

Pro-Life



Back in 1997 I wrote an editorial, titled “Pro-Choice,” about conservatives and liberals who want to deny people choice in all sorts of areas. So I thought it was time I wrote a “pro-life” editorial. This time I want to focus on one of the most important choices: the choice of life over death. (And once again, I’m not writing about abortion.) Not much controversy here, right? Everyone prefers life to death. Everyone wants to live as long as possible. You’d think so. But no, it turns

out that lots of people are not so sure that life is a good thing.

The most obvious are Osama bin Laden and his network of terrorists. Islamic martyrs “love death as you love life,” bin Laden tells an interviewer. “The Americans are fighting so they can live and enjoy the material things in this life,” a Taliban spokesman says, “but we are fighting so we can die in the cause of Allah.” In a video for his followers, bin Laden intones, “The love of this world is wrong.”

And there he reaches the crux of the issue. He is wrong. This world is well worth loving. It is right and good for human beings to try to make the most of life on this earth. The Americans are indeed “fighting so they can live and enjoy the material things of this life.” Not just material things, of course—we fight for such values as love, sex, family, friendship, community, integrity, and courage. But at the root of all these is the love of life in all its wonder and happiness.

One of the biggest complaints modern Americans have about life is how stressed they feel, how they are pulled in so many directions. Why are we stressed? Not because we have to work longer hours than we used to. Whatever the statisticians may tell us about the hours we work, we know that our grandparents and their grandparents worked harder than we do to achieve a much lower standard of living. How many hours a week would I have to work to afford a small house without air conditioning, radio, television, or a refrigerator? No, the problem today is that capitalism has given us so many options; but who would want to give up all that abundance?

Or all the *interestingness*? Whatever your interests, the modern world is filled with enough to keep you busy for a lifetime. Every day there’s more news about science, politics, international affairs, sports, entertainment, and so on—not to mention new books, new movies, new music, new religions, even new family and friends. I for one don’t want to die because I want to find out what happens next—in everything from sports to politics to TV soaps to the newest scientific discoveries.

Sadly, the Islamic terrorists are not the only people who see life as a limited blessing. The debates over genetic engineering have brought out our native-born anti-lifers in droves. One of the most-quoted bioethicists of our time, Daniel Callahan of the Hastings Center, says: “The worst possible way to resolve [the question of

life extension] is to leave it up to individual choice. There is no known social good coming from the conquest of death.”

Callahan is a liberal, in the modern welfarist sense. Conservatives such as philosopher Leon Kass, named to head President Bush’s Council on Bioethics, and scholar Francis Fukuyama, a member of the council, sound remarkably similar. In a debate at the Cato Institute, Fukuyama said, “The whole effort to defeat death, it seems to me, is a kind of striving that speaks of a kind of serious lack of a certain kind of moral perspective.” A certain kind, perhaps.

Kass writes, “The finitude of human life is a blessing for every human individual.” In a speech in Jerusalem two years ago, he complained that Jewish scholars “nearly always come down strongly in favor of medical progress and on the side of life—more life, stronger life, new life.” He objects to their making “victory over mortality” the goal of medical science. This Jewish attitude

has also been noticed in the Middle East, where Hamas leader Ismail Haniya says that Jews “love life more than any other people, and they prefer not to die.”

And then there are the environmental extremists, who think there’s just too much human life on earth. Jacques Cousteau told the *UNESCO Courier* in 1991, “In order to stabilize world populations, we must eliminate 350,000 people per day.” Earth First! founder Dave Foreman writes, “We humans have become a disease, the Humanpox.” Celebrated young novelist William T. Vollman says, “I would say there are too many people in the world and maybe something like AIDS or something like war may be a good thing on that level.”

There are many ways to divide people according to their political beliefs—communist and anti-communist, liberal and conservative, libertarian and statist, reactionary and modernist, and so on. But the issue of whether you celebrate life on this earth and want to extend it or think that “the conquest of death” lacks any value seems a good place to draw a line. With enemies of life in abundance, maybe we need what Hayek called a party of life, a “party that favors free growth and spontaneous evolution,” a party that appreciates and encourages the enjoyment of life on this earth. And since choice is an essential part of human life, the pro-life party must be pro-choice as well. The Declaration of Independence, which not only declares that governments derive their powers “from the consent of the governed” but also claims for all people the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, can serve as the party manifesto.

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—David Boaz