

The assassination of Dr. George Tiller

Kate Randall
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The assassination of Dr. George Tiller by a right-wing anti-abortion fanatic is both a personal tragedy and a savage attack on basic democratic rights. It has exposed the pathological state of political life in America and the absence of any commitment to democracy within the country's ruling elite.

Dr. George Tiller, who wore a bulletproof vest at all times in public, was killed by one shot to the head outside his church on Sunday. He was the medical director of one of the few clinics in the country offering late-term abortions. Sixty-seven at the time of his death, he leaves behind his wife Jeanne, three daughters—two of them physicians—a son, and ten grandchildren.

A statement released by the family read, "George dedicated his life to providing women with high-quality health care despite frequent threats and violence. We ask that he be remembered as a good husband, father and grandfather and a dedicated servant on behalf of the rights of women everywhere."

The alleged gunman, Scott Roeder, 51, appeared Wednesday in a Wichita, Kansas, courtroom via video from jail and was charged with one count of murder in connection with Dr. Tiller's murder. He was also charged with aggravated assault for allegedly threatening two people who tried to stop him.

Roeder has a long record of anti-abortion fanaticism and connections to extreme-right and fascistic organizations. A former envelope factory worker, lately he was doing odd jobs.

He has been involved in the anti-tax Freemen movement as well as a group called One Supreme Court, which claimed its members were "sovereign citizens" not subject to federal and state laws.

Roeder was well known to the employees of Dr. Tiller's Wichita clinic, where anti-abortion zealots appeared daily shouting "Killer Tiller!," "Babies Killed Here!" and "Tiller's Slaughter House!"

The anti-abortion hysteria personified by Scott Roeder and his murderous actions has been cultivated by a network of religious fanatics, right-wing media personalities, and leading figures within the Republican Party.

Following Dr. Tiller's murder, Randall Terry, founder of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, described the doctor as a "mass murderer" and declared, "He reaped what he sowed." He said Tiller would be remembered as "one of the villains of history."

Bill O'Reilly of Fox News has ranted against Dr. Tiller dozens of times on his talk show, declaring him guilty of "Nazi stuff" and warning ominously that he would face "Judgment Day."

O'Reilly defended his attacks on Tiller in the aftermath of the doctor's murder. Dismissing his critics, he wrote, "Every single thing we said about Tiller was true."

The services provided by the Women's Health Care Services clinic where George Tiller was medical director are protected by law and have been upheld by the US Supreme Court.

Before the doctor's murder last Sunday, his Wichita clinic was one of only three facilities in the US where women, often facing the agonizing decision of terminating their pregnancy after the 20th week due to horrible fetal deformities or the danger the pregnancy posed to their lives, could seek medical assistance. Women from across the country were referred by doctors and hospitals to Tiller's clinic only to be terrorized—as at other women's clinics nationwide—by anti-abortion protesters, who hurl obscenities and hold placards displaying grisly photos.

Since the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion in the US, these clinics have been targeted by anti-abortion vigilantes. Doctors and other clinic employees have been wounded and killed in numerous

violent attacks organized by members of “pro-life” groups:

- March 10, 1993: Dr. David Gunn was gunned down outside a Pensacola, Florida, clinic.
- Dec. 30, 1994: Two receptionists at two Boston-area clinics were killed, and another five wounded.
- Oct. 23, 1998: Dr. Barnett Slepian was fatally shot in his home in a Buffalo, New York, suburb.
- Dr. George Tiller was himself the victim of an assassination attempt on August 19, 1993, when he was shot in both arms outside his Wichita clinic.

Dr. Warren Hern, a Boulder, Colorado, physician, spoke about the threat exposed by the murder of his friend and colleague. “I’m profoundly sad and I’m furious and I think the American people need to understand that we have a fascist movement in this country,” Hern told the *Colorado Independent* last Sunday. “We don’t have to invade Iraq to find terrorists. They’re right here killing abortion doctors.”

He struck out in particular at the Republican Party’s exploitation of this campaign of intimidation, which it has utilized as a political prop for decades.

“Dr. Tiller is dead by an anti-abortion assassin, and this is the absolutely inevitable consequence of 35 years of anti-abortion fanatic rhetoric and intimidation and assassination violence and exploitation by the Republican Party of this movement.”

Hern’s forthright description of the political realities underlying this heinous crime stands in stark contrast to the cowardice and complicity of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

President Obama issued a mealy-mouthed two-sentence statement on the killing: “I am shocked and outraged by the murder of Dr. George Tiller as he attended church services this morning. However profound our differences as Americans over difficult issues such as abortion, they cannot be resolved by heinous acts of violence.”

Reprising in a perfunctory manner the theme he presented in his commencement address at Notre Dame University last month, he drew an equal sign between the legally protected rights of women and the medical professionals providing them services and those who would seek to deny them their rights by means of intimidation and, in this case, assassination.

He condemned neither the murderer nor those forces in the Christian right, the right-wing media and the

Republican Party who promote such violence.

Like the Democratic Party as a whole, Obama is cowed by these forces. He is unwilling and unable to state the obvious: this noxious combination of political, religious and media organizations is incubating a home-grown fascist movement in America.

These forces bear political and moral responsibility for fomenting violent acts that—outside of the 9/11 attacks—have produced the overwhelming majority of deaths and destruction caused by terrorism within the United States over the past 30 years. Yet they are treated with kid gloves by the political establishment and the media.

Today, demented elements like the Wichita assassin are encouraged to strike at women’s clinics and their personnel. Tomorrow, they can be directed against a movement of the working class against the attacks on jobs and living standards.

The tepid reaction of the Democrats and Obama to the heinous murder of Dr. Tiller underscores the fact that they will only accommodate these fascistic elements, because they are being cultivated by significant sections of the American political establishment.

The defense of democratic rights—including the legal right to abortion—can be carried out only through the independent mobilization of the broad mass of working people, guided by a socialist and internationalist perspective, in the struggle against capitalism and the reactionary political forces that it engenders.

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The author also recommends:

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