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# With abortionist dead, do conservatives share blame?

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Around 500 pro-lifers surround the abortion clinic of Dr. George Tiller in 2007. (Photo: Operation Rescue)

With the murder May 31 of Dr. George Tiller, one of the nation's few late-term abortion doctors, supporters of abortion rights are questioning whether there is a connection between his death and the rhetoric of the anti-abortion movement.

More to the point, would Tiller have been a victim if anti-abortion groups had not made him so prominent?

?Pro-life groups have created this climate through language and attacking those of us who are pro-choice for being killers,? said the Rev. Carlton W. Veazey, president of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

?Doing so, they set the stage for anybody who thinks that this is murder to put this in their own hands to commit murder. ... They set the framework because they demonize those of us in the pro-choice movement.?

In 1991, Operation Rescue mobilized thousands of anti-abortion activists in the ?Summer of Mercy? in Wichita, Kansas, targeting Tiller and other leaders of the abortion rights movement. More recently, Tiller was acquitted last March in a criminal trial in which he had been accused of illegally performing some late-term abortions. Conservative talk-show host Bill O'Reilly of Fox News and groups like Concerned Women for America have labeled him ?Tiller the Killer.?

Still, some anti-abortion activists argued that Tiller brought notoriety upon himself, and organizations within the movement did nothing more than highlight his second- and third-trimester abortions.

?First of all, I thought, `how horrible,?? said Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, recalling his reaction when he heard of Tiller's murder. ?I thought this is going to be the same song and dance that we had the last time this happened, people trying to paint all of us as wild-eyed crazies.?

The wounds of the already contentious abortion debate open wider when violence occurs, such as when Dr. Barnett Slepian was murdered in 1998 when anti-abortion activist James Kopp fired an assault rifle through the window of his home. Now, with Tiller killed in the foyer of his Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita, the

blame game surfaces anew, along with calls for toned-down arguments from activists on both sides of the issue.

?People have a right to disagree about abortion, but it's impossible to separate (Sunday's) tragedy from the violent language that has been directed for years at doctors like George Tiller,? said Michael B. Keegan, president of People For the American Way, which supports abortion rights.

?Those who have inflamed emotions and dehumanized their opponents around the issue of abortion should take pause before they continue such dangerous rhetoric.?

But some anti-abortion activists said their movement cannot be narrowed to rare acts of violence. In fact, Land said, the person responsible for Tiller's death is not fit to be viewed as a representative of anti-abortion proponents.

?This is an act of a deranged individual,? he said. ?Anyone who thinks they have the right to walk into a church and be judge, jury and executioner of a fellow human being is no disciple of the pro-life movement.?

Tony Perkins, president of the Washington-based Family Research Council, agreed that it's wrong to connect more peaceful, lawful protests of movements like his with the violence that occurred.

Perkins was a vocal, and frequent, critic of Tiller's campaign contributions to then-Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius before her confirmation as Health and Human Services secretary.

But Perkins said only those on the political left with ?twisted minds? would make a direct connection and ?try to exploit this event to say that this is the face of the pro-life community. It is not.?

While anti-abortion activists targeted Tiller with protests, the Rev. Flip Benham, director of Operation Save America, said the doctor, not anti-abortion groups, placed himself in the public eye.

?He made himself a poster child for abortion and he relished that position,? said Benham, who was among the ?Summer of Mercy? protesters outside Tiller's Women's Health Care Services clinic in 1991. ?George Tiller chose this path.?

Steve Schneck, director of the Life Cycle Institute at the Catholic University of America, agreed with conservatives that Tiller's own work as an abortion doctor gave him national recognition.

?I don't hold pro-life groups at all responsible for his death,? he said.

But Schneck said people arguing for or against abortion rights should take stock after the violence and reconsider their language.

?I'm quite sure that as a result of this, we will hear increasing calls to tone down the rhetoric on both sides,? he said. ?A little less volume would be very good for both camps.?

?Religion News Service

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