

IT'S NOT JUST AN ABORTION BAN

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT'S GLOBAL AGENDA



CLAYTON POWER

BY YIFAT SUSSKIND

After the initial shock of the recent Supreme Court ruling upholding President Bush's abortion ban, it is time to acknowledge the full reality of the decision. According to the American College of Obstetrics & Gynecologists — which represents 90% of OB/GYNs in the U.S. — the ruling is harmful to women's health. But the Court's decision is about much more than a woman's right to safely end a pregnancy. That's because today's Supreme Court is a product of the Bush Administration (newcomer Justices Roberts and Alito tipped the decision); and the Bush Administration is a product of the Christian Right. Anyone who has been watching the Christian Right chip away at abortion access and the separation of church and state knows that criminalizing abortion is just the tip of the Christian fundamentalist iceberg and that their agenda is global in scope. Globalizing the Culture War.

Today, Regent, the flagship university to the openly theocratic wing of the Christian Right, has 150 alumni working in the Bush Administration. Their alma mater's mission: to provide "Christian leadership to change the world." Overturning *Roe v. Wade* in the U.S. has been their signature preoccupation, but as missionaries, the battlefield of the Christian Right is the whole world. Christian Right activists recognized years ago that they weren't winning any decisive battles in the domestic "culture war." But they also noticed that the mainstream women's movement was largely absent from foreign policy debates. Compared with domestic politics, foreign policy was a feminist-free zone — so the Christian Right moved in.

Since 2000 — with one of their own finally in the White House — religious fundamentalists have turned their attention to U.S. foreign policy like never before. They started where all religious fundamentalists start: with asserting control over women's bodies. For them, the subordination of women is both a microcosm and a precondition for the world they want to create. And everyone knows that a sure-fire way to subordinate women is to prevent them from controlling their fertility. After all, when you can't decide whether, how often, or even with whom to have children, what can you decide?

That's why the Christian Right's first big payback from Bush was the reenactment of the "global gag rule," which bars organizations that receive U.S. funds from counseling, referring,

or providing information on abortion. Enacted on Bush's second day in office, the gag rule has forced not only abortion providers, but whole clinics to shut down — all of them in the world's poorest countries, where health services depend on international aid. The United Nations estimates that by denying women access to contraceptives and a range of health services, Bush's gag rule has led to an additional two million unwanted pregnancies and more than 75,000 infant and child deaths. Moreover, because there is a direct link between women's ability to control their fertility and their capacity to escape poverty, the gag rule violates a range of social and economic rights, in addition to women's reproductive rights.

Religious fundamentalism was invented by U.S. Protestants at the end of the 19th century, but now, there are powerful fundamentalist movements in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, all working to restrict women's rights in the name of religion. Many of them gained traction during the Cold War, when the U.S. supported fundamentalist groups as an antidote to the influence of the Soviet Union and secular nationalists.

The spread of religious fundamentalism has helped transform the UN from a "Godless institution" vilified by the Christian Right into an arena of potential allies, ripe for infiltration. Under Bush, religious fundamentalists have been appointed to represent the U.S. at international health and human rights conferences. They have allied with the Vatican (which enjoys a quasi-governmental status in the UN), Iran, and others seeking to unravel and reshape the UN agenda. As Austin Ruse, president of the U.S.-based Catholic Family & Human Rights Institute, which "monitors UN activity," said "Without countries like Sudan, abortion would have been recognized as a universal human right in a UN document."

Where other countries' allegiance to fundamentalist values has been thin, U.S. religious fundamentalists have relied on sheer bullying at the UN. These delegates have felt doubly empowered — as emissaries of the world's "only true faith" and its only superpower. Over the past six years, the unparalleled global economic, political and military might of the United States has enabled Christian fundamentalists to push international public health and human rights policies that have grave repercussions for women worldwide. Under Bush, they have succeeded in denying the morning-after pill to rape survivors in Kosovo and barred access to condoms and sexual education in AIDS-ravaged Africa.

For the most part, policies such as these did not cost the Republican Party votes because they didn't impact women

in the U.S. — at least not at first. But the U.S. attack on women's reproductive rights abroad followed by the recent Supreme Court ruling is a stark reminder that ideologically speaking, there is no such thing as foreign policy. The Christian Right seeks to restrict women's rights domestically, just as they have internationally — as part of one coherent "vision" that includes much more than a world without abortion.

We only need to look at countries where religious fundamentalists have gained the upper hand in policymaking to see where the U.S. Christian Right would like to take us. Fundamentalists of different religions draw on different texts and operate in diverse cultures and contexts. But when it comes to their rigid and retrograde gender ideology, they show a lot more commonalities than differences. The Christian Right's agenda extends to restricting women's rights to work, equality before the law, education, and freedom from a range of gender-based human rights abuses, including domestic battery and marital rape. And the Christian Right's "vision" goes beyond attacks on narrowly construed notions of "women's rights." They're angling for more of the kind of messianic militarism that characterized Bush's response to 9/11 (which he originally called a "crusade"), and more neoliberal economic policies that promise greater ruin to the world's poor people and ecology.

So how do we counter a movement that now has millions of supporters and has spent billions building think tanks, universities, media outlets and lobbying machines in pursuit of their agenda?


First, it's going to take more than single-issue politics based on a narrow reading of reproductive choice. In many parts of the world, coercive "family planning" policies that violate women's right to have children are as much a threat to reproductive freedom as lack of abortion access. For people everywhere, reproductive rights must be linked to social and economic rights so that every baby has decent housing, enough food and clean water, a healthy, peaceful environment, and other rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Bush — for all his pandering about the "rights" of fetuses — is blocking unanimous global support for that Convention. (The only other country that refuses to ratify it is Somalia, which hasn't had a government in 16 years.)

Second, we need to expand our understanding of "women's issues." The attack on abortion rights is just one aspect of a religious fundamentalist agenda that is threatening not only women's freedom, but international peace and security, Indigenous cultural survival, and secular, democratic political traditions around the world. All of these are women's issues.

Third, we need a new progressive dialogue that makes more room for religious people working to counter fundamentalist agendas, fueled by their own faith-based politics.


In short, we need a strategy that recognizes connections between women's reproductive rights and the full range of human rights, and between women in the U.S. and women around the world. It's not that we each need to be addressing every possible political issue simultaneously. But wherever our convictions move us to action, let's act with an awareness of how our piece of the puzzle fits into a bigger picture of the world we are working to create. Because, while it may seem that the Supreme Court's ruling is only about restricting access to abortion, those who worked for years to bring it about see the decision as one battle in a war to remake the whole world in Jerry Falwell's image.

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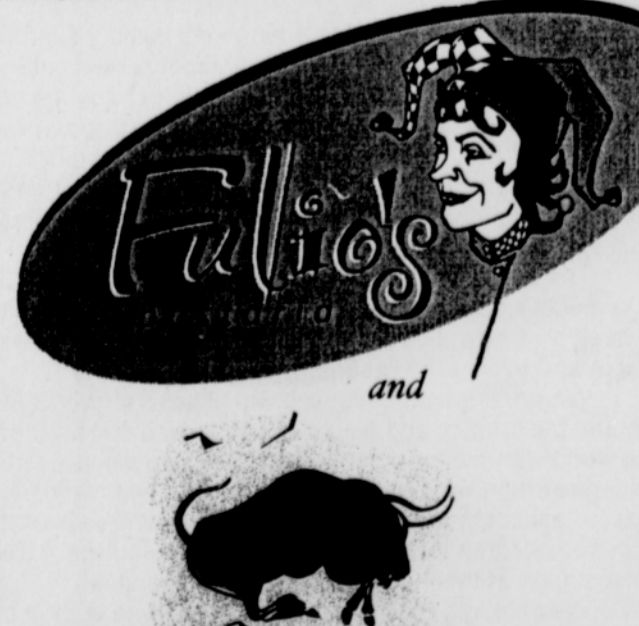
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