

Obama and abortion: When no news is news

Jerry Filteau | Jan. 23, 2009

WASHINGTON

Sometimes no news is news.

On Jan. 22, the 36th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion nationwide, newly inaugurated President Barack Obama did not issue an executive order reversing the Mexico City policy -- and his not acting was news.

The policy comes from a presidential executive order barring the U.S. Agency for International Development from granting any family planning and reproductive health funds to overseas non-governmental organizations that offer or advocate abortion as a form of family planning.

Under the policy, hundreds of millions of USAID dollars a year go exclusively to family planning organizations that do not engage in abortion, instead of to International Planned Parenthood Federation affiliates and others that provide abortions as an integral part of their family planning program.

The Mexico City policy -- so named because it was announced by President Reagan at a United Nations population conference in Mexico City in 1984 -- bars any use of U.S. foreign aid for abortion or abortion-related services.

It further states that no U.S. foreign aid for other family planning and reproductive health causes can be given to organizations that also engage in abortion advocacy or offer abortion services or referrals as a means of family planning, even if the aid requested is not directly for abortion-related activities.

So why was it news that Obama did not reverse the policy Jan. 22? Well, the policy remained in place under Republican presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

When Bill Clinton, a Democrat, took office in 1993, he chose Jan. 22, the *Roe v. Wade* anniversary, to issue his first executive order -- rescinding the Mexico City policy and again allowing abortion providers around the world to have access to U.S. funds for contraceptive and other family planning services.

Every Jan. 22 tens of thousands of opponents of legalized abortion gather in the nation's capital for the annual March for Life, seeking a reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. Many in the right-to-life movement took the symbolic timing of Clinton's decision as a direct slap in the face.

Eight years later when George W. Bush took office, his first executive order was to reinstate the Mexico City policy. He, too, chose Jan. 22 to issue the order, delighting those who oppose abortion but angering those who support it.

Thomas P. Melady, diplomat in residence at the Institute of World Politics, said he was in Washington Jan. 22, 1993, and was attending a reception with several U.S. cardinals who were in town for the March for Life, when

a reporter came up to them and informed them of Clinton's executive order.

"One of the cardinals said, "My, he didn't even give us (the pro-life marchers) the courtesy of waiting till we left town," said Melady, who at that time was U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. "That's the difference? this year, he added. "This president gave us the courtesy."

Obama promised during his campaign to rescind the Mexico City policy and was expected to issue an order to that effect within a few days of his inauguration -- Politico.com predicted that it would come later today (Jan. 23).

But the fact that the new president avoided the symbolic date was interpreted as another example of his efforts to reduce the atmosphere of ideological partisanship and confrontation that has so marked the Washington political scene for many years now.

Instead, he said in a statement marking the anniversary, "While this is a sensitive and often divisive issue, no matter what our views, we are united in our determination to prevent unintended pregnancies, reduce the need for abortion and support women and families in the choices they make."

"To accomplish these goals," he added, "we must work to find common ground to expand access to affordable contraception, accurate health information and preventative services."

(Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.)

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