



A regular antidote to the mainstream media

TOMGRAM

Robert Lipsyte, Abortion -- Not for Women Only

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It's easy to forget just how long we've been waiting for Samuel Alito's "[opinion](#)," signaling that *Roe v. Wade* is going down the tubes. Back in 2019, I already took it for granted that the Supreme Court would indeed put an end to *Roe* and [wrote then](#) that, as I did, I couldn't help but think "of my own involvement with abortion as a man." My wife and I had indeed decided to abort a fetus because of a medical anomaly, even though we both wanted a child then. That was 10 years after *Roe v. Wade* became the law of the land. Now, I feel nothing but horror and sadness for couples like us who will indeed face such crises in an increasingly Trumpian America.

And honestly, I also remember the years of my youth before *Roe* became the law of the land in 1973. In fact, there was a moment then when, filled with horror, I ventured into the back-alley world of illegal abortions to help someone I cared deeply about who was, I thought, pregnant. We were lucky. She proved not to be, but I've never forgotten the fear (and, strangely enough, the fascination) of that abortion journey into what was then an everyday American underworld and undoubtedly will be again. More than a half-century has passed since then and I still haven't forgotten that moment, which makes me truly sad for all the young people today who are going to face a similar hell on Earth thanks to Donald Trump, Samuel Alito, and crew.

They have no hesitation, I know, about sending the rest of us into the

flames of hell. Looking back, the failed coup at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, may not have been the worst of Donald Trump. His seizure (with the help of [Mitch McConnell](#)) of the Supreme Court will, I fear, leave that riot in the dustbin of history when it comes to changing this country.

And they have a nerve. Truly they do. Which is why, today, I turn this site over to Robert Lipsyte, former *New York Times* columnist, [TomDispatch regular](#), and author most recently of [SportsWorld: An American Dreamland](#). Let him remind us all of what it was like, not just for women but for men, too, in the pre-*Roe* years and why it's up to us not to let this stand. *Tom*

Where Are the Men?

No More Bystander Boys in the Post-Roe Era

BY [ROBERT LIPSYTE](#)

For 50 years now, people have told desperate, heart-breaking stories about what it was like to search for an abortion in the days before *Roe v. Wade*. These were invariably narratives of women in crisis. They sometimes involved brief discussions about economic inequality, police-state intrigue, and unwanted children, but for the most part men were invisible in them, missing in action. Where were they? And where are they now that a wall of fundamental rights seems to be crumbling away not just for women, but for all of us? This is another example of what I used to call the Bystander Boys.

As a sportswriter, my work over these decades often brought me into a universe of male entitlement and the sort of posturing I thought of as *faux* masculinity. Even in that chest-beating environment, I was struck by the absence in abortion stories of what in another time would have been called *manliness*. What happened to that mostly storybook ideal of the brave, modest, responsible, big-hearted protector? I figured out early on not to waste time searching for him among football quarterbacks or baseball coaches, or even cops and Army officers. Much, much later, I found more people with the right stuff — that “manly” ideal — among single mothers and feminist lawyers.

As it happened, there weren't a lot of male heroes during the women's movement of the 1970s or even the more recent #MeToo upsurge. Most men, except for the power boys who treated everyone else as girls, were too fearful or starstruck to intervene. The most grotesque models were, of course, the athletes who stood by silently while their teammates raped stoned or drunken women.

In the pre-pill early 1960s, when unwanted pregnancy was a constant chilling

specter for my pre-Boomer “silent” generation, men usually talked about abortion only if their girlfriends had missed a period — when they were trying to track down that [coal-country Pennsylvania doctor](#) who performed illegal abortions with relative impunity. They might even share their fears of what an unwanted kid would do to their careers, but rarely did they bring up the typical back-alley butchery of abortion in those years that came from the hijacking of the most fundamental of rights.

Where are those guys even today, much less their sons and grandsons, presumably still active partners in the reproductive process? Forget about moral responsibility — what about the jeopardy our lives are in as the possibility of a Trumpian-style authoritarian future closes in around us? Sixty years ago, it already seemed remarkably clear to me how crucial it was that men stop leaving women to face this nightmare essentially alone — and it still does.

The Dismissal

With that in mind, let me tell you my own ancient abortion story, though it always felt somewhat pallid compared to others — what my kids would have sneered at as a “first-world story” if I had told them. Still, I think it does capture the fear and helplessness of a time which, sadly enough, just might be coming around again.

The year was 1961, 12 years before *Roe v. Wade*. I had already been married to my first wife for two years and she was justifiably convinced that we were still too shaky, emotionally and professionally, to have children. We were both 23. She was an undergraduate, working on the side in a doctor’s office. I was an ambitious *New York Times* reporter, covering sports for that paper and cops for its Sunday magazine. When she discovered that she was pregnant, we briefly argued about what to do. I liked the idea of fatherhood and was convinced that it wouldn’t hamper my career. (No wonder, since in the spirit of the time, I assumed she’d be doing all the work.) But I did at least understand that, in the end, it was her choice, not mine.

Through her medical connections, she found a Fifth Avenue doctor who would perform the then-illegal operation for \$500, which we could just barely scrape together. We called that upcoming operation “the dismissal” in what we both

understood to be a pathetically smart-assed way of avoiding a confrontation with the actual fears and mixed emotions generated by our choice. At that time, it was, of course, criminal, dangerous, and (in what passed for proper society) largely despised.

I was scared for Maria's well-being and the possible consequences of acting illegally. I was particularly fearful that the *Times* might find out and, in some fashion, hold it against me. In a confused and twisted way, I was also disturbed about acting against the moral conventions of my society and time. It made me feel like a bad person and, believe me, those were wrenching feelings that began to bubble back into my memory recently as the most humane of judicial amendments [came under assault](#) by truly evil forces.

I was also — however contradictory this might sound — righteously angry on that crisp, clear fall afternoon as Maria and I walked to the doctor's ground-floor office across from New York's Central Park. I knew even then that religious bigots and the mercenary politicians backing them stood in the way of our health and freedom. Admittedly, I could never have imagined that, more than half a century later, the same combination of forces would be [using abortion](#) as part of an authoritarian plot to seize control of all aspects of our lives. Back then, I probably would have smirked at such seeming paranoia, had I seen it in some sci-fi film.

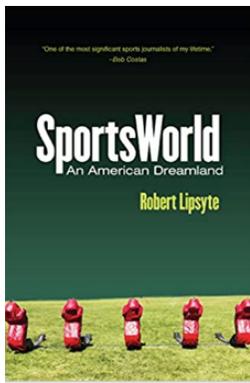
The doctor's door opened before I rang the buzzer and the arm of an older woman — the doctor's wife I later discovered — shot out, grabbed Maria's sleeve and began pulling her inside. We kissed quickly. I noted how terrified Maria's eyes were. And then she was gone.

I had been instructed to leave the area and call in two hours (from a pay phone on the street, of course, since no one then had a mobile phone). After wandering in the park for a while, I found myself drifting back toward the doctor's office. Reporters always have that urge to stay near the action. As dusk was settling, I noticed nondescript black and gray sedans beginning to double-park illegally along Fifth Avenue and in the side streets flanking that office. They disgorged athletic-looking women in non-chic clothes. In that fashionable neighborhood, they were distinctly *not* local residents.

The Raid

As they clustered on the sidewalk, I remember thinking that they looked like a women's semi-pro softball team I had once covered, as well as the women cops I had met recently doing a *Times* magazine piece about a squad of Manhattan detectives.

I realized then that I was watching a raid. I felt ice water in my veins as I hurried to a telephone booth from which I could observe the cops closing in on the doctor's office. What should I do? Warn the doctor? Less than an hour had passed since Maria had gone inside. If they aborted the abortion now, would that spare them criminal charges? What if she was numbing into the anesthesia? I imagined the doctor, scalpel in hand, panicking and injuring my wife. I couldn't bring myself to take that chance. So, made powerless by my decision, I simply waited and watched.



Soon enough, the cops swarmed the office door and went inside. I moved closer. Several of them were standing guard there and others were stationed along the block. They briskly collected a middle-aged couple heading toward the office and stuffed them into a parked sedan.

It seemed like a long time before the office door opened and the cops came out with the doctor's wife, a white-bearded man in a white coat, a teenage girl wrapped in a blanket, and Maria, pale and shaking after the operation. I couldn't be a bystander for one more second. Nobody stopped me as I ran

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to her, yelling, "That's my wife!"

The cops were matter of fact, almost kindly. They assured us that if Maria agreed to accompany them to Bellevue Hospital and submit to an examination to ascertain whether she had an abortion, there would be no charges against her. I felt helpless. I didn't know what to do or who to call.

Gripped by a certain desperation, I asked whether the medical exam would be the end of it? No, I was told, she would need to appear before a grand jury trying the doctor. I insisted on going to Bellevue with her. The cops conferred. Okay, they

said, and took me along.

I sat in the chilly hallway of that hospital for a long, long time. Passing cops chatted with me in a relatively friendly way. Several of them all but apologized. Abortions were against the law, they pointed out, shrugging, as if to say, what can we do? Finally, I took Maria home. She slept for a day. There were visits from a nurse at the doctor's office where she worked.

Sometime later, she did indeed testify before a grand jury. The doctor's name eventually appeared in a splashy *New York Post* story. He was running an abortion "factory," so the claim went, and the raid on his office was considered a big bust.

The Choice

And that was pretty much the end of it for us, not to speak of our marriage a year later. The only related event: a call from the Police Department's public information chief, a deputy commissioner, demanding an apology and a retraction of things I had written in my recent magazine article about the squad of women detectives. He said he knew just why I had written so negatively about them and assured me that if I didn't send him that apology, he would inform key people at the *Times* about my recent "unlawful activity." He let that phrase hang in the air.

I felt chills. My career, I feared, was over. At that moment, I remember thinking about how my dad had talked me into getting a junior-high-school English-teaching license as a back-up to my risky journalism career.

Still, I felt I had no choice and told that deputy commissioner to go to hell. He snickered and hung up. I never heard from him again. Sometime later, a magazine editor from the *Times* discreetly indicated to me that he'd brushed off some complaint from a police flack and told me not to worry.

End of story, although I thought about it again when *Roe v. Wade* became the law of the land in 1973 and, with Maria's permission, I wrote about what happened to us as part of a boomlet of pre-*Roe* horror stories published then. The bloody wire coat hanger that women [so notoriously used](#) to try to induce abortions at home, which once seemed all too real to me, was becoming a quaint symbol of another

age. We could breathe easy on this, as it was obviously settled law for all time.

In retrospect, I realize that I was surprised by how blithely a new generation took for granted legal access to safe abortions. As a feminist married to a feminist journalist in the 1970s, my nascent thoughts about those Bystander Boys of the pre-*Roe* era transformed into far better images of “liberated males” I knew, mostly writers and academics, who supported the women’s movement, even if the mainstream media wrote them off as softies.

Everything started coming back to me, though, with [Politico’s scoop](#) on Supreme Court justice Samuel Alito’s draft opinion that threatens to end *Roe v. Wade* (and potentially so much more). In that “[opinion](#),” you can see one of the many bullies of this era at work. When it came out, the Republican congressional crew were, of course, already well launched on the tactics they had undoubtedly learned so long ago in some schoolyard, intimidating any onlookers who wanted to stop them from terrorizing the girls.

Meanwhile, the everyday dudes, [starting](#) with [President Biden](#), were generally cutting and running from both the reproductive nightmare Alito’s opinion had set loose in our world and its larger social implications, including the Trumpist campaign to control us all.

It’s time, though, for the boys to become men, to step out on the streets, organize, demonstrate, march (and [wear](#) [knitted penis caps](#)), [Terms of Service](#) escort patients, make noise. Older men like me who can evoke the terrible pre-*Roe* days should tell their stories, at least to their grandsons, especially the ones who claim that their impractical progressive ideals prohibit them from voting in lesser-of-two-evils elections (too common these days, it seems.)

Just hold your nose, sonny, if it means doing the right thing.

And perhaps it’s most important to keep reminding ourselves and everyone we know that abortion isn’t the whole abortion story, that the bullies are preparing to go after the entire schoolyard, not just the girls, and (as has become so common these days) they’re going to stomp into the [school-board meeting](#) as well. Sooner or later, they’ll try to take over the school itself and, eventually, the mind and soul

of this country thanks to the holes they're about to tear in the Constitution. There are more of us than them and, if we stand together and fight, we can still win. No place for bystanders now.

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