

Abortion foes debate best PR approach

by [David Gibson](#)

January 23, 2013

When thousands of abortion opponents gather on Friday (Jan. 25) on the National Mall for their annual protest march, they will be united in their fierce passion for ending a procedure that the Supreme Court legalized 40 years ago in the controversial Roe v. Wade decision.

But they will also be more divided than ever on how best to rally people to join their cause: shock them with harsh slogans and graphic images of mangled fetuses, or convince them with reasonable arguments and affecting ultrasound images.

If activists are going to the March for Life "to display graphic photos or videos of aborted babies," Simcha Fisher wrote this week in the National Catholic Register, a conservative outlet, "I'm begging you to reconsider."

Fisher admitted that such images once shook her out of "a vague, fuzzy support for the pro-life cause" and turned her into a serious activist.

But she believes that "a public place is not the place to use these images – ever, I'm convinced. These images are like a terrible weapon which should be used with fear and trembling, and only as a last resort."

Fisher's view is hardly universal among abortion foes. "America will not reject abortion until America sees abortion," as the Rev. Frank Pavone, head of Priests for Life, likes to say.

Pavone and other longtime veterans of the anti-abortion fight – leaders of the American Life League, Operation Rescue, and the Pro-Life Action League, for example – still see the shock value in gruesome images, which they say are effective and also appropriate to the gravity and reality of the issue.

But they tend to be activists who were mobilized in the early years of the movement, when they rallied supporters with videos like "The Silent Scream" and drew public attention with guerrilla tactics at abortion clinics.

Now, however, a new generation of activists has a new approach and new tools to make their case in a more appealing way – vivid computer imaging that shows thriving babies in the womb and a growing network of counseling centers that seek to convince pregnant women not to have an abortion.

"You've got some who believe in holding up graphic signs of abortion. I'm not one of those and I don't think that's the best approach," Jeanne Monahan, 40, who recently took over as head of the March for Life, said a couple of weeks before this year's demonstration.

"I think we can be more positive and compelling with science and reason."

Champions of the soft-sell approach were shocked at last year's March for Life when one group unveiled a huge video display of graphic images, a tactic that led to a backlash among some abortion opponents and sparked an intense debate in blogs and online forums that has continued.

"In a situation teaching about abortion these are powerful tools, but to thrust it on everyone with no regard or warning is irresponsible and self righteous," Theresa Bonopartis, an anti-abortion activist from New York, wrote after the 2012 march.

The debate is not likely to be settled anytime soon. As Monahan said, "Everyone's there and they've got their constitutional right to say what they believe and to do it in the way that they want."

Moreover, legalized abortion seems to be a settled issue for most Americans, according to various polls, and the frustration with the status quo leads some abortion opponents to push for more aggressive PR efforts, notes Michele Dillon, a sociologist at the University of New Hampshire who has written about abortion and the culture wars.

But, she says, the younger generation has the better argument.

"I don't think there's any evidence showing that these extreme visual representations have made a dent in the general support for the legalization of abortion," Dillon said. "It just turns people off."

In her column on Tuesday, the 40th anniversary of the Roe ruling, Fisher listed many of the other reasons frequently cited for not using graphic abortion images: to avoid scandalizing children and making women feel rejected, to show respect for the fetus in the images, and to avoid "desensitization" among abortion opponents.

But at the heart of all the advice, she said, is "basic psychology."

"If you want people to listen to you and have sympathy for your cause," she wrote, "don't come across as a lunatic." —*RNS*