again, we can inflate this figure to account for under-reporting, but we must also deflate it because we know that self-induced abortion attempts do not always work. If we go with Badgley's figures, we arrive at an annual figure of

fewer than 10,000 illegal and self-induced abortions in Canada prior to legalization.

Sixfold Increase

Contrast these numbers with those that emerge after 1969. According to *Statistics Canada*, a government source, the annual number of legal abortions reached a peak of 66,319 in 1982. That is more than a sixfold increase in abortion rates after legalization.

The Canadian experience is repeated in Britain. C.B. Goodhart's study, published in *Population Studies* in 1973, is one of the most authoritative. Goodhart estimates that illegal abortions in Britain ran at about 15,000 to 20,000 a year prior to legalization, after which the number rose sharply, peaking in 1983 at 128,553. Again, this is an increase of at least 600 percent.

What about abortion figures for the United States? The problem, here, has been that the groups collecting the statistics have tended to be aggressively pro-abortion, and their methodologies are demonstrably skewed to buttress their policy recommendations. For example, we know that surveys are not the most reliable source of information when it comes to this subject. Yet the figure most commonly used in the American abortion debate is from a survey of 10,000 women who attended the Margaret Sanger Birth Control Clinic in the late 1920s in New York City. It is questionable whether figures taken from the 1920s apply to the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. It is equally questionable whether New York is a representative state. It is also legitimate to question whether women who frequent the Margaret Sanger Birth Control Clinic represent the majority of American women or even the majority of urban women. The point is that this is a notoriously unreliable study, which is only in circulation because the high figures it came up with fit nicely with pro-choice arguments that a large number of women always have sought abortions and legalization could have little or no effect on the overall number of abortions.

Bernard Nathanson is a strong pro-life advocate these days, but he once was a prominent advocate of abortion. In fact he is, along with Betty Friedan, one of the original founders of the National Abortion Rights Action League

Estimated numbers of criminal abortions in the U.S.A. if criminal abortion were 3, 5, or 15 times more dangerous than natural pregnancy

	3 times more dangerous	5 times more dangerous	15 times more dangerous
1940	166,476	99,886	33,295
1961	357,049	214,229	71,410
1967	225,000	135,000	45,000

(NARAL). "I knew the figures were totally false," he now says of the extrapolations from the Sanger study, "and I suppose the others did too if they stopped to think of it. But in the 'morality' of our revolution, these were useful figures, widely accepted, so why go out of our way to correct them with honest statistics?"

Counting Illegal Abortions

Perhaps we can discredit the kind of data that Nathanson speaks about, but is there any way to arrive at some credible estimate of the number of abortions in this country prior to *Roe*? Actually, there is such a way. It is a bit circuitous and complex, but it does not rely on simply asking women whether they have had an illegal abortion. Basically, the approach is to extrapolate from the number of maternal deaths due to illegal abortion to the probable number of abortions. For example, if we know that 10 women died from abortion in a given year, and we know that the death rate of women from illegal abortion is 10 in a million, then we can conclude that a million abortions were attempted that year.

Barbara Syska, Thomas Hilgers and Dennis O'Hare, in a penetrating study, *New Perspectives on Human Abortion*, published in 1981, develops an objective model which shows that the American criminal abortion rate can be assumed to be similar to Britain's and Canada's abortion rate. If such a correlation is valid, then we arrive at an approximate figure of 100,000 abortions in the United States per year prior to legalization.

Syska, Hilgers and O'Hare also present a range of figures for the total number of illegal abortions, depending on whether they were considered to be 3, 5, or 10 times more dangerous than natural pregnancy, as Table 1 illustrates. The statistics suggest that illegal abortion in the United States peaked in 1961, and that by 1967, the year abortion began to be legalized, the number of abortions was probably no higher than 135,000. That inference is based on the assumption that undergoing an illegal abortion was five times as dangerous as giving birth. This is a very conservative assumption because in 1967, six years prior to legalization and two decades from the present, medical technology had not advanced to the point where abortion was as safe as natural birth. After the suction machine was invented, abortion became as safe, now slightly safer, as natural birth. But this was not the case until very recently, so the 135,000 figure selected here is most plausible.

But even if the figure was arbitrarily doubled, that would mean only 270,000 abortions. Even if it was multiplied five times—an incredible proposition which requires us to assume that criminal abortion was as safe as natural pregnancy—that would still make 655,000 abortions, less than half the number of abortions being performed each year since legalization.

Abortion Explosion

According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, the research agency for Planned Parenthood, there are now approximately 1.5 million abortions in the United States each year. The number may have peaked in 1980, when 1,553,890 abortions were performed. This means that, using Syska, Hilgers and O'Hare estimates, current abortion rates are

anywhere from seven to 30 times greater than they were prior to legalization. This finding is comparable to what we know about Canada and Britain. So a relationship between legalization and the incidence of abortion seems clear.

The claim that women will have abortions no matter what the law says is further undermined by an important recent study pulling together findings from the United States, Sweden and New Zealand. Writing in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* in 1984, Carlos del Campo concludes that, out of a total of 6,298 women refused a legal abortion between the 1940s and the late 1960s, 70.6 percent carried their pregnancies to term—they had their babies. Only 13.2 percent went ahead and

From 1940 to the late 1960s, the number of deaths from illegal abortions showed a sharp, almost uninterrupted decline.

got an abortion, illegally. It is striking that in every country a majority of women chose to complete their pregnancies—the percentage ranges from 58 to 80. A relatively small number of women sought out a clandestine abortionist.

Perhaps legalizing abortion increases its incidence; does it follow that restricting abortion automatically reduces its incidence? The experience of Eastern European countries, which have in the past generation tightened their abortion laws, is quite instructive.

Thomas Frejka, writing in *Population and Development Review* in 1983, finds that more restrictive abortion laws do in fact reduce the number of abortions. The rate varies: for instance, Czechoslovakia experiences only a slight and temporary decline from 1.0 to 0.9 abortions per women per lifetime. But Hungary finds a sharper reduction, from 2.5 to 1.1—a decline which started earlier than the change in the abortion law, apparently the result of increased contraceptive use. Romania experienced a dramatic reduction from 5.6 to 1.9 abortions per lifetime after the law was made more restrictive. These "lifetime" figures obviously correlate with annual figures because they reflect the number of abortions women have had in their lifetime as measured in a given year.

Laws Do Restrict


Among non-communist countries, New Zealand was the first to attempt to change from permissive to restrictive legislation. Until 1976, New Zealand law allowed induced abortion if there was danger to the life or health of the mother. By that year the abortion rate had risen to one for every nine live births. In 1978 a new law came into effect, stipulating that the danger to the mother's life or health must be "serious." The immediate result was a steep plunge in the abortion rate to one for every 14 live births in 1978 and 1979. However, after intense pressure from the

medical profession, the law was again widened, with the result that by 1982 the abortion rate had risen to an all-time high of one out of every 7.5 live births.

In Canada abortion has been legal since 1969 if the mother's life or health was in danger. In many counties this has been interpreted to permit abortion on request. However, a recent study by Statistics Canada of the 10 years' abortion experience between 1975 and 1984 shows that provinces which have begun to administer the law strictly have considerably fewer abortions than other provinces. Prince Edward Island, for example, has had no legal abortions since 1983, and Newfoundland has had fewer than 400 a year. Provinces like Ontario and British Columbia, by contrast, have a rate six or seven times that of Newfoundland. Yet the astonishing fact is that the number of women from provinces where the law is now strictly applied, who seek abortions outside their home provinces, is negligible. In 1984, 12 women from Prince Edward Island and 39 from Newfoundland sought legal abortions outside their provinces. We know this because the Canadian government is very meticulous about abortion statistics: it requires Canadian hospitals to collect all kinds of personal and demographic data about women who have legal abortions.

For those who accept the facts, a final question remains.

Why does abortion law correlate with the incidence of abortion? Perhaps it is because the vast majority of abortions today are sought out by unmarried teen-aged women and by married women who simply do not want an additional child. It is understandable, perhaps, that these women would prefer legal abortion to the embarrassment and inconvenience of having a baby. On the other hand it is hard to believe that all, or even most, of them would go to the extent of having an illegal abortion, with the medical risks they are warned about, and with the legal penalties they face if discovered. It is the easy availability of abortion which probably causes a number of women who would otherwise settle for a baby to elect for termination of pregnancy instead. Whatever the validity of these speculations, whatever the cause that more women have abortions when they are legal, the fact that this is so cannot be denied. The research confirms the intuitive view that if abortions are made harder to get, fewer women tend to get them.

Law should be based on a recognition of reality. The arguments and expectations that were advanced during the legalization debate in Canada, Britain, and the United States have proven to be very unsound. It is time for a new moral and legal debate that rests on what we now know about abortion and abortion laws. 

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The Democratic Revolution Spreads to Asia

PAUL A. GIGOT

A staple theme of U.S. political debate in recent years has been the extraordinary rise of democracy in Latin America. Much less has been made of the gradual expansion of political freedom in another part of the world that is just as important to U.S. interests—East and South Asia. From Corazon Aquino's triumph in Manila, to the blossoming of opposition politics in South Korea, Taiwan, and Pakistan, to the consolidation of democracy in Japan and India, most of the region's countries that are aligned with the West are experiencing some form of progress toward political freedom.

This trend is encouraging both for the cause of freedom itself and for America's interests in a stable and prosperous Asia. Greater political freedom is usually linked to greater economic freedom—and to better standards of living. More democratic institutions also offer some hope of longer-term political stability. And the trend demonstrates that a confident America with an assertive foreign policy can assist the cause of freedom even without firing a shot or waving a flag. When Asia's rulers see democracy working well in America, they are less likely to fear it at home. When they believe America stands by them firmly as an ally—even when it is sometimes critical—they are more likely to be politically tolerant at home.

The transfer of power in the Philippines from Ferdinand Marcos to Corazon Aquino is a dramatic confirmation of Jeane Kirkpatrick's observation that pro-Western authoritarian regimes can and often do evolve into freer societies. But if we compare the political situation in particular nations in the late 1970s with the situation today, it is clear that the phenomenon Mrs. Kirkpatrick described is occurring throughout the region. Some snapshots:

South Korea

1979: President Park Chung Hee has installed his hated and repressive Yushin Constitution; his government suppresses dissent and tortures political opponents, and, in a binge of misguided nationalism, skews economic investment to heavy industry. Within months, Park will be assassinated, and a group of young generals will come to power in a coup, jail their opponents, and crush a local uprising at Kwangju.

1987: Those same young generals, led by President

Chun Doo Hwan, have tolerated a marked liberalization. The most open elections in a generation, in 1984, brought a large opposition minority into the National Assembly. Opposition leaders Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam are still regularly subject to house arrest, but dissidents are freed from jail, a charge of torture is admitted and investigated, and President Chun repeats his vow to step down in 1988. If Chun does step down, the event would mark the first peaceful transition of power in modern Korean history.

Taiwan

1979: An opposition demonstration, at Kaohsiung, is brutally crushed and dissidents are jailed. The Tangwai, or those in politics "outside the [ruling Kuomintang] party," are harassed and their publications routinely shut down.

1987: Local elections last year, that were, by all accounts, remarkably free, bring to prominence dozens of independent and opposition politicians. Tangwai publications flourish. A scandal involving the murder of the dissident journalist, Henry Liu, is investigated and its perpetrators convicted. Certain kinds of speech are still prohibited, particularly the advocacy of independence for Taiwan. But while the Kuomintang retains a firm grip on power, the party contains a younger generation of leaders who push for expanded freedom.

Thailand

1979: Military coups have become routine. In the worst of them, rioters encouraged by the military attack student demonstrators, murdering dozens in downtown Bangkok. Many of the students flee to the countryside, invigorating a Communist insurgency.

1987: Prem Tinsulanonda, prime minister for seven years, has lasted in power longer than any Thai leader in a generation. Chief of State King Bhumibol, like Spain's King Juan Carlos, uses his enormous popularity to deter any coups. The military retains great political influence, but a

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