

War, Operation Rescue Style

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War is Hell, the aphorism goes. Or, in the vocabulary of Operation Rescue, the militant national anti-abortion group that descended on the Choice Medical Group clinic in Santa Cruz last Saturday, War is the way right-to-lifers can save unborn fetuses from falling into Hell.

For if you want to talk about Operation Rescue, or even understand its members' comments to the press, you simply have to be versed in warspeak. "It's been a real ministry born of shared experience," commended Cal—a retired colonel jailed for blockading a family planning clinic along with Oper-

alternately calls OR actions "invasions" or "blockades." In one recent article in the San Jose *Mercury News*, the protesters were "soldiers," their cause a "holy war" and their assemblage a "rag-tag army." "I'm an old-fashioned guy," Northern California Operation Rescue leader Jeff White aptly commented in this story. Lamenting that much of his membership is female, he elaborated, "I think men should fight battles."

It adds a nice irony to the abortion debate that a group so loudly decrying the "murder of innocent children" [*their verbiage*] can best

a screw loose and maybe border on being fanatics.")

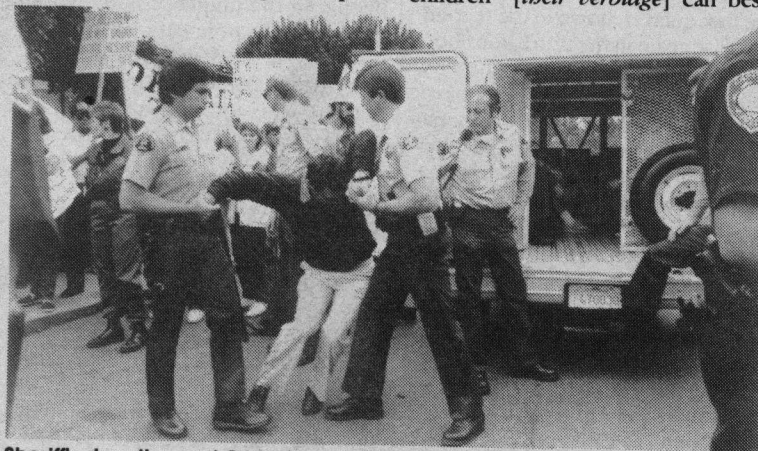
Operation Rescue, however, has a reputation for hardball tactics. A successful Los Angeles court case against OR, which concluded this March with an injunction limiting the group's access to family planning clinics, involved one woman who complained of unlawful harassment. In court papers, that patient of the L.A. clinic claims OR members pushed her, shoved her and verbally taunted her by calling her a "murderer," among other things. Incidentally, she was on her way for an examination related to abdominal surgery.

• Unlike the many social causes to which OR compares itself in one recently circulating pamphlet—the end of slavery, women's suffrage, labor, civil rights, gay rights and feminism—Operation Rescue does not focus on the attaining of rights, but on limiting them. "We can't let our rights tread upon the rights of others," U.S. District Judge Terry Hatter elaborated in explanation of his decision against OR in the Los Angeles case, which was filed by the ACLU.

"The tactics that these people are using is definitely confusing things," added Action Alliance for Reproductive Rights's Van Allen, a longtime local activist who has been arrested for performing civil disobedience. "But you have to ask, When is something done to fight for rights and when is something done to impose your views on everyone else. Their stated goal is to stop business from taking place on the premises."

According to Carolyn O'Donnell, manager of the Choice clinic targeted last weekend, that goal flopped. The clinic shuffled all abortions scheduled during the Saturday demonstration to that afternoon.

Other activists, however, fear the group may return with more troops and more success, now that it tested the waters with its Santa Cruz debut. AARR, which used a pre-designed phone tree to assemble 200 demonstrators Saturday to counter OR's 65, is preparing for a front they suspect will become more and more slippery as local protests continue. "What's clear to me is that they're experimenting with tactics," said Van Allen, referring to the "minuteman" siege and the fact that his group had no advance warning and caught wind of no rumors before Saturday. "We're not at all relaxed now. We think they might come back," possibly this Saturday, he said. And Operation Rescue is not talking. •



Sheriff's deputies and Operation Rescue at Saturday's sit-in

ation Rescue—with a fairly typical OR vocabulary. "[It] has been much like my experience in combat, but much deeper."

In the war of words, the lexicon of Operation Rescue is that of combat. Operation organizers dub their group a "military operation" and their mission a "battle." This week they quickly likened their Santa Cruz sit-in, a maneuver whose casualties included a broken arm and 34 arrests, to sieges of the Revolutionary War. Then as well as now, the prevalence of infiltrators and saboteurs forced strategists to plot short-notice "minuteman" attacks, lest their troops doublecross them and their tactics be discovered.

Their style, too, lends itself to easy paramilitary parallels. Working in utmost secrecy in order to outwit the opposition, Operation Rescue will announce its weekly place of protest only hours before they strike—even to their own combatants. According to local OR opponent and Action Alliance for Reproductive Rights member Bruce Van Allen, this Saturday the group was even more elusive than normal, sealing off the usual leaks by refraining from holding a rally the evening before, in which they would normally have announced their place of protest.

The mainstream press, meanwhile,

describe itself in terms of the bellicose. But things get confusing when, in the press and even in Operation Rescue's own literature, the war metaphors break down into parallels with civil disobedience, the form of protest made prominent by anti-nuclear, anti-intervention and *peace* activists. When it's not put in military lingo, Operation Rescue's crusade is touted as vaguely reminiscent of the '60s, a phenomenon various media outlets have profiled and one that is all too overused.

In fact there are some fundamental differences between Operation Rescue-style protests and those broadly described as "civil disobedience."

• For one, CD protests such as those held yearly at the Lockheed Missiles and Space Company in Bonny Doon are usually peaceful. Saturday's OR demonstration was by all accounts tranquil as well. (Spokespersons for AARR, the Sheriff's office and the Choice clinic felt the protest was non-violent; OR did not respond to messages from *The Sun*. For his own part, protest observer Sheriff Al Noren saw no difference between the various styles of demonstrators. When asked to compare OR's Saturday skirmish to the most recent Lockheed event, he reflected, "They do about the same thing.... I think they've all maybe got