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Abortion Clinics Preparing for More Violence

By FELICITY BARRINGER,

WASHINGTON, March 11— The low-rise suburban landscape that is the setting of most abortion clinics is an unlikely backdrop for martial metaphors and discussions of how to block bullets. But in one small city after another, abortion providers said today that they saw the fatal shooting of their colleague, Dr. David Gunn, on Wednesday as the inevitable result of a moral battle that long ago turned physical.

If abortion opponents see the shooting as an "isolated incident" and the work of a "nutcake," abortion rights advocates -- both feminists and the obstetricians who perform 1.6 million abortions each year in the United States -- see it as the culmination of a decade or more of blockades, fire bombings, chemical attacks and nighttime gunfire.

Given that history, the slaying of Dr. Gunn in Pensacola, Fla., has become a call to arms among abortion providers who say it is past time to defend themselves and each other.

In Boulder, Colo., it is bullet-proof windows. In Santa Rosa, Calif., abortion rights volunteers are organizing 24-hour watches at clinics. In Fort Wayne, Ind., and Wichita, Kan., abortion clinics employ security guards, as does the Planned Parenthood clinic in Des Moines. The clinic in Kansas City, Mo., hired armed guards today.

Dr. G. W. Orr, an obstetrician who performs abortions in Omaha is getting a bullet-proof vest. So is Dr. Buck Williams in Sioux Falls, S.D., and he is not stopping at that. "Overnight I changed handguns and went from a .38-caliber to a .45," he said. "That'll just make a bigger hole in somebody."

In Milwaukee, Dr. George Woodward went public at a news conference today about the threats he had received as an abortion provider, figuring that high visibility was safer than a low profile. In a later telephone interview he said: "I'm working hand in glove with Planned Parenthood and the Milwaukee and Brookfield, Wis., police departments, doing everything I can to take every precaution I can. I haven't become a Salman Rushdie yet, but I may."

On the other hand, some abortion providers said there was little more they could realistically hope to do to protect themselves.

In Colorado, Dr. Warren Hern, medical director of the Boulder Abortion Clinic, said: "I am sitting here behind my desk, looking out a bullet-proof window. I work in four layers of bullet-proof windows. Death threats are so common they are not remarkable. I went to a pro-choice meeting in Denver recently, and as I walked through the picket line, someone said, 'You should die.' "

The news of Dr. Gunn's shooting was a wrenching departure from the script of the nation's longest-running public morality play, one that forced the players to rethink their own rote approaches to their roles. While the focus of abortion rights activists was the need for protection and resistance, many abortion opponents, whose movement had been built on appeals to morality, showed palpable anguish over an act of violence in the name of their cause. Abortion Foes React

Such anguish was not evident in the earliest reactions from groups like Operation Rescue, Rescue America and Missionaries to the Preborn, which mixed often-pallid condemnations of the murder with calls for support funds for the family of Michael F. Griffin, the man accused of killing Dr. Gunn.

In an interview with CBS News, Randall Terry, director of Operation Rescue, said of Dr. Gunn, "While we grieve for him and for his widow and for his children, we must also grieve for the thousands of children that he has murdered."

Debbie Dykes, a member of the American Family Association in Bradenton, said, "I think the man that was killed -- and it was unfortunate -- he should be glad he was not killed the same way that he has killed other people, which is limb by limb."

By contrast, the United States Catholic Conference and some other longtime abortion opponents reacted with rage tempered with sorrow at an act that some felt threatened the moral foundation of their cause.

"The violence of killing in the name of pro-life makes a mockery of the pro-life cause," the conference said in a statement. "As we abhor the violence of abortion, we abhor violence as a dangerous and deplorable means to stop abortion."

The statement added, "It is not enough to say, 'We sympathize with Mr. Griffin's motivations but disagree with his actions.' In the name and in the true spirit of pro-life, we call on all in the pro-life movement to condemn such violence in no uncertain terms." A Shared Term: 'Terrorist'

Bill Price, president of Texans United for Life, sounded a similar theme. "I'm a little bit disturbed by comments and quotes from colleagues in the pro-life movement which appear to be rationalizing or justifying or minimizing this horrific act," he said.

"I think, frankly, there has been a philosophical or even moral groundwork laid for assassinating abortionists by certain people in the pro-life movement, and I think they bear some of the blame. If they don't stop it, there will be an increase in these kinds of acts. You don't win a moral war through force or coercion or intimidation. You win through reason.

"I think it is a defining point in the history of this struggle," he added. "Responsible leaders have to speak out against this. If they don't, we will just become a bunch of terrorists."

While Douglas Johnson, a spokesman for the National Right to Life Committee, dismissed Mr. Griffin as "a nutcake," abortion rights advocates used Mr. Price's word, "terrorists," in their calls for help from local and state officials and from President Clinton, Congress and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Clinton Condemns Shooting

In a statement today, President Clinton said: "I was saddened and angered by the fatal shooting in Pensacola yesterday of Dr. David Gunn. The violence against clinics must stop."

Abortion rights advocates argued that the shooting should give renewed impetus to efforts to pass legislation like the Freedom of Choice Act, which would codify into law the provisions of the Supreme Court's 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing most abortions. They also pushed for passage of a bill now in the House that would make it a Federal crime to interfere with abortion clinics' services to their patients.

Several states are considering similar laws to protect access, and legislators in Tallahassee, Fla., said today that they would speed up consideration of a measure in that state.

Some abortion rights activists argue that the need for such laws increased recently when the Supreme Court ruled that abortion protesters could not be enjoined from blocking access to clinics under a 19th Century law known as the Ku Klux Klan Act, which prohibits conspiracies to deny citizens their constitutional rights. Injunctions under state laws, like those governing trespass, remain in force, though it is not known how many such laws there are. 'Huddling Together for Warmth'

Telephones at clinics rang constantly today, with calls from reporters, from groups like Planned Parenthood and the National Abortion Federation, and from other clinics expressing sympathy and support. "It's mostly huddling together for warmth," said Peg Johnston, an administrator at Southern Tier Women's Services near Binghamton, N.Y., the hometown of Mr. Terry.

Although her clinic has put up a perimeter fence to keep protesters off the property, she said: "I don't think there's any real way to protect yourself against this kind of terrorism. We've all been saying and worrying that the violence was going to escalate."

During a break in a hearing at State District Court in Dallas, where Roe v. Wade was first heard, Dr. Norman Tompkins said he is "very much" concerned about his safety and that of his family after the Florida killing. "It scares the living daylights out of me," he said.

Photo: "We've all been saying and worrying that the violence was going to escalate," said Peg Johnston, an administrator of an abortion clinic near Binghamton, N.Y. She keeps the door locked against protesters. (Michael Okoniewski for The New York Times)

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