

From Youth Pro-Life Activist to Congressman

BY Rep. Chris Smith

Over the past 27 years of service in the U.S. House of Representatives I have given thousands of speeches. Some of them are memorable, owing more to the setting than contents—the Vatican, the Kremlin, the United Nations—but the one speech I remember best was the first pro-life speech I researched and gave in one of my college classes.

That one speech and surrounding reactions set the course for my entire future, including who I would marry and what career path I would follow.

In that speech, I told my classmates that to me, abortion methods looked like child abuse. I explained that there were positive nonviolent alternatives to an unexpected pregnancy offered by groups such as Birthright. I relayed my dismay at the callousness of one abortionist I had read about who was “upset” that a late-term abortion he performed had “survived”—the “dreaded complication”—a living baby.

You would have thought I had committed the unpardonable sin.

No less than three classmates wrote and delivered stridently harsh rebuttal speeches. I had challenged what I truly believed to be an insidious injustice, a raft of junk science routinely employed to prop up abortion rights and what I generally regarded as surface appeal arguments that could not survive any serious scrutiny. In response, they attacked me.

As I sat in that classroom, I felt an overwhelming sense of empathy and sorrow for the helpless unborn child, who unlike me had no way of defending himself or herself against such violent prejudice. I also felt bad for young, pregnant women who were being sold a pack of lies. And I was stunned by the personal animus—and that condescending look every pro-lifer knows and has likely experienced.

It was a moment of truth for me—fight, flight, or choose the safe environs of indifference or nonchalance. I chose to fight.

At Trenton State College (now the College of New Jersey), I teamed up with another student and good friend—Marty Dannenfelser—and together we launched the TSC Pro-Life Committee as part of the National Youth Pro-Life Coalition. As it turned out, our first speaker, Alda Atkinson, gave an extraordinarily powerful and informative pre-sentation replete with Dr. Willke’s slides of fetal development and actual abortions, an event that clinched the deal as to my total commitment. Our primary mission—which remains a core mission of today’s collegians for life—was to educate and help mothers at risk.

A short time later, I met a similarly committed, smart, and attractive young woman named Marie who became president of the committee and, I’m thrilled to say, went on to marry me. (We will celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary next July.)

Throughout the 70s I served as state youth pro-life coordinator, as well as legislative director and executive director of the New Jersey Right to Life Committee. As we fought the good fight

in the 70s, it became apparent that the high bar of overturning a Supreme Court decision coupled with overt complicity of the media with our adversaries made success—any success—difficult.

And as I discovered, this particular fight was like no other. It requires giving the cause total commitment while cultivating prudence and patience for the long haul. This fight would not be won overnight. It requires deep love not just for the oppressed but the oppressors as well. As people of faith, we must do no less.

It requires sustained compassion, courage, persistence, and abiding hope regardless of success or failure or anything in between. It requires good science, sound strategy, and disciplined tactics.

It requires telling the truth despite the fact that the other side distorts, manipulates, and “lies through their teeth” to quote one pro-abortion leader. (Hey, if they can kill babies, what’s a lie?) And it requires prayer—tons of prayer and sacrifice and even fasting.

I also discovered I had joined a group of remarkable pro-life people who were clearly the most selfless, compassionate, and generous people on earth, the modern-day abolitionists, who like the anti-slavery crusaders of old, fought for justice and for the weak, vulnerable, and disenfranchised regardless of the personal cost. Often they opened their homes and wallets to personally aid those in need.

In the early years of the pro-life movement, it didn’t take long to realize the importance of both legislative action and involvement in political campaigns if we were to protect unborn children from the clutches of the abortionists. This fact is no less true today. Policies are developed and enacted in the legislative arena. For me, that was and is where the fight has to be engaged.

In 1976, at the age of 23, I served as campaign manager for a U.S. Senate primary candidate. We were crushed. Two years later, I was back, running for a congressional seat. I too was crushed at the polls. (But so was another congressional candidate, one from Texas named George W. Bush.)

Two years later in 1980 I tried again and won a congressional seat. And this past November was reelected for a 14th consecutive term.

In Congress I poured myself into a myriad of human rights and humanitarian concerns, including authoring laws to protect women from sex traffickers, help children with autism, secure health care and benefits for veterans and/or their survivors, end religious persecution, aid torture victims, and promote the rule of just law. At the core of all human rights protection is the right to life for all regardless of age, race, condition of dependency or disability, or stage of development. The right to life of the unborn is the first human right.

In recent years, modern medicine and scientific breakthroughs have shattered the myth that unborn children are not human persons or alive. Today, ultrasound technologies and other diagnostic tools have helped doctors to diagnose illness and disability before birth. New and exciting breakthrough health care intervention for the unborn—including microsurgeries—are leading to an ever expanding array of successful treatments and cures of sick or disabled unborn babies in need of help.

In stark contrast, abortion methods rip, tear, and dismember, or chemically poison the fragile bodies of unborn children. There is nothing whatsoever benign, compassionate, or just about

an act that utterly destroys the life of a baby and often physically, psychologically, or emotionally harms the woman.

Abortion is a violation of fundamental human rights and should be treated as such. Actions by groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to advocate in favor of abortion as a "human right" does grave disservice to real human rights abuses and calls into question the integrity of these organizations. They—like us—have a duty to protect everyone at risk, not just the planned, the privileged, and the perfect.

Despite pro-life victories over the years such as proscribing public funding for abortion, the ban on partial-birth abortion, and the enactment of numerous informed consent laws in several states, the durable protection we seek remains elusive.

And with the recent flip of leadership in Congress, our challenge to preserve our gains—most of which need to be renewed annually as riders to appropriation bills—presents serious challenges and struggles over policy and funding.

As Republican Chair of the House Pro-Life Caucus, I know the present challenge is great. But many pro-lifers in Congress will fight hard to defend life.

We will use every legitimate means available to protect the innocent. To stop anti-life legislation that subsidizes embryonic stem cell research with federal funds, for example, we will have to count on President Bush's veto and the votes to sustain his veto.

We've been here before. Many of us are battle tested.

It was worse in 1992. Bill Clinton's party controlled everything and aggressively touted the "Freedom of Choice Act," a bill designed to codify a policy that went well beyond Roe v. Wade. He and his wife pushed an absolute mandate for abortion in universal health coverage.

Clinton sought the nullification of all pro-life riders. He unilaterally overturned numerous pro-life policies by executive order and greased the skids for RU486.

Then—as now—we were unshaken in our resolve to meet any and all challenges. In the end, the Abortion President—Bill Clinton—did enormous damage both here and abroad. But the outcomes of his anti-life initiatives could have been much worse. Today we can be truly grateful that a courageous pro-life president occupies the White House.

Still, this new session of Congress ought to be viewed as a serious wake-up call to men and women who cherish life to consider service in public office. Few occupations offer such a direct way to shape the policies of a nation and of a world. Congress—and our state legislatures—need men and women who are bold, courageous, and unwavering in their defense of life.

To the young especially, the pro-life movement absolutely needs your enthusiasm, idealism, ideas, and hope. We need your vision and leadership. We need your faith in action.

I fervently hope and pray that more of you will heed the call to a life in whole or in part in politics—as staff or elected representatives. Heed the call, we need you now.