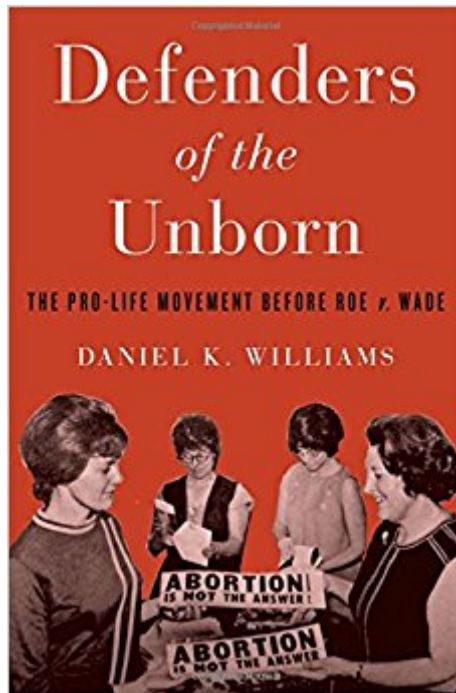


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Defenders Of The Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement Before Roe V. Wade



Synopsis

On April 16, 1972, ten thousand people gathered in Central Park to protest New York's liberal abortion law. Emotions ran high, reflecting the nation's extreme polarization over abortion. Yet the divisions did not fall neatly along partisan or religious lines-the assembled protesters were far from a bunch of fire-breathing culture warriors. In *Defenders of the Unborn*, Daniel K. Williams reveals the hidden history of the pro-life movement in America, showing that a cause that many see as reactionary and anti-feminist began as a liberal crusade for human rights. For decades, the media portrayed the pro-life movement as a Catholic cause, but by the time of the Central Park rally, that stereotype was already hopelessly outdated. The kinds of people in attendance at pro-life rallies ranged from white Protestant physicians, to young mothers, to African American Democratic legislators-even the occasional member of Planned Parenthood. One of New York City's most vocal pro-life advocates was a liberal Lutheran minister who was best known for his civil rights activism and his protests against the Vietnam War. The language with which pro-lifers championed their cause was not that of conservative Catholic theology, infused with attacks on contraception and women's sexual freedom. Rather, they saw themselves as civil rights crusaders, defending the inalienable right to life of a defenseless minority: the unborn fetus. It was because of this grounding in human rights, Williams argues, that the right-to-life movement gained such momentum in the early 1960s. Indeed, pro-lifers were winning the battle before *Roe v. Wade* changed the course of history. Through a deep investigation of previously untapped archives, Williams presents the untold story of New Deal-era liberals who forged alliances with a diverse array of activists, Republican and Democrat alike, to fight for what they saw as a human rights cause. Provocative and insightful, *Defenders of the Unborn* is a must-read for anyone who craves a deeper understanding of a highly-charged issue.

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Customer Reviews

Sure, after Roe v. Wade (1973) there was a lot of pro-life activism. But where did these people come from? As Daniel K. Williams writes in *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade (Plus Some After)* (that's my addendum to the title), anti-abortion activism was alive and well before Roe v. Wade, and it may not have looked like what you would expect. In the first half of the 20th century, pro-life activism began "as a defense of human rights for the unborn." The first activists, according to Williams, were not political conservatives, but "people who supported New Deal liberalism and government aid to the poor, and who viewed their campaign as an effort to extend state protection to the rights of a defenseless minority (in this case, the unborn)." Many of those favoring fewer restrictions on abortion did so on utilitarian grounds: women die because of illegal abortions, poor women don't have access to safe abortions, women should have the option to abort a baby with birth defects, families who can't afford to raise children should be able to choose to abort, etc. Williams makes little of the inherently racist and classist attitude that drove much of the abortion rights movement, but it's there. Catholics were the most vocal in resisting the move toward more liberal abortion laws. They prophetically pointed out that therapeutic abortion would inevitably lead to elective abortion, or abortion on demand. There were many supposedly well-meaning doctors and religious leaders who promoted repeal or reduction of limitations on abortion for health reasons, but the justification of "harm to the mother" became less and less meaningful, and the pro-abortion voices came to be dominated by feminists who wanted abortion to be available to all women all the time. The swiftness with which abortion became more acceptable to the American people is truly remarkable. What would have appalled one generation became commonplace to the next. Almost as remarkable is the ground the pro-life movement was able to gain back. They figured out that using visuals was the most effective argument they could make. Images of small but fully-formed babies that had been aborted had a huge impact on public awareness and attitudes. Williams doesn't speak in these terms in *Defenders of the Unborn*, but I couldn't help thinking about spiritual warfare in the battles over abortion. Satan must be giddy with the victory of convincing people that the killing of an unborn child is a good thing. After getting a foot in the door with cases of rape and saving the mother's life, abortions became more and more common until it

was a mildly inconvenient form of birth control. The fact that many churches, including one I once saw celebrating the anniversary of Roe v. Wade on its marquee, embrace abortion is an ultimate victory for the powers of darkness. Defenders of the Unborn is heavy on political maneuverings, the formation and dissolution of pro-life and pro-choice organizations, and the tracking of legislative actions and court rulings. Williams emphasizes the shifting of the center of the pro-life movement. Given the Democratic Party's emphasis on human rights, the pro-life movement initially had a home there. But voices calling for individual rights and equal rights for women eventually deemed that the rights of the unborn take second place, and pro-life voices were no longer welcome. The Republican Party became the party of choice for pro-lifers, to the point that Republican candidates were forced to take increasingly pro-life positions. This shift is a source of interesting paradoxes, as we see Jesse Jackson and Teddy Kennedy articulating strong pro-life messages, while prominent Republicans were consistently pro-choice, then both groups backtracking and "growing" in their views. Williams's book examines a very important issue in a crucial era of American politics. As the Catholic bishops argue, all other issues take second place to the issue of the sanctity of life. As one who has grown up in the post-Roe v. Wade era, I find it hard to imagine a world in which abortion is not viewed as the killing of a baby. I still have a hard time understanding the cavalier way in which abortion is accepted in some circles. Although I've never been an activist, Williams has helped me to see where pro-life activism has come from and the ways it has, to a limited extent, succeeded, in spite of its failures. Thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for the complimentary electronic review copy!

This is, so far, an engrossing narrative. Williams tackles the subject with a good balance of factual evidence and first-hand testimony. My only fault with it so far is the author's use of "flaunt the law." How this got past an editor at Oxford University Press is a wonder to me. It goes beyond a mere typo (which would be bad enough).

Informative and interesting ; the author provides a thorough and objective narrative of legal attempts to liberalize abortion law and the opposition to them in the 20th century.

An accurate telling of the pro-life movement's early history. Very well researched!

Careful analysis of the arguments of both sides, notwithstanding the title.

This book makes a nice door stop--but it creates an alternate universe. Prior to Roe, restrictions against abortion had been enacted because of the emergent medical industry. And the double standard between men and women. There was for instance no manslaughter charge if a woman had a miscarriage. Or if she was in a traffic accident and miscarried. She was not charged with murder. The churches which then had positions about life were not calling for women to be prosecuted. It was entirely about regulating the practice of doctors and the sexual behavior of women.

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