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At Notre Dame, Obama Calls for Civil Tone in Abortion Debate

By [PETER BAKER](#) and [SUSAN SAULNY](#)

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — [President Obama](#) directly confronted America's deep divide over abortion on Sunday as he appealed to partisans on each side to find ways to respect one another's basic decency and even work together to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies.

As anti-abortion demonstrators protested outside and a few hecklers shouted inside, Mr. Obama used a commencement address at the [University of Notre Dame](#) to call for more "open hearts, open minds, fair-minded words" in a debate that has polarized the country for decades. The audience at this Roman Catholic institution cheered his message and drowned out protesters, some of whom called him a "baby killer."

"Maybe we won't agree on abortion," Mr. Obama told graduating students, relatives and professors, "but we can still agree that this heart-wrenching decision for any woman is not made casually. It has both moral and spiritual dimension.

"So let us work together to reduce the number of women seeking abortions. Let's reduce unintended pregnancies. Let's make adoption more available. Let's provide care and support for women who do carry their children to term."

The encounter was a rare foray into one of the most volatile areas of public life for Mr. Obama, who supports abortion rights but has sought to avoid becoming enmeshed in the issue. As recently as last week, aides said he would mention the controversy in his speech without dwelling on it. But ultimately, he decided to devote most of his address to bridging the chasm over abortion and other moral issues.

Mr. Obama arrived here amid an emotional public argument about the duties of a Catholic university and the state of the abortion conflict. Bishops, advocates on each side and students complained that it was inappropriate to have him deliver the address and receive an honorary degree since he diverges so profoundly from the church's teachings.

Notre Dame said it had invited Mr. Obama — the sixth president to give a commencement

address here — because of his commitment to social justice and his history-making role as the first African-American president.

While several hundred people attended an anti-abortion Mass, about 100 abortion opponents demonstrated against the president's visit at the edge of campus, shouting back and forth with a smaller number of abortion rights demonstrators. They yelled through megaphones, waved banners at motorists and distributed leaflets to pedestrians. Nearly 40 protesters were arrested trying to enter the campus, Sgt. Bill Redman of the St. Joseph County Police Department said, including Norma McCorvey, the plaintiff in *Roe v. Wade*, who has become a campaigner against abortion.

"How dare you honor him?" read a billboard on a road outside South Bend. A plane overhead pulled a banner with a picture of the feet of an aborted fetus.

Jon Buttaci, a graduating senior who boycotted the commencement ceremony in favor of a small vigil at the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, said: "The Catholicism on this campus doesn't match up with what the larger church is teaching. We're standing up for prestige instead of standing up for the church."

In his address, Mr. Obama did not engage on the merits of the debate on abortion; he instead made an appeal to each side of the issue. He said he supported a "sensible conscience clause" allowing health care providers to withhold abortion or other services that conflicted with religious beliefs. And he recalled agreeing with an anti-abortion voter who complained that his Senate campaign Web site in 2004 had demonized those who disagreed with Mr. Obama by calling them "right-wing ideologues."

"Each side will continue to make its case to the public with passion and conviction," he said. "But surely we can do so without reducing those with differing views to caricature."

The modest protests here were amplified on national airwaves. "The problem here is that we're trivializing abortion," the Rev. Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life, said on "Fox News Sunday." "But the people are speaking out. People are getting angry that 1.2 million children are being aborted every year."

[Michael Steele](#), chairman of the [Republican National Committee](#) and a Catholic, said Notre Dame should have allowed Mr. Obama to speak but not given him an honorary degree. "I think it's inappropriate," Mr. Steele said on "Meet the Press" on [NBC](#). "And the president should speak, but the degree should not be conferred."

The crowd inside the Joyce Center enthusiastically supported Mr. Obama, erupting into sustained cheers when he arrived. Some graduating students adorned their mortarboards with a yellow

cross and baby feet, a symbol of the anti-abortion movement. But just as many had the president's red-white-and-blue campaign logo on theirs, and the crowd sided with him against hecklers.

When a man sitting in the rafters of the stadium began shouting, the crowd drowned him out, and he was taken away by security officers. Three other men stood up one at a time within the next few minutes shouting "abortion is murder" and "stop killing our children." The crowd responded by shouting, "Yes, we can," Mr. Obama's campaign slogan, and "We are N.D.," a Notre Dame chant.

Mr. Obama added his own ad lib. "We're not going to shy away from things that are uncomfortable sometimes," he said as one heckler was led away.

Mr. Obama has tried to sidestep confrontation over abortion, saying at one point that he wanted "to tamp down some of the anger surrounding this issue." He repealed President [George W. Bush](#)'s restrictions on federal money for international family planning groups and embryonic [stem cell](#) research. But while he endorsed abortion rights legislation during the campaign, he said last month that "the Freedom of Choice Act is not my highest legislative priority."

The Notre Dame invitation and the pending retirement of Justice [David H. Souter](#), who voted to uphold abortion rights on the [Supreme Court](#), pushed the issue to the forefront. And a new Gallup poll suggested a shift in public opinion. Fifty-one percent called themselves "pro-life" compared with 42 percent who described themselves as "pro-choice" — the first time a majority has embraced the position since Gallup began asking the question in 1995.

As Mr. Obama departed, his motorcade passed a few dozen protesters shouting at an intersection and holding signs that showed fetuses and said things like "Notre Dame spiritually sold out." Others approaching campus for the ceremony were likewise greeted by photographs of mangled fetuses.

Many demonstrators had no affiliation with Notre Dame. "You're not a Christian university," shouted Mona Wenger, 54, who said she was not Catholic. "You have invited the worst baby killer in the nation."

Jim Leeson, 65, said he came from Garrett, Ind., to attend a Mass opposing abortion and to "prayerfully protest."

"It's time for this university to get back to its roots and values," Mr. Leeson said. "I'm glad this is happening here."

Most students stayed away from the demonstrations. Melissa Pirkey, a sociology graduate

student, stood alongside the anti-abortion protesters with her own placard: "This ND student welcomes Obama."

With mortarboard in hand, Robert Kessler, 22, a graduating senior, wandered among the protesters and shook his head. "Some of these pictures are grotesque, and I don't want them to be part of my graduation," Mr. Kessler said. "If these groups wanted to make a difference, they could have better used their money on homes for unwed mothers."

Dirk Johnson contributed reporting.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 19, 2009

An article on Monday about President Obama's commencement address at the University of Notre Dame misstated the year of his race for the United States Senate. He ran in 2004, not 2006.

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