

John D. Rockefeller 3rd

**Address to the International Conference on Abortion,
Hot Springs, Virginia, November 1968,
- Abortion in a Changing World -**

Forward

An International Conference on abortion was convened by the Association for the Study of Abortion at Hot Springs, Virginia, between November 17 and 20, 1968. Five plenary sessions were devoted to the ethical, medical, legal, social, and global aspects of abortion. This book contains the proceedings of this part of the conference. A second volume contains the record of ten separate panel sessions, which dealt with abortion and animation, poverty, public health, psychiatry, obstetrics, morality, mortality, constitutionality, progeny, and womankind.

The conference was attended by 87 invited participants, from 19 different countries, and 27 selected observers. In addition, papers were submitted by 5 invited persons who were unable to make the trip to Hot Springs. No attempt was made to invite equal numbers of Catholics and non-Catholics, men and women, whites and blacks, or foreigners and Americans. The main criterion used in selecting a participant was expertise in the field of abortion.

The primary purpose of the conference was not to debate or promote abortion law reform, not to incite controversy or achieve consensus, but rather to explore the field of abortion, to exchange knowledge about abortion, and to expose this knowledge to public view.

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Address to the Conference

ABORTION LAW REFORM-THE MORAL BASIS

John D. Rockefeller 3rd

You are gathered here as specialists from all over the world to examine the subject of abortion. But I see in this meeting more than a technical conference on a difficult problem. There is a deeper significance, one that gives me a basic sense of well-being about my fellowman and a spirit of hope for our collective future.

Our age seems dominated by awesomely complex problems. Yet, in the midst of it all, there is a growing tendency to confront our problems instead of avoiding them. There is greater freedom of thought and expression. There is growing concern for the good of all people, for human rights and dignity. Given the troubles of our time, this will be our saving grace.

We can find no better case in point than abortion. It is an age-old problem which in most countries of the world has been effectively swept under the rug for the past hundred years or more. This kind of avoidance has occurred in many areas of human affairs, but it has been especially acute in regard to issues associated with sex. For example, it was only a relatively few years ago that we began to talk openly about family planning. The progress since that time has been impressive. In large measure, I believe such forthrightness is paving the way for dealing with abortion. As this conference indicates, we are now beginning to confront that problem.

There is nothing new I can tell you about abortion. But as a concerned citizen, as a generalist among specialists, I can review with you the areas of deep concern for society today. And I can express certain personal views.

At the broadest level, the problems of abortion stem from the fact that prohibitive laws are inconsistent with the way that many human beings actually behave. Tragic as it is, abortion appears to be the number-one method of birth control in the world today. In Colombia not long ago, I was told that there was one abortion for every two live births. In Mexico recently, I was told that illegal abortions occur at the rate of about half a million a year. In Chile, they said, hospital cases caused by abortion run at more than 50,000 a year. It has been estimated that throughout Latin America a leading cause of death of women of childbearing age is the aftereffects of illegal abortion. Even in a country like the United States, where family planning practice is advanced and abortion laws are among the most restrictive in the world, illegal abortions occur on a large scale. The estimates range from 200,000 up toward one million a year.

The problems associated with abortion practices are complicated and interwoven. Often, as at this conference, they are categorized under various headings-moral, legal, social, medical. I would like to suggest that all of them are basically moral problems. Points of view will vary widely on any one problem and often are in conflict.

An underlying difficulty is that in the discussion of abortion there is a tendency to restrict the moral issue to the question of the rights of the fetus. Many sincere and devoted people believe that from the moment of conception human life exists and that therefore it is morally wrong to abort. Others believe that until life is viable outside of the womb it is not human life. While all of us would like to have the definitive answer to this question, I suggest that we never will. Any decision for the common good will be arbitrary for some.

This limited view of the moral issue has resulted in restrictive abortion laws. But there are times in the affairs of men when the attempt to legislate morality creates greater problems than it solves. The inescapable fact is that present abortion laws cause greater tragedies than the tragedy of abortion itself. Something is terribly out of balance here.

Whenever laws are broken on a large scale, by otherwise decent and respectable people, the entire society faces a serious moral question, and respect for the law in general is set back. All the evidence suggests that the legal prohibition of abortion is little more successful than was the prohibition of alcohol. The result is gradual erosion of the moral fabric that holds society together. This is intensified by the burden of guilt that is created. People who go the dangerous route of illegal abortion often incur deep guilt feelings not only because they have broken the law but because of the moral and religious strictures on abortion. We all share the guilt for perpetuating the conditions that create this situation.

Seemingly, we are faced with a choice of enforcing the law more vigorously or revising it to be more congruent with human needs. In my judgment, the weight of opinion today is strongly toward the latter course. History has taught us that vigorous efforts to enforce laws which substantial numbers of persons find intolerable only lead to a vicious circle in which the original problem is made even worse.

Basing our laws on the belief that it is morally wrong to abort only serves to create in turn a whole series of social dilemmas. The woman who in desperation seeks abortion poses a difficult moral question for society at large. She feels her entire life situation to be threatened. Shall she be denied relief? If so, what about the unwanted child she bears? The word "unwanted" brings to mind a picture of psychological deprivation, and possibly physical suffering as well. The New York Times recently reported that cases of child abuse are steadily increasing in the United States. Child abandonment and infanticide are serious problems in some countries. All over the world, unwanted children are being permanently harmed both physically and psychologically through hunger, neglect, abuse. Is this not a moral issue of the first order? Is not something terribly out of balance?

The medical profession bears an unfair and almost impossible burden in the present situation. There are probably few doctors concerned with maternity cases who at one time or another have not faced a cruel dilemma—having a patient who for any one of several good reasons desperately wants and needs an abortion and yet being prevented by the law from helping. The moral issue is intensified for the doctor because he knows that his inability to help may lead to an abortion performed under unsafe conditions. Often, the result is personal tragedy for the patient. An abortion can be one of the safest of operations if performed in a hospital, and it can be the most dangerous if performed by unskilled hands under unsanitary conditions.

In the range of problems I have just reviewed, it seems to me that abortion must be considered the lesser evil. It is morally justified by the greater evils that in all too many cases flow from the absence of abortion-the unwanted child, the unwanting mother, the medical risks of nonprofessional practices, disrespect for the law. The damage done to parents, children, and society by these greater evils cannot be effectively measured by objective criteria, but it is urgent and real and, in many societies, critical. Surely arbitrary laws cannot be expected to solve such a problem; in fact, they have helped create it.

I would like now to consider with you how we can achieve balance and perspective in regard to these moral questions. It becomes increasingly clear, I believe, that we cannot allow the problems that stem from restrictive abortion laws to continue. It is not enough to say that the state should take care of the deformed or the unwanted child. This does little or nothing for the anguish of the mother. And state care rarely is available on a scale and level of quality adequate to the problem.

In my judgment, there is far too much energy and attention directed to defending these existing laws and far too little energy and attention directed to the problem of the unwanted child. To me, this is the most serious imbalance of all. We all want to see children born into this world with every reasonable chance of living a life of dignity and self-fulfillment. I believe it is morally indefensible to perpetuate conditions that handicap children from the moment they are born.

We must concern ourselves with the most fundamental rights of children-to be wanted, loved, and given a reasonable start in this world. It seems ironic that society requires the most careful checking and screening of persons who want to adopt children, and at the same time indiscriminately requires parents to go ahead with births they do not want.

My own view is that we must press for action in three areas. Clearly, one is to continue the work exemplified by this conference to study the problems associated with abortion and to disseminate widely information about them. The Association for the Study of Abortion has rendered an important public service in this regard, and will continue to do so. Those of you from so many countries who have worked on the abortion problem are the pioneers in dispelling the ignorance about this subject that has been the legacy of our society. Through the light of public understanding, the guilt and shame that presently accompany the desire to terminate an unwanted pregnancy will gradually be lifted. Only in this way can we build the moral environment that will assure a wise review of our present abortion laws.

The second area of action I would urge deals with the restrictive abortion laws in the many countries where they still exist, including the United States. They must be changed to alleviate the evils in our society which I have discussed. It seems to me that there are two approaches.

One is modifying and liberalizing present abortion laws. The crucial element in any new law is to make certain that the mental health provision is clear, unambiguous, and liberal. We know that the so called "hard" reasons for abortion-incest, rape, deformity, threat to the physical health of the mother-will affect only a small fraction of the illegal abortions now being performed. There will be no significant easing of the problem unless the changes include a broad interpretation of mental health, comparable to the provisions of the British law. We must recognize that many factors can cause serious mental distress on the part of the

pregnant woman-the prospect of illegitimate birth, the size of the family, the health of existing children, the economic condition of the family. The law must be broad enough to allow abortion if any such factor is causing serious mental anguish and if qualified medical opinion concurs.

The other approach is to eliminate abortion laws altogether, replacing them only with a requirement that a duly licensed physician perform the abortion. Then the decision to abort or not would rest with the conscience and need of the patient and the professional experience and guidance of the physician. This would give each individual freedom of choice. It would force no person to violate his own moral code. And it would give us a true basis for eliminating the social evils I have discussed. One now hears support for this approach in many quarters. In my opinion it will inevitably be the long-range answer.

The third area of action is of course family planning. To the extent that family planning is improved-that we develop better contraceptives and promote ever wider use of them according to the individual's own needs and desires-to that extent the incidence of abortion will go down. We must recognize, however, that making family planning effective around the world is a gigantic undertaking. There is much to be done before the level of action is on a scale commensurate with the magnitude and urgency of the need. I would stress that I do not favor liberalizing abortion laws for the purpose of fostering abortion as a method of birth control. Even when abortion is clearly indicated, it is surely an unhappy choice that one would wish to avoid.

Throughout the whole range of problems we have been discussing our central purpose is to enrich the quality of human life, to help make it possible for individuals to lead lives of dignity and fulfillment. It is in this context that I urge consideration of the three areas of action that I have put before you. In my judgment abortion law reform can no longer be delayed. We must alleviate the social evils that present laws now help to create and perpetuate. We must have higher levels of public knowledge and understanding. There must be forthright action to achieve these objectives. I salute you for the contributions you have made and, will continue to make.