



IDEAS

## Losing the *Rare* in 'Safe, Legal, and Rare'

Coined by Bill Clinton, the phrase was an inspired way to bring together a range of abortion supporters under a now-abandoned umbrella.

By Caitlin Flanagan



Win McNamee / Reuters

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Did it come to him all at once, in a flash of inspiration? Or was it the final, elegant iteration of ideas he'd been trying to compress into a single phrase for months? He surely never imagined that it would become the credo of millions. When Bill Clinton

gave the country “safe, legal, and rare” in 1992, it was meant only to be a bit of political business, a workaround. But those five syllables didn’t just get him out of a problem. They translated into language the inchoate sentiments of millions of Americans so exactly that they had to hear it only once for it to become their firmly held position on abortion.

Now, after a quarter century of mighty service, of what President Barack Obama would have called “coalition building,” the phrase is being vigorously expunged from the pro-abortion-rights conversation, including from the plank of the Democratic Party (in 2012) and the official position of Planned Parenthood. Representative Tulsi Gabbard discovered this change of heart in the October debate, when she evoked Clinton’s famous phrase and was pilloried for it. Young feminists living in the age of dwindling access to abortion aren’t interested in a mantra that implies there is something shameful about the procedure, even if it has kept many people in the pro-choice tent. In the present state of American politics, compromise—even the rhetoric of compromise—is understood as appeasement, and we seem to have decided that it is better to risk losing everything than to give an inch.

“Abortion was a big issue in 1992,” Clinton recently told a group of students at Georgetown Law School. “I was one of the first pro-choice Democrats to run since *Roe v. Wade*, who actually benefited from *Roe v. Wade*,” he said. Before him, the subject had been a hot potato for Democratic candidates. Mindful of the Catholic vote, worried about the South, and not wanting to freak out the old folk, Democrats tripped over themselves trying to appear both for and against abortion. While Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale, and Michael Dukakis all supported legal abortion, they also expressed their personal distaste for the procedure—unthinkable for a Democratic candidate today.

Caitlin Flanagan: The dishonesty of the abortion debate

By 1992, after eight punishing years of Ronald Reagan (who had effectively legalized abortion as governor of California before getting new friends, announcing that abortion was “a wound on the nation’s soul,” and going to the White House) and four years of George H. W. Bush, Democrats were eager for a candidate who was an adamant and unembarrassed supporter of abortion rights. Bill Clinton was eager to give them exactly what they wanted, but he had a problem. When it came to the anti-abortion position, he had inhaled.

As his longtime aid Betsey Wright said in 1992, Clinton’s attitude toward abortion had undergone an “evolution”; as the chairman of the National Right to Life Committee said, Clinton was “pretty slippery” on the subject. He’d expressed a

variety of opinions while governor of Arkansas, and in 1986, he'd written a letter to the Arkansas Right to Life Committee, saying, "I am opposed to abortion ... We should not spend money on abortion because so many people think abortion is wrong." Who knew those old bats would hang on to the thing like it was the Shroud of Turin? According to a NARAL report in 1989, Clinton "refused to state a position on abortion." ("I don't know why they said that," Wright told *The New York Times* vaguely, adding that she had sent the organization many newspaper clippings.)

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How could Bill Clinton possibly present himself as vigorously pro-abortion-rights in 1992, when just six years earlier he'd essentially declared the opposite? Anyone else would have bungled it. But Bill Clinton in his prime had the best political instincts since Lyndon Johnson—as well as extremely high intelligence and a deep, almost uncanny sense of the way people feel about important subjects. His solution was the product of both his formal and sentimental education. It reflected his four years at Georgetown, his three at Yale Law School, and a thousand nights staring up at the starry sky from the Astroturf-covered bed of his pickup truck. Jesuitical, legalistic, and in tune with an embodied understanding of the mysteries and exigencies of human sexuality, "safe, legal, and rare" might be his greatest work. It operates the way a joke does: two beats of certainty, and then an explosion of reversal.

First there is *safe*, a word suggesting care and protection, and also a reminder: Where once there was danger, now there is safety. Then *legal*, bracing and stark. Women's safety cannot be entrusted to the vagaries of human emotion; it must be secured by the law. Together these two words express the totality of the pro-choice argument, offering no quarter to the ambivalent. But Bill Clinton would never leave us shivering

and naked on the Astroturf of blunt honesty. He would give us a little something to take the edge off. And besides, “safe and legal” didn’t gain him any territory. He needed something that squared his past positions with his present one. And there it was: *rare*.

*Rare* was the benediction. *Rare* covered your bets. Resonant with double meaning—describing that which occurs infrequently and that which is therefore precious, valuable—it lifted the burden of any passing anxiety. “I think it should be safe, legal, and rare,” one could say in a definitive, end-of-discussion way if asked probing questions.

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Bill Clinton located language that made it possible to be completely for legal abortion and against legal abortion. The most Clintonian aspect of *rare* is that it is meaningless. Clinton never—“not once, not a single time,” to invoke another of his famous pronouncements—told us how rare he thought abortions should be. Or suggested a mechanism by which he would make them rare, or announced the ideal number of abortions a year. He knew us better than we knew ourselves. We wanted something, but we didn’t want to face a full accounting of it—and when that is your moral crisis, your superhero is Bill Clinton.

When did the backlash against the phrase begin? Probably about a decade ago, one more case of Hillary Ruins Everything. When she was running in the 2008 Democratic primary, she decided to improve on Bill’s magic. “I believe abortion should be safe, legal and rare,” she announced, “and when I say ‘rare,’ I mean *rare!*”

Three *rare*s? What was she doing? Like her husband before her, she knew that *rare* was what made the work so powerful, indicating some mixed feelings, some disapproval, some resigned acceptance. But the formula is two-thirds pro-abortion-rights, one-third reassurance. When you drown out “safe” and “legal” with “rare, rare, rare!” you’ve changed the equation so much that the obvious retort is “Why? Why? Why?” By her 2016 campaign, she’d noted a change of mood on the feminist left, dropped all three *rare*s, and opposed the Hyde amendment, which bars the use of federal funds to pay for abortion.

When Hillary Clinton was coming up, the assumption among abortion supporters was that it was the better of two bad decisions, the response to a mistake, and—while it should always be legal—inherently a bit sad. I’m 15 years younger than Hillary Clinton is, but still of a generation that when you heard a friend had had an abortion, your response was, “Oh, poor her—how is she doing?”

Today's young feminists—as Hillary Clinton evidently understands—are determined to rid abortion of any lingering stigma, including the stigmatizing notion that it should be rare. They share their stories publicly and take part in a culture in which abortion is recognized and celebrated in stand-up comedy, television shows, movies. To someone outside their culture, all of this might seem, at best, unseemly, and at worst unfeeling. But they have not developed these sentiments in a vacuum. These women are fighting an equally intense anti-abortion culture, one that wants to instill shame in women as a means of reducing the number of abortions. The message of “rare” is not so different to them from the gruesome anti-abortion billboard or bumper sticker.

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Whether they mean to or not, these young women are introducing a purity test where there shouldn't be one: within the community of pro-abortion-rights voters. In this new calculus, true believers are welcome; anyone else can find the door. Like so much of progressive politics today, this approach ignores the specter of the “F-you vote,” the vote cast by people who are generally liberal but have had it up to here with being lectured about the incorrectness of their moral attitudes. The “F-you vote” was one of a hundred small factors that got Donald Trump elected last time.

Only Bill Clinton could square this circle and save us from ourselves, but he left town long ago. And Hillary Clinton on Howard Stern (tan, rested, and ready, God help us) is still no help at all. We're on our own now, and not a person among the Democratic candidates is skilled enough to find any progressive middle ground on abortion, a subject that may be one more canary in the coal mine of November's election.

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Caitlin Flanagan is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. She is the author of *Girl Land* and *To Hell With All That*.

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