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Reagan's Darkest Hour

"Therapeutic" abortion in California.

By Paul Kengor & Patricia Clark Doerner

As president, Ronald Reagan was an unflagging champion of unborn human life. “Today there is a wound in our national conscience,” Reagan told a joint session of Congress in his 1986 State of the Union. “America will never be whole as long as the right to life granted by our Creator is denied to the unborn.”

But honest discussions of Reagan’s record on the abortion issue admit that as California governor he signed into law a liberalization of abortion that led to an explosion of abortions in the nation’s largest state. Reagan critics and supporters alike recognize this fact — one that is particularly tough to swallow for staunch pro-lifers. The full story, however, is more complicated — and worth setting straight now, 35 years after *Roe v. Wade*.

On June 14, 1967, Ronald Reagan signed the Therapeutic Abortion Act, after only six months as California governor. From a total of 518 legal abortions in California in 1967, the number of abortions would soar to an annual average of 100,000 in the remaining years of Reagan’s two terms — more abortions than in any U.S. state prior to the advent of *Roe v. Wade*. Reagan’s signing of the abortion bill was an ironic beginning for a man often seen as the modern father of the pro-life movement. How did this happen?

When the issue surfaced in the first months of his governorship, Reagan was unsure how to react. Surprising as it may seem today, in 1967 abortion was not the great public issue that it is today. Reagan later admitted that abortion had been “a subject I’d never given much thought to.” Moreover, his aides were divided on the question.

Reagan began to vigorously study the issue and the Therapeutic Abortion Act. He asked his longtime adviser and Cabinet secretary Bill Clark — a devout Catholic who had contemplated the priesthood — for counsel. “Bill, I’ve got to know more — theologically, philosophically, medically,” Reagan confided. Clark loaded up the governor with a box of reading materials, which he took home and read in semi-seclusion. Edmund Morris later said that, by the time the Therapeutic Abortion Act reached his desk, “Reagan was quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas.” Years later, Reagan remarked that he did “more studying and soul searching” on the issue than any other as governor.

Nonetheless, he signed the bill. Reagan and his staff calculated that if he vetoed the bill, his veto would be overridden by the state legislature. Therefore, he decided to do what he could to make the bill less harmful, arguing for the insertion of certain language that eliminated its worst features and allowed for abortion only in rare cases — such as rape or incest, or where pregnancy would gravely impair the physical or mental health of the mother.

The Therapeutic Abortion Act became law. And as would happen with nearly every abortion law in the years ahead, the mental-health provision was abused by patient and doctor alike. Reagan biographer Lou Cannon notes that even the bill's Democratic sponsor confessed to being surprised that physicians so liberally interpreted the law.

Reagan was shocked at the unintended consequences of his action. Morris said Reagan was left with an “undefinable sense of guilt” after watching abortions skyrocket. Cannon claims this was “the only time as governor or president that Reagan acknowledged a mistake on major legislation.” Clark called the incident “perhaps Reagan's greatest disappointment in public life.”

For Reagan, one good thing did come out of this disappointment. As Georgetown's Matt Sitman notes, “It is impossible to understand his later staunchly pro-life positions without grasping the lessons he learned from this early political battle.” Reagan, says Sitman, survived the ordeal with a “profoundly intellectual understanding of the abortion issue.... It was in 1967 that his ideas concerning the beginning of human life were fully formed.” He now had a cogent understanding, politically and morally, of abortion and its implications.

Reagan would later denounce abortion so strongly and so frequently from the Oval Office that Bill Clark has compiled a 45-page document of Reagan's quotes on abortion, collected from the official *Presidential Papers*. Reagan even authored a small book — *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation*, featuring contributions from Bill Clark, Malcolm Muggeridge, and Mother Teresa — that was published by the Human Life Foundation in 1984. White House moderates wanted Reagan to delay publication until after the 1984 election, fearing it would turn off pro-choice Republicans, but Reagan refused. He would not be burned again on abortion. No more compromises.

Ronald Reagan emerged from 1967 repentant, but ready for future battles. The damage was done; of course, the results were nothing compared to the travesty that a group of men in black robes in Washington were planning six years later.

– *Paul Kengor and Patricia Clark Doerner are co-authors of [The Judge: William P. Clark, Ronald Reagan's Top Hand](#). Paul Kengor is also author of [The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism](#) and professor of political science at Grove City College.*

