

Antiabortion analogy is flawed but popular

by [David Gibson](#) in the [December 13, 2011](#) issue

Is legalized abortion akin to the Nazi Holocaust? The analogy is a standard talking point among abortion opponents, and a new half-hour video by a prominent Christian apologist has gone viral by making the comparison more explicit and graphic than any antiabortion sound bite on the evening news.

But the success of the video and the popularity of the argument raise the broader question of whether comparing legalized abortion to the Holocaust—or to slavery, another widespread analogy—is logical and legitimate, even if it is effective.

The new Internet movie is called *180*, a title meant to signal that viewers will do a U-turn from their previous support for abortion rights. In many respects, it's a standard piece of propaganda in the culture wars.

The video was produced by Ray Comfort, a controversial evangelical Christian from New Zealand who announces at the start of the video that he is Jewish, though in fact his father was a gentile and he was raised without religious instruction. Comfort became a born-again Christian in his early twenties.

For the first half of *180*, Comfort interweaves chilling clips of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi death camps with street-level interviews of young people who display fairly predictable ignorance about the Holocaust (and much else). He then pivots to make a connection between what he's told them about the attempted genocide of the Jews and modern-day legalized abortion.

Scales fall from eyes

and minds are miraculously changed, at least in Comfort's careful, if self-serving, editing. "What's a pretty good documentary could have been even stronger without the fools early on," as *Christianity Today's* Mark Moring put it.

But middling reviews and even blistering criticism are hardly going to sink *180*. The Holocaust analogy is so powerful that opponents of abortion don't need to examine it very closely, while supporters of abortion rights simply dismiss it out of hand without really refuting it.

So what

is wrong with the comparison? The most obvious and common objection is that it deeply offends Jewish sensibilities, even more so when abortion foes use the power of raw numbers to argue that abortion is actually worse than the Holocaust.

"Nearly 60 million Americans have been slaughtered by abortion, and that's ten times the amount of Jews who died under the Nazis," argued Comfort in responding to critics like Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who said those who compare the Holocaust to abortion "prove that they do not know what the Holocaust was."

For

a number of antiabortion critics, the problems go beyond respecting the memory of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Instead, they say the analogy has holes that undermine the credibility of campaigns against abortion and can ultimately harm the movement's ability to make its case to the wider culture.

One major flaw in the Holocaust logic, they note, is that the U.S. government is not mandating that women have abortions—unlike the Third Reich, which ordered the extermination of Jews and other classes of people. "At this point in time, neither state nor federal governments require pregnant women to kill their unborn children, regardless of the women's circumstances or the unborn children's condition," Teresa Collett, an antiabortion advocate who teaches at the University of St. Thomas School of Law, has written in critiquing the Holocaust comparison.

"To employ the language of constitutional law, abortions are not state actions, unlike the imprisonment and killing of the Jews by the Nazis," Collett wrote in an exchange on the topic at *Mirror of Justice*, a popular blog on Catholic legal theory.

Another problem is that even if one considers abortion to be murder, it does not automatically make women who have abortions murderers. "The mothers who choose abortion often feel as though they have no other choice, and admittedly, the choices they face often are not easy ones," Robert Vischer, another law professor at St. Thomas, argued in the *Mirror of Justice* debate.

"I do not think that choosing to kill their unborn children is the answer, but choosing that answer does not make them the moral equivalents of the Nazis, and neither does our government's willingness to permit them that choice."

In a widely cited 2008 essay in *Commonweal* magazine, a liberal Catholic periodical, Cathleen Kaveny, who teaches law and theology at the University of Notre Dame, noted several other problems with the analogy.

One is that the Nazis would have jailed or even killed anyone who helped Jews escape persecution. "In contrast, the pro-life movement in the United States has a strong political voice," Kaveny wrote. "Ongoing efforts to convince women to carry their pregnancies to term, and to give those women assistance in doing so, are entirely legal and legitimate, and often effective. Crisis pregnancy centers are not analogous to the 'secret annex' in *The Diary of Anne Frank*."

A final problem that both Kaveny and Collett highlighted is that comparing legalized abortion to the Holocaust implies that the U.S. government deserves the same fate as Nazi Germany—namely, to be overthrown. And that's a logical conclusion few if any antiabortion activists are going to make.

Still, a number of antiabortion activists who agree that the Holocaust comparison is flawed say critics need to come up with a better substitute, and so far they haven't. That means that the comparison isn't likely to go away anytime soon.

Though

the argument can wind up turning off as many people as it convinces, its emotional appeal is amplified by its apparent simplicity—and by the frustration that many abortion opponents feel over their inability to end what they see as a monstrous injustice. There's an old saying that "every analogy limps," meaning that no comparison is perfect. But that doesn't mean that an analogy can't run away with an argument. —RNS