

# Susan B. Anthony's Birthday-Follow footsteps of early feminists: Uphold rights of unborn children

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Susan B. Anthony's birthday provides women an opportunity to reflect on feminism, or the "f" word, as some articles and books describe it today.

We've given up our bra burning and hating men, but how would Anthony and her colleagues react to one unpopular view, particularly among youth, that we support abortion on demand?

Scholars agree that early women's rights activists universally opposed abortion, but they disagree on the primary reason why. One generally accepted reason is that women were not free. Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president, said, "Every woman knows that if she were free, she would never bear an unwished-for child, nor think of murdering one before its birth." Male sexual irresponsibility, lack of legal contraception and low-paying jobs promoted, in the words of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, this "crying evil." Highlighting these causes would serve to advance women's emancipation, while the "dreadful deed" of abortion accommodated the problem, as Anthony called it, that is society's oppression of women.

Articles in *The Revolution*, the newspaper founded, owned and published by Susan B. Anthony, run contrary to the beliefs of some feminists that abortion rights symbolize that women are indeed free. In Anthony's time, abortion was a symptom of the fact that they were not free, that society rejected women. Abortion was not a solution to inequality, but a symptom of their inequality.

Women's health safety was another reason. Sarah Norton, who worked for the Working Women's Association, blamed abortion doctors: "Child murderers practice their profession without let or hindrance and open infant butcheries unquestioned." Norton was not alone in graphic descriptions of abortion that are too politically incorrect for today's newspapers. In *The Revolution*, language did not obfuscate what abortion actually did to a child. Even before sonograms and DNA, women didn't wax ignorant or manipulate language to justify what they called "ante-natal murder" and "infanticide." The bluntness is a likely indicator of the moral weight the life of the child played in their denouncing abortion.

Some contemporary women's scholars quibble over whether it was Anthony herself who penned the article describing abortion in *The Revolution* as "The horrible crime of child-murder." (The article was signed "A.") However, Anthony expressed almost identical sentiments in a speech on marriage and maternity she gave in Chicago in 1875.

Whether "A" was Anthony or not, Anthony surely supported the opinions expressed in *The Revolution*. At a time when women's voices couldn't be heard through the vote, one can understand why Anthony's newspaper was not designed to be an instrument of balanced public opinion. In addition, Anthony's opposition to abortion was important enough to her that the masthead of the inaugural issue of *The Revolution* declared its policy of not accepting advertisements for "immoral" abortive medicines, a source of lucrative income for other publications of the day. Today, the humanity of the unborn has become lost in historical amnesia. Dehumanizing arguments about brain development, smallness, personhood and ownership of another person were epithets used

against women, as they are used as justifications to dominate the unborn child today. Elizabeth Cady Stanton presaged today's debate when she said, "When we consider that women are treated as property, it is degrading to women that we should treat our children as property to be disposed of as we see fit."

Susan B. Anthony's colleague Lucy Stone was faced with similar tensions as are pro-life and pro-choice women today: Stone, who worked for the Antislavery Society, was not allowed to mention women's rights in her lectures, and some in the women's suffrage movement forbade their colleagues to speak for the rights of black people. Stone insisted that not only were these groups not in competition, but working to liberate both simultaneously advanced their mutual cause. A similar holistic vision today for women and their children, born and unborn, will serve to revitalize both movements.

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