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Violence will kill anti-abortion effort . . .

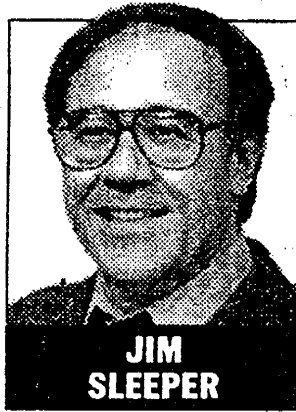
The murder of abortion doctor John Bayard Britton in Pensacola, Fla., is the beginning of the end of the "pro-life" movement as a force in American politics. That has nothing to do with its ideology and everything to do with how Americans treat movements that fall to extremists of the right or the left.

Our political landscape is littered with the wreckage of violent movements that liberals, too, supported with their bodies and checkbooks. Just as the pro-life movement risks becoming pro-death and drowning in what President Clinton calls "domestic terrorism," so the anti-war movement of the 1960s blew itself and others up in its homemade war. The slogan, "There is no way to peace; peace is the way," gave way to, "Bring the war home!" and "Off the pigs!" The end overwhelmed the means.

To early anti-war activists, some of them religious pacifists, the Vietnamese Communists, however regrettably violent, carried the hope of their country's liberation from a far more violent colonial exploitation. Teach-ins, prayer vigils and campaigns tried to awaken Americans to this truth. It wasn't the whole truth — Communism had its own brutality and idiosyncrasy — but as slaughter continued and protesters were repressed, some made the fatal mistake of likening "Amerika" to Nazi Germany to justify violent domestic revolt. "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, NLF [National Liberation Front] is gonna win!" some cried, falling silent as activists killed fellow Americans in bombings and holdups.

Early pro-lifers, too, began with hopeful beliefs about the conception of life and the nature of sexuality, beliefs they think compatible with the dignity of women as the bearers of new life and with liberal social and economic reforms that Catholic bishops regularly endorse.

These are not necessarily marginal views. Just as some conservatives began to doubt the war, some liberals now fret about new sexual mores, including "abortion on demand." Hoping to tap this legitimate moral concern, Operation Rescue adopted early anti-war tactics. But while governments do wage wars, they don't perform abortions, and even many who dislike abortion don't want government to control it. As government permits the "slaughter of innocents" to continue (and



represses protesters, as they see it), gentler pro-lifers lose out to right-wing misogynists.

Will this movement's religious roots save it from the nihilism that sank anti-war activists? I doubt it. As in the '60s, absolutists are pushing out moderates and destroying the movement's broader appeal. "The recent decline in protesters at clinics is related to the murder of [Britton's prede-

cessor in Pensacola, Dr.] David Gunn," notes David Garrow, author of "Liberty and Sexuality," a magisterial history of reproductive-rights battles. Moderates' departures also explain how, shortly before Britton's murder, the pro-violence views of his alleged killer, Paul Hill, could sway a Chicago pro-life convention.

In the '70s, similarly, anti-war activists' lethal bombing of a research lab in Madison, Wis., and a lethal Brinks robbery near Boston were preceded by violence-prone extremists' takeovers at Chicago conventions — the 1967 Palmer House "new politics" confab, protests at the 1968 Democratic Convention and the 1969 meltdown of Students for a Democratic Society at the Chicago Coliseum. The war did end, but little thanks to "the movement," which already had imploded after insuring the victories of Richard Nixon and a California governor named Ronald Reagan.

FORTUNATELY, OUR political culture has saving graces, left us by James Madison and other founders, that merit updating to include everyone. As Britton was gunned down Friday morning, I was heading to a White House meeting of the Communitarian Network, a group of pro-lifers and pro-choicers, evangelicals and secular humanists who are renewing the best in American civil discourse.

The network, founded by Prof. Amitai Etzioni, insists we can teach "character" and core values such as truth-telling and treating people with dignity — even in public schools — without coming to blows over abortion and other "show stoppers."

Community leaders who want the religious right and ultra-liberals to take a step back and let civility hold sway can contact the Communitarians at (800) 245-7460. And all of us can mull the lessons of Pensacola and other places too numerous (and painful) to mention.