

Epilogue

In May, 1972, the model abortion law of New York State, which granted all women freedom of choice in the matter of bearing children, was repealed by the state legislature even though the bill had been highly praised by the President's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future. In its place the legislators passed the Donovan-Crawford bill which permitted abortions only to save the life of the mother. The liberal 1970 law hung on the stroke of a pen, for only Governor Nelson Rockefeller could save it by exercising his veto. The pressure and abuse he was subjected to were phenomenal. In the end he stayed by his convictions which ran contrary to some political realities, and for another year the liberal abortion statute in New York was safe.

In November, 1972, a referendum to liberalize the Michigan abortion law was defeated, despite polls taken two weeks before the vote which indicated that it would be approved by a comfortable majority (60 percent) of the people of that state. When the ballots were counted, 60 percent of the voters had said "No" to change in the existing law. In the political postmortem that followed, the reformers admitted that the last minute all-out campaign by Right to Life forces (into which a reputed million dollars had been poured) was responsible for their unexpected defeat. Billboards and pamphlets portraying the abortion reformers as "murderers" had flooded the state during those last two weeks and the limited assets of those who advocated changing the abortion law were too meager for an effective public reaction.

Those same forces which repealed (but for the grace of Governor Rockefeller) New York's law in May and defeated Michigan's referendum in November are shaping up for another all-out fight in the 1973 session of the New York State Legislature.

If that law falls, thousands of women will be deprived of a

fundamental right regarding the freedom to control their own lives and will be forced to live as bond servants to an archaic and vengeful law that at best will be hypocritical and discriminatory. Because other state legislatures may be influenced by the process in New York, the New York State Assembly holds in its hands the fate of millions of women and the progress they have made toward greater freedom and equality. If from fear or by intimidation or political opportunism they vote our mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters into the shame and humiliation of "illegal abortions," they will deserve on their heads the blood of every woman who suffers and dies as a result of their action. For the repeal of the law will not be voted out of ignorance or innocence but with knowledge and forethought because women have already lived in that kind of world and tasted the dregs of punishment for having an unwanted pregnancy.

No more dramatic climax to the long struggle for a woman's freedom of choice could have been envisioned than the announcement of Monday morning, January 22, 1973, that the Supreme Court of the United States had declared it unconstitutional for any state to prohibit abortion during the first six months of pregnancy. This ruling guarantees women the right to choose when and whether they will bear children. It is the vindication of the movement and the work of the clergy begun five and one-half years ago with the conviction that the prohibitory abortion laws were a violation by the state of the woman's right to privacy and personal liberty.