

A Second Sexual Revolution

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Roe v. Wade was decided 36 years ago. Feminism was in its adolescence. Sexual freedom was just emerging. The constitutional right to use birth control was only eight years old.

Much has changed since then. Women have gained power in politics and the economy. The election of our first female president has been delayed by the election of our first black president. Sex is everywhere — popular music, television, the Internet. Birth control is more available and reliable than ever.

It's time to grow up. It's time to stop thinking of abortion as a pillar of sexual freedom or women's empowerment. Abortion isn't synonymous with reproductive choice or with the decision not to become a parent. It's just one method of executing that decision. And it's a bad method: primitive, late, and lethal. In the vast majority of cases, it's the choice you're left with when you've already failed.

It's time for a second sexual revolution. A revolution aimed not at demanding reproductive freedom, but at using it wisely. A revolution concerned less with rights and more with responsibility.

The second sexual revolution, informed by embryology, must draw a line at conception. Not a legal line, but a moral one. It must challenge us to make wise reproductive choices — choices dictated by conscience, not by the state — before we bring new life into existence. Each of us must ask: Am I ready to become a parent?

If not, am I taking adequate precautions to prevent pregnancy?
Am I doing everything possible to avoid creating — and then aborting
— a developing human being?

If you preach or practice family planning, you understand the importance of parenthood and thinking about it before sex. I'm asking you to add a further consideration. After conception, you can still avoid parenthood. But you can't take back what you've started: the unfolding of a human embryo. If you're not willing to carry that child to term, you'll have to abort it. Take that prospect as seriously as you take the prospect of unwanted parenthood. Don't risk creating a life you can't bear.

If you believe in the right to life, I'm asking you to embrace all means of protecting it. To put it bluntly: A culture of life requires an ethic of contraception. Birth control prevents abortions. It isn't a sin or an offense against life, as too many girls and Catholic couples have been taught. It's an act of responsibility, even reverence.

That's the sexual revolution we need today: pro-choice, pro-life, practical, reflective, and conscientious. It's not impossible. It's just hard. Growing up always is.

William Saletan is Slate's national correspondent. He writes about science, technology, politics, and society. He is the author of Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War, which argues that pro-choice and pro-life activists have lost the abortion debate to a third constituency: libertarian conservatives.