

The Party of Death: The Democrats, the Media, the Courts, and the Disregard for Human Life

By Ramesh Ponnuru

Reviewed by Dave Andrusko

For those who don't follow the daily oscillations of the abortion debate, Ramesh Ponnuru may not be a familiar name.

Those of us who do know him as the extraordinarily thoughtful pro-life senior editor of National Review. Wise to the way of abortion politics, it came as no surprise to his admirers that barely had the ink dried on *The Party of Death* than his book came under an ugly online attack for various and sundry alleged defects. For those who'd actually bothered to read the book (as oppose to cribbing talking points from pro-abortionist web sites), the irony was hard to miss.

One of the book's primary strengths is its meticulous explication of how for over 33 years the public has responded not to the real *Roe v. Wade* decision, but to a fabrication stitched together by the Courts, much of the media and academia, and the upper echelons of the Democratic Party. Likewise, the attack on his book was less (if at all) the response of a careful reading of his thesis than it was a push-the-panic-button preemptive strike launched to bury Ponnuru's unassailable conclusion that the Democratic Party has become "the chief political vehicle for the idea that inviolability of human life is outdated."

In 20 elegantly written chapters, Ponnuru covers a massive amount of territory. Because so much attention has and will be rightly paid to the political implications of his book, it's useful first to discuss the broader context in which he places his analysis of how one of our two major parties has become an almost wholly owned subsidiary of what Pope John Paul II called the "culture of death."

(Parenthetically, Ponnuru correctly argues that the case against the Party of Death can be made independently of religion-based arguments. Pope John Paul's name does not appear, for example.)

(And by making his case in these terms Ponnuru provides his readers with commonly accessible language for dialoguing with those who differ over abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, and destructive stem cell research. Ponnuru quotes George McKenna, who argues that what unites pro-lifers is not a religious doctrine but "a law written in their hearts telling them that we may not kill people just because their birth will be inconvenient or their death will be greeted with relief.")

Ponnuru brilliantly outlines the trajectory of the culture of death that so logically follows from its initial lethal error.

Think of it as if launching a rocket. If the engineers program the computer wrong and the missile starts off course by even the slightest degree, the amount of error gradually gets bigger and bigger during the flight. Eventually, the rocket will be wildly off course— with possibly fatal results.

Likewise, when we start from a faulty premise—it is permissible to withdraw protection from one category of human being. Then once we decide that category "A" can be excluded for reason "X," before you know it we're debating why category "B" shouldn't also be excluded from the community of common concern for reason "Y."

Critics of this line of argument like to pretend the slippery slope is a mere debater's point. But, as Ponnuru writes, while "[i]t is easy, in advance, to imagine that our sensibilities will set limits on a moral innovation," in fact, "crossing these limits is not so difficult once we have breached the principle that forbade all such actions. All it takes is a simple question: What's the difference?"

Thus, the momentum for eugenic abortions, the sympathy for not treating babies born with maladies, the impulse to widen and broaden the categories of people whom we can starve to death, and the lust to clone human embryos as sources of spare parts. "What's the difference?"

So there is this connecting thread to the "party of death," which, while it has members in both major political parties "is much stronger today among Democrats than Republicans."

For those of a certain age, who were raised as Democrats, the capture of the “party of the little guy” by “the party of death” is particularly devastating. As Ponnuru points out, the national Democratic Party crossed the Rubicon when it denied a pro-life Democratic governor the opportunity to speak at its 1992 coronation of Bill Clinton.

Ponnuru keenly summarizes the corner into which the party has painted itself. Alluding to militantly pro-abortion California Senator Barbara Boxer, he summarizes the “positions of the Boxer Democrats” in this manner: Abortion should be legal throughout pregnancy. Teenage girls should not have to inform their parents about it, much less get their consent. Nobody who would let the voters deviate from these positions should be allowed on the court.

The Senate shouldn’t even be allowed to hold a vote on such people. The law should not treat the murders of pregnant women as double homicides because it might lead people to look more negatively at abortion. And taxpayers should pay for abortions, just in case there are some going undone. But federal funds should not be allotted to ensure the health of the unborn.

“Each of these positions is extreme by the standards of public opinion,” Ponnuru writes, “but not by the standards of what the Democratic Party has become.”

The Party of Death is so current that there is much about how the Democratic Party is desperate to reposition itself (but not change) on abortion. That has been made unavoidable even for Sen. Hillary Clinton for many reasons, but primarily because of the consciousness-raising impact of the long debate over partial-birth abortion.

Ponnuru observes that the Democrats’ “radicalism would begin to come into the public’s view only in 1995, when the Republicans took control of Congress and raised the issue of partial-birth abortion.” That debate “would make it clear that many Democrats didn’t just support abortion at any point until birth: they supported it during birth, too.”

This illustration calls to mind one of Ponnuru’s earliest and most insightful statements. *Roe v. Wade* is a corrupter—of the courts, of politicians, and even professional historians.

In 1973 the Supreme Court shone a spotlight on “penumbras” and “emanations” which it imagined surrounded the Constitution and discovered a “right” to abortion. We were told then—as we have been countless times since—that *Roe* did not legalize abortion on demand.

This was never true, but this reassurance rang particularly hollow 27 years later when the Court said it was impermissible to forbid an unimaginably brutal abortion technique—one that kills mature babies by jamming surgical scissors into the backs of their heads, vacuuming out their brains, and crushing their skulls when they are mere inches away from being fully delivered outside their mother’s womb.

But it’s not just judges and politicians. With surgical precision, Ponnuru takes apart a 1989 brief that defended *Roe* filed by 281 historians.

Forget for a moment that those whose specialty is light years away from abortion likely had nothing particularly useful to offer. The “historians’ brief” was internally inconsistent, lacked virtually any sources for its assertions, and was filled with statements (to quote Ponnuru) that were either “false or misleading.”

Having said all that Ponnuru nonetheless ends on an optimistic note. Assuming pro-lifers continue the well planned, carefully implemented policy of incrementalism that has served them so well, when *Roe* does fall its demise will not be a disaster, as so many commentators insist, but a boon to the cause of life.

For those who also worry about *Roe*’s pernicious impact on our form of government, The Party of Death reminds us that *Roe v. Wade* is undemocratic twice over. It is undemocratic in a procedural sense—“It circumvented the normal process of democratic policy making”—but it is also “undemocratic in a deeper sense: It violates the principle of human equality that is the moral basis for democratic self-government, and specifically for American democracy.”

Naturally, not every pro-lifer will agree with every assessment made by Ponnuru. But to nitpick would be to miss the forest for the twigs.

The book is an accessible, highly readable pro-life primer and would be a wonderful addition to your chapter’s library or as a gift especially to people just coming into the Movement.

Ponnuru concludes with a thoughtful assessment of where we are and where we are heading. "Most Americans already know that abortion is wrong," he writes. "If Roe falls—when it falls—pro-lifers will be able to demonstrate another truth about abortion: We can live without it."