

Re: media coverage of  
partial-birth debate

# Partial Truth

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**I**N late 1996 and early 1997, reporters and commentators went through one of their little rituals of shock, self-disgust, confession, and atonement. The occasion was the debate over partial-birth abortion.

The most abject confession came from *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen, who admitted he had been parroting data from "the usual pro-choice groups." He had been "led to believe that these late-term abortions were extremely rare and performed only when the life of the mother was in danger or the fetus irreparably deformed," he wrote in September 1996. "I was wrong." The *Post* itself editorialized the following March about the pro-abortion groups that "lied about the real reasons women seek this particular kind of abortion." The *Chicago Tribune* noted that "this was not the first misinformation peddled by pro-choice organizations." Jonathan Alter in *Newsweek* admitted the incident had "even managed to rouse the consciences of basically pro-choice types like me."

This was fine as far as it went. But the indignation seemed to arise more from the injury to professional pride than from the lie itself. Thus, a year later, the matter has basically been put behind us, the liars still called upon for information on the very matters they lied about.

It all began, you will recall, with Dr. James McMahon. Unearthed in 1990 by *Los Angeles Times* reporter Karen Tumulty, he was the fellow who first figured out how to deliver all but the head of a baby, apply scissors and suction tube, and still enjoy the protection of our abortion laws. His colleague, Ohio abortionist Martin Haskell, in 1992 composed an instructional monograph, *Dilation and Extraction for Late Second Trimester Abortion*, explain-

ing the method step by step, and also the reason: "Most surgeons find dismemberment at 20 weeks and beyond to be difficult due to the toughness of fetal tissues at this stage of development." Hence the advantage of "intact abortion" by means of crushing the baby's head.

Haskell's how-to manual was distributed by the National Abortion Federation for study by other abortionists, one copy making its way to the National Right to Life Committee. Adding medically accurate line drawings of each step, the NRLC reprinted the monograph as a brochure. In July 1993 reporter Diane Gianelli of *American Medical News* picked up the story, confirming each point in interviews with McMahon and Haskell. The NAF accused her of falsifying quotes, such as Haskell's estimate that 80 per cent of partial-birth abortions are "purely elective." *American Medical News* responded with a transcript of the taped interviews. The NAF was forced to concede its misrepresentations. There the matter stayed until July 1995, when Rep. Charles Canady (R., Fla.) introduced the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act.

What followed was the greatest disinformation campaign in American journalism since the *New York Times's* Walter Duranty earned a Pulitzer covering up for Stalin. For the next several months a series of urgent "fact sheets" landed in newsrooms across America. Sorting through the press clips, it isn't hard to tell which reporter was reading from which fact sheet.

Planned Parenthood, Nov. 1: "The procedure, extremely rare and done only in cases when the woman's life is in danger or in cases of extreme fetal abnormality . . ." Fox News, Nov. 2: "It's a procedure used only when the mother's life is at stake or when the fetus has severe abnormalities." Reporter Edwin Chen of the *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 2: "The controversial abortion technique is typically performed when a woman's life is in danger or to abort a fetus that is not expected to survive."

Planned Parenthood, June 15: "The D&X [partial-birth] abortion procedure is a rare and difficult medical proce-

ture. It is usually performed in the most extreme cases to save the life of the woman or in cases of severe fetal abnormalities." The *New York Times*, June 19: "[The Canady bill] would outlaw one of the rarest types of abortions—a highly specialized procedure that is used in the latter stages of pregnancy to abort fetuses with severe abnormalities or no chance of surviving long after birth." Reporter Chitra

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Ragavan of National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, July 14: "Anti-abortion groups call it 'partial-birth' abortion. Doctors resort to this rare procedure only for late-term abortions if the fetuses have severe abnormalities and no chance of survival."

Fact sheet courtesy of the National Abortion Federation: "This procedure is used only in about 500 cases per year." *Time* magazine the following week: "Experts estimate that partial-birth abortion accounts for perhaps 600 of the 1.5 million abortions performed in the U.S. each year."

All this, mind you, was reported as simple fact, requiring no attribution. Another tack was to avoid any mention at all of the details, as when *CBS Evening News* anchor Dan Rather informed us that the House had voted "to make a rarely used type of late-term abortion a felony."

Other news outlets reported that anesthesia made the procedure painless to the fetus. (Planned Parenthood, Nov. 1: "The fetus dies of an overdose of anesthesia given to the mother intravenously.") It was a point easily enough checked with a call to the American Society of Anesthesiologists (which debunked the claim after it was published, noting the millions of healthy babies delivered each year to mothers who have undergone anesthesia) or by looking at the original interviews with McMahon and Haskell (Gianelli: "Let's talk first about whether or not the fetus is dead beforehand." Haskell: "No, it's not. No, it's really not.") As the Canady bill neared a vote, the Associated Press reported that "Opponents of the bill say the scissors method is very rare if it exists at all." (Haskell in his how-to monograph: "[T]he surgeon then forces the scissors into the base of the skull. Having safely entered the skull, he spreads the scissors to enlarge the opening.")

Then one day in September 1996 a reporter for *The Record* in Bergen County, New Jersey, Ruth Padawer, undertook an extremely rare and difficult procedure known as original research. She called the local abortion clinic to ask how many partial-birth abortions it performed: at least 1,500 a year, she learned. Of the 1,500 just at that clinic—

three times the 450 to 500 said to occur nationwide—"a minuscule amount" were done to save the mother's life. Two days later the *Washington Post* did itself credit with a lengthy piece by medical writer Dr. David Brown and reporter Barbara Vobejda, essentially refuting all its previous reportage: "It is possible—and maybe even likely—that the majority of these abortions are performed on normal fetuses."

In February 1997 came the most striking confession. Interviewed the previous November on *Nightline*, Ron Fitzsimmons, executive director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, had used the 450-nationwide figure. He now wished to tell America that he had been "lying through my teeth." By far the majority of cases involve a healthy mother and a healthy fetus, he told *American Medical News*. "The abortion-rights folks know it, the anti-abortion folks know it, and so, probably, does everybody else." Abortion in general, he added, "is a form of killing. You're ending a life."

Some 14 months had passed, as Terry Eastland concluded in a 1997 edition of PBS's *Media Matters*, between the introduction of Canady's bill and the first sign of original reporting by all but a few in the major media. It took the *Bergen Record* to get the *New York Times* moving, and an abortionist to prick the conscience of pro-choice America.

Notable in coverage since then is the absence of the usual paragraph reminding the reader of the story so far. If, let us say, Gary Bauer had been caught in an outright deception, it's a safe bet that that would be considered essential background in all future media coverage of his doings ("The controversial Bauer, who twenty years ago was revealed to have lied . . ."). One also notices, as in a March 23 AP dispatch, a return to the pre-Fitzsimmons line: "Abortion-rights advocates say the procedure is uncommon and used only when a fetus has severe abnormalities or the woman has serious

health problems." Here and there you can even find outright denial. Listen to "news analyst" Cynthia Tucker of the *Atlanta Constitution*, appearing on PBS's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* three months after Fitzsimmons came clean: "Jim, abortion is a medical decision and Congress has absolutely no business in it. The late-term abortion that opponents call 'partial-birth' abortion—it is an obscure, very rarely practiced medical procedure, and most members of Congress don't know what they're talking about when they discuss it."

What we're hearing there is desperation. The term itself remains cordoned between quotation marks, as if beneath proper journalistic usage. But one by one the euphemisms are falling away and the hard nouns and verbs are breaking free, sometimes to surreal effect: "While proponents say such laws ban 'partial-birth' abortion," reported the *New York Times* on April 8, "nowhere do the statutes describe that procedure, which involves extracting all but the head of a living fetus from the womb, then killing it by inserting a pair of scissors into the brain." Here are the editors at the newspaper of record fussing over "partial-birth," while *killing* breezes by without notice. □

