

Anti-abortion crowd targets birth control

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By Bonnie Erbe

It's no secret to those who follow Washington politics that birth control has been "next on the list" of anti-abortion, religious conservatives. Following the enthronement of President Bush's Victorian coterie in 2001, their top priority -- an imposition of "everything but" a ban on abortion -- has been accomplished in five short years. Now there's undeniable proof that abortion was not the home run they longed for, but more tantamount to first base in a long-range plan to ban birth control, too.

First, the widely maligned Alan Guttmacher Institute -- widely maligned by religious conservatives, that is -- issued a report showing the economic divide disproportionately foists more unplanned pregnancies on poor women, while simultaneously denying them access to abortion. Courtesy of the so-called Hyde Amendment, which bars federal funds for abortion, and the abstinence-only crowd, women living below the poverty line are now four times more likely than affluent women to experience unintentional pregnancy (and by inference, to bear a child, whether wanted, planned or not).

In addition, The Washington Post informs us that 50 percent more poor women gave birth in 2001 than in 1994, while the birth rate decreased among affluent women. Poor women who chose to terminate their pregnancies aborted an average of six days later than their affluent counterparts.

The Guttmacher data documents only what happened until the year the Victorian coterie took over in Washington, including national policy on birth control. The New York Times this past weekend chronicled what has happened since.

"Many Christians who are active in the evolving anti-birth-control arena state frankly that what links their efforts is a religious commitment to altering the moral landscape of the country. In particular, and not to put too fine a point on it, they want to change the way Americans have sex. The FDA adviser on reproductive-health drugs, proclaimed himself 'fully committed to promoting an understanding of human sexuality and procreation radically at odds with the prevailing views and practices of our contemporary culture.' "

The Times also tells us that the uber-conservative group Focus on the Family, which holds a front-row seat in the Bush court, posts a kind of contraceptive warning label on its Web site: " 'Modern contraceptive inventions have given many an exaggerated sense of safety and prompted more people than ever before to move sexual expression outside the marriage boundary.' Contraception, by this logic, encourages sexual promiscuity, sexual deviance (such as homosexuality) and a preoccupation with sex that is unhealthy even within marriage."

With the president's public approval ratings competitive with Herbert Hoover's in the "most hated ever" range, one would think those die-hards might retreat. No, they're forging straight ahead, hoping to wring every regression they can write into federal law and regulation before they decamp or are kicked out of town in January 2009.

These people don't give up when they're rejected. They thrive. Unlike pro-choicers who celebrated the 1973 Roe v. Wade victory, then went home assuming that abortion rights were as permanent as the carvings on Mount Rushmore, those folks love a fight. They continue to roll back women's gains even after the public has indicated clearly in poll after poll it wants them to leave settled law alone.

The Times quotes the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as saying in a December 2005 column, "The effective separation of sex from procreation may be one of the most important defining marks of our age -- and one of the most ominous. This awareness is spreading among American evangelicals, and it threatens to set loose a firestorm. ... A growing number of evangelicals are rethinking the issue of birth control -- and facing the hard questions posed by reproductive technologies."

They used to utter those kinds of statements only in private, sotto voce. Now they feel free to proclaim them in print, on the record. If they want to repress their own kind, let them. It's when they try to repress the rest of us that we need to usher them back into the ward from which they emerged.