

## Whose Life?

By Rachel Power

George Bush's policies on abortion and his invasion of Iraq can be seen as part of the same ideology — one based on his professed belief in the sanctity of human life and America's role as its protector. Bush's expectation that the Iraqi people would be dancing in the streets with gratitude for the imposition of US-style democracy is part of the same fantasy that sees a baby as a divine being, a symbol of purity, entirely independent of the mother. In both cases, there is inherent denial of sociological realities and a blind refusal of responsibility for the brutal impact of his policies.

One of Bush's first acts as President was to reinstate the Mexico City Policy, or Global Gag Rule, prohibiting the flow of US foreign money to overseas family planning organisations that provide abortion services or related information to their patients or the public. As a result, funds are being denied to international NGOs, many of which not only respond to the demand for family planning, including the provision of contraception, but also address a range of critical health and community needs. Many are dealing with cultures in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia in which married women are expected to provide sex on demand.

At the signing of the partial Birth Abortion Ban Act in 2003, Bush championed: 'a basic standard of humanity, the duty of the strong to protect the weak'. America, he said:

*... stands for liberty, for the pursuit of happiness and for the unalienable right to life. And the most basic duty of government is to defend the life of the innocent ... In the debate about the rights of the unborn ... we're asked to live out our calling as Americans ... [to] make this a more just and welcoming society.*

Meanwhile, he is sending an army of youths — many with no innocence left to lose — into a war that has seen the mass bombing of civilians, including countless children, all in their name of their own liberation. The ironies are clear.

A renewed debate about the moral and emotional, alongside the social, aspects of the abortion, has arisen in response to the Bush administration's draconian policies on the issue. In Australia, recent comments by Health Minister Tony Abbott, as well as the screening of Julia Black's film *My Foetus* on the ABC's *Compass*, have added to the controversy. The film, made while Black was pregnant with her first child, reconsiders an abortion she had more than a decade earlier. It shows a four-week pregnant woman having a suction termination, as well as foetal remains at 10, 11 and 21 weeks gestation. Some pro-choice advocates saw the ABC's screening of *My Foetus* as an unacceptable collusion with right wing religious groups.

The film prompted certain prominent feminists, such as Catherine Lumby, Eva Cox and Wendy McCarthy, to call for a 'constructive discussion' about late-term abortions in the light of technological advances that enable extremely premature babies to survive outside the womb. Millions of dollars are being spent on keeping very premature babies, many born at less than thirty weeks gestation, alive and a high percentage of these babies will have ongoing mental and physical disabilities. However, Abbott and his supporters are using this questioning of later-term abortions as a way in to promoting an outright ban on, as he sees it, the 'murder' of unborn babies.

For some time, pro-choice advocates have been accused of leaving the foetus out of the picture, while anti-abortionists have been charged with ignoring women's circumstances. The screening

of *My Foetus* has renewed the arguments about which side of the debate can lay 'claim' to the foetus. Lumby has taken offence at accusations that her willingness to engage with the debate has given confidence to Abbott and other outspoken right-wing Catholics wanting a 'rethink about the abortion culture'. As she argues, women have always had to address the ethical issues surrounding abortion, at both an intellectual level and, for many, as part of a highly personal, often tortuous, decision-making process regarding their capacity to care for a potential child. To reduce it to a 'question of the mother's convenience', as Abbott does, is absurd.

It makes sense that once you have a baby, the potential of an earlier, unborn life is given new definition. At the same time, however, experiencing one's love for a child creates a profound sense of empathy with women trying to raise their children in war-torn or poverty-stricken situations, where children are dying as a matter of course; when the circumstances of a woman who already has ten children and is risking terrible consequences, to both her and her family's health and livelihood, becomes all too real.

At its heart, the debate comes down to a fantasy projection versus the real. Conservative religious doctrines, represented here by the likes of Abbott, are having a devastating effect on women's lives globally. Only the most patriarchal religions, including Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Judaism, continue to prohibit abortion under any circumstances, even to save a woman's life. While Abbott is vilifying women who choose abortion as unthinking, selfish villains, his Government condemns single mothers for raising 'dysfunctional families' and creates policies that give women no real option but to terminate their pregnancies. On an international scale, both the US and Australian Governments are managing to ignore commitments made as part of official pledges to increase development aid.

According to a recent *Bulletin* survey, two thirds of Australians support women's access to a safe and affordable abortion and there is no indication that Abbott's hysteria is representative of the general view. In America, over one million protestors turned out in Washington in April this year in support of abortion rights and opposition to Bush administration policies on women's health issues.

Upon signing the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, Bush proclaimed:

*With this action, we widen the circle of compassion and inclusion in our society, and we reaffirm that the United States of America is building a culture of life.*

A culture of 'life' in which thousands of children are dying every day of easily treatable diseases and malnutrition. A culture that is seeing parents in Australia's detention centres confronting an environment so hostile that a child can lose his or her will to live. A culture in which First and Third World women alike are confronting the prospect of a return to the most brutal methods of abortion as a result of the imposition of a patriarchal, fundamental system of beliefs.

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