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SMEAR CAMPAIGNS NOT A TACTIC OF PRO-ABORTION GROUPS ALONE

by Douglas R. Scott, Jr.

There are few things LDI likes less than battles between groups that are supposed to be working toward the same goals. Human nature being what it is, however, it is neither new nor surprising when one group points a finger at another.

It would surely be in LDI's interest to stay out of the fray, but when pro-life leaders are being publicly accused and the charges are misleading or outright distortions, we believe it would be wrong to stand by and let the innocent be destroyed by an "established" group with a vested interest in the new organization's demise. Only those statements made by one group about another that are provably true and designed to make the pro-life movement stronger and more God-honoring would be backed by LDI, in which case we would expect the matter to be handled in a biblical manner.

In July 1998, the National Right to Life Committee Inc. (NRLC) issued a "consumer alert" press release alleging that a "fake pro-life group" had been "soliciting funds from unsuspecting pro-life people." The implication was that those responsible are either pro-abortion or only interested in money. The organization under attack is American Right to Life (ARL), recently formed by several long-time pro-life activists.

NRLC has leveled several charges at ARL, including the following: 1) not all attempts to contact ARL were immediately successful; 2) ARL was not registered as a lobbying organization; and 3) two staff members of the established group went to the street address of ARL, and found that it "is actually a box number at a 'Mail Boxes, Etc.' location." (When the accusing group was told of ARL's physical location, staff members again went calling, but claimed they could find no activity at the location.) NRLC urged its supporters "to use extreme caution if a call or letter is received from this group..." NRLC told its newsletter subscribers that donations would be wasted by the fraudulent ARL and the money would be better spent by NRLC.

Many religious and pro-life publications printed the charges practically verbatim as submitted to them. The founder of Pro-Life Infonet, Steven A. Ertelt, e-mailed the attacks worldwide and he told the Catholic News Service that the new organization and its fund-raising efforts are "a total scam." When informed of the facts, Ertelt essentially argued that ARL should have handled its formation in a better way (for example, by first contacting existing pro-life groups). Ertelt essentially argued that because ARL's founders did not start the new group in the manner he would have personally and randomly required, the attacks he made against the group ("scam," etc.) were justifiable.

Interestingly, while NRLC was issuing statements about the mysterious and "fake" organization, it sent a letter to ARL that was dated before the release of the "consumer alert." NRLC received a prompt and direct response from ARL. In other words, the NRLC knew much more about ARL and its leadership before it began launching the public attacks than it led people to believe. The attacks were designed to cripple ARL at its founding, which is any new organization's most vulnerable point.

We at LDI wish to offer the following observations:

1. ARL is a new organization and, as is usually the case, is in the process of getting everything in order (including finding staffing for its office, etc.), but like many other groups, it will retain its "Mail Boxes, Etc." address to handle the large volume of mail it is already receiving;
2. If a physical office, a certain number of office personnel, or a certain budget are (arbitrarily) required for a pro-life organization to be called "legitimate," there are many groups that fall short (most of which have existed for many years and have an excellent record of success);
3. ARL's founders decided it was time for another pro-life organization when NRLC:

- a. routinely agrees to weak legislation, thereby allowing politicians to escape casting “hard votes” (such as adding rape and incest exceptions to the Hyde Amendment, which bans federal funding of abortions);
- b. refuses to take a position against Planned Parenthood (other than as it relates to abortion);
- c. funded the campaigns of congressmen who have no opposition or are shoo-ins for reelection, while refusing to support truly pro-life candidates in hotly contested races where the support could have made a difference in the outcome;
- d. has taken hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Republican National Committee and supported candidates who are more “Republican” than pro-life;
- e. allows paid staff to serve on its board of directors, does not require board members to reside in the state they represent, and has a history of nepotism over hiring the most qualified employees (Planned Parenthood would never tolerate such a policy as it would negatively impact its effectiveness); and
- f. refused to support bona fide pro-life lawmakers (with 100 percent pro-life voting records—some of whom are even pro-life leaders in Congress) because they disagreed with NRLC on “campaign finance reform,” which ARL considers to be less important than, say, partial-birth abortion, funding for Planned Parenthood, and so forth, for rating candidates. But it seems that virtually no lawmaker who took the “wrong” position on campaign finance reform was supported by NRLC, regardless of his or her record on actual pro-life issues.

As Robert D. Novak wrote in his September 10, 1998, syndicated column, NRLC refused to support staunchly pro-life Rep. Linda Smith, R-Wash., in her quest to unseat rabidly pro-abortion Senator Patty Murray, D-Wash. The group preferred Smith’s pro-abortion primary opponent, Christopher Bayley, because of his opposition to campaign finance reform. NRLC even called Bayley “pro-life” when nothing could be further from the truth. Even the state affiliate of NRLC bucked its national counterpart and avidly backed Smith, who ended up soundly defeating Bayley. The negative residual effect was unavoidable and Smith was trounced in the general election.

Similarly, NRLC paid for phone calls to pro-lifer voters urging them to support Heather Wilson in a special congressional election, merely because she opposes partial-birth abortion, federal funding of abortion and, you guessed it, campaign finance reform. ARL does not think these positions, which are even popular

among some pro-abortion members of Congress, make a candidate worthy of “pro-life” dollars and support. This is especially true when the candidate (Wilson) calls herself “pro-choice.” ARL believes there should be basic standards met before it supports a candidate with the money of hardworking and caring pro-lifers.

ARL will support only those candidates who are truly pro-life. Furthermore, while one need not immediately register to lobby, ARL has nevertheless become a registered lobbying organization.

Regardless of which group is “best” or “preferred,” this is a matter of opinion and strategy. NRLC’s attacks do not a “fake” organization make. Could Human Life International, American Life League or the Christian Coalition be rightfully accused of being “fake” because they have different approaches?

We at LDI know ARL and we *wholeheartedly* believe such an organization is sorely needed in the Pro-Life Movement. In fact, we are willing to tie our reputation to that of ARL without hesitation. Pro-lifers who support the actions, policies and strategies of the “established” organization (NRLC) are free to continue funding it. But those who hold a different view should have the opportunity to put their money where it is used in a way that is consistent with their convictions. The fact is that there is not just one pro-life organization in this country, regardless of what some may want pro-life Americans to believe.

We pray that all organizations will work together against the real enemy. We at LDI have learned from experience that if a group and its leaders are faithful, ethical, and principled, people will want to support it. If not, the organization does not deserve to be funded.

If there was anything for our readers to be concerned about with regard to ARL, we would be eager to tell you so—plainly and forcefully. But the fact is that ARL is as legitimate as any other pro-life organization. We regret that the founders of ARL have had to endure callous and unwarranted attacks. Moreover, we are sorry that others have spread the charges without verification; assuming the validity mattered to them at all.

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