

## AMERICA'S LONG—AND OFTEN FORGOTTEN—HISTORY OF VIOLENCE TOWARD ABORTION PROVIDERS

A recent editorial in the Washington Post seems either neglectful of, or ignorant to, the history of violence against abortion providers.

CAITLIN CRUZ · JUN 29, 2018



A candlelight vigil held for George Tiller in Boston, Massachusetts, on June 1st, 2009.

(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

A few days ago, the *Washington Post*'s editorial board published a piece in defense of Sarah Huckabee Sanders. The op-ed was essentially a defense of the press secretary, whom the *Post* editors felt ought to be able to eat her meals in peace. The editorial warned that Sanders' treatment at the hands of the restaurant employees could bring about an apocalyptically uncivil future—one where those who side with abortion are made into targets. From the *Post*'s editorial (emphasis mine):

*We nonetheless would argue that Ms. Huckabee, and Ms. Nielsen and Mr. Miller, too, should be allowed to eat dinner in peace. Those who are insisting that we are in a special moment justifying incivility should think for a moment how many Americans might find their own special moment. **How hard is it to imagine, for example, people who strongly believe that abortion is murder deciding that judges or other officials who protect abortion rights should not be able to live peaceably with their families?***

This line of reasoning seems either neglectful of, or ignorant to, reality. Because the reality is, people who "protect abortion rights" *have* been subject to arson, stabbings, shootings, stalking, and bombings, since at least Roe v. Wade legalized abortion.

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The National Abortion Federation, an organization that tracks violence against abortion providers, counted 832 instances in 2017 of trespassing in clinics—the highest such number since the NAF began keeping records. There were also 78,114 incidents of picketing at clinics in 2017, a figure that "far exceeds any other year since we began tracking these statistics in 1977," according to an NAF press release. Abortion providers also reported 34 burglary incidents and 21 incidents of stalking. While there were fortunately no "acts of extreme violence"—such as murder or bombing—last year, there was at least one bombing *attempt*, at a clinic in Champaign, Illinois, according to the Associated Press.

And the relative calm of our present doesn't discount the tumult that preceded it. Consider the tragedy of George Tiller.

Tiller practiced medicine in Wichita, Kansas, for nearly 40 years. He was one of the few doctors in the country to perform late-term abortions. He was a regular target of pro-life protesters, some of whom circulated his home address on "wanted" posters. There were a number of assaults against him, many of them violent: His clinic was bombed in 1986, and Tiller himself was shot in both arms by a protester in 1993. (He went back to work the next day.) Then, on May 31st, 2009, Tiller was shot in the head in the entry hall to his longtime church in Kansas by an anti-choice zealot. He died shortly thereafter.

A little more than a week after Tiller's death, his family announced his clinic would be closed. When the next year another doctor announced her intent to provide abortions in the Wichita area, protesters began showing up outside her family medicine practice and her home.

Many others have lost their lives performing such work, particularly throughout the 1990s, when the country experienced a rash of such violence. There was Barnett Slepian, an abortion provider who was shot and killed in his home in Amherst, New York, in 1998. There was Robert Sanderson, a security guard at an Alabama clinic who was killed after a bomb exploded in 1998. There was Shannon Lowney and Leanne Nichols, both of whom were killed by a gunman at an abortifacient clinic in Boston, where they worked as receptionists, in 1994. There was John Bayard Britton, a provider who was shot and killed outside his Florida clinic. There was David Gunn, yet another provider killed in Florida, in 1993.

The death tallies creep up more recently too. In 2015, a man shot and killed three people at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado. His motive: He believed Planned Parenthood sold "baby parts"—a lie created by conspiracy theorists.

Just because an abortion provider hasn't been murdered in the last few years, or a bombing hasn't successfully targeted a clinic, does not mean violence against providers and clinics hasn't continued.

George Tiller hasn't even been dead a decade. Forgetting his and his colleagues memories' only cedes the already shaky ground that abortion stands on in the public eye.

TAGS · ABORTION PROVIDERS · GEORGE TILLER · SARAH HUCKABEE SANDERS · ABORTION · WASHINGTON POST · PLANNED PARENTHOOD

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