

POLITICAL SURVEYOR

By Charles E. Cook

For further documentation on the Clinton-Daschle "phony ban," contact the National Right to Life Committee Federal Legislative Office, (202) 626-8820.

Partial-Birth Betrayal: Democrats Seething As Activist Admits Lie

A quiet fight within the Democratic party went public earlier this week with the statement by the leader of a major pro-choice organization that he "lied through [his] teeth" about the frequency and circumstances of the "partial birth" abortion procedure during the 1995 debate on the issue.

In an American Medical News article to be published March 3 and quoted in Wednesday's New York Times, Ron Fitzsimmons, executive director of the National Association of Abortion Providers, said the procedure is performed far more often than he and other pro-choice leaders had told the public and Congress. His previous assurances had encouraged Congressional Democrats to oppose a ban on the procedure, which President Clinton vetoed.

The National Association of Abortion Providers is an organization of more than 200 independent abortion clinics. Fitzsimmons told the Times that he remains pro-choice and still opposes a ban on the procedure, but was quoted as saying that the lying, particularly in an appearance on ABC's "Nightline," "made me physically ill."

He said he told his wife the next day, "I can't do it again."

Privately, Congressional Democrats and their strategists have been seething for some time, feeling that they had been set up by the pro-choice community. They say they were led to believe that the procedure — in which a fetus is partially delivered and then its skull is crushed before removal from the birth canal — is quite rare and only used under extraordinary circumstances, such as to save the life



Photo by Laura Patterson

Some Democrats now want to revisit the partial-birth abortion issue, writes Cook. Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (above) has said he would accept a ban that makes an exception for certain health circumstances.

or preserve the health of the mother, or when the fetus is severely deformed.

The partial-birth abortion issue, though not widely used in the 1996 elections, was extremely potent where it did come up. It almost cost Democrats two Senate seats: in Iowa, where Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin saw a comfortable lead evaporate in a matter of days; and in Louisiana, where it cost Democrat Mary Landrieu 4 or 5 points, turning the race into the closest Senate contest in Louisiana history.

Just a couple of days before the Fitzsimmons statement, a Democratic strategist told me to expect Senate Democrats to bring the issue back up to allow their Members to get on the record against this procedure. They are

bitter that they were misled by pro-choice lobbyists — and that it almost cost them dearly on Election Day.

To be sure, Democrats are not having second thoughts about the abortion issue in general, but they now see that this aspect of the debate is a certain political loser. They concede that even many voters who otherwise are adamantly pro-choice are squeamish about this particularly gruesome procedure.

There is some evidence that the percentage of Americans who are pro-choice under all circumstances has declined a few points in the last couple of years. It's possible that corresponds to the rise of this partial-birth issue, which until recently was unknown to the general public.

Should Democrats decide to backtrack on

the partial-birth issue, there is some question as to whether it will be a meaningful retreat. The National Right to Life Committee argues that while Clinton and Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD) have "indicated a willingness to accept a ban on partial-birth abortions if a 'narrow' exception were added for various serious health circumstances," the exceptions amount to little, if any, change.

The pro-life forces maintain that the Clinton-Daschle proposal would only apply from the seventh month of pregnancy onward, while most partial-birth abortions occur, they say, during the fifth and sixth months.

Furthermore, the NRLC opposes an exemption that would allow the procedure to be performed to "protect a mother's future fertility." They point to a statement by former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop and 400 other physicians that "partial-birth abortion is never medically necessary to protect a mother's health or future fertility," and that it "can pose a significant threat to both her immediate health and future fertility."

Interestingly, this all comes on the heels of Congress voting to release family planning funding for international organizations. While that money technically isn't supposed to be used to fund abortions, it has the effect of freeing up other funds that can.

The pro-choice cause, in general, has not lost ground. But this one extreme position has caused it significant harm — especially in terms of credibility. Some of the movement's best friends on Capitol Hill feel betrayed.

One of the most basic rules of lobbying is, "Never lie to a Member of Congress, particularly one of your friends." Another is, "Never ask a Member to do something that will later jeopardize his seat."

The pro-choice movement did both and will pay a price for it.