

Pro-Lifers Brace for Political Backlash After Tiller Murder

✖ The murder of abortion doctor George Tiller on Sunday has many pro-life leaders concerned the Obama administration will use the shooting to restrict pro-life activities and advance a radical abortion agenda.

They point to Attorney General Eric Holder Jr.'s order on Monday to increase security for some abortion clinics and doctors as a sign that government leaders may view the killing as more than an isolated incident by a lone extremist.

Pro-life advocates say Tiller's murder also may result in legislative moves to deter anti-abortion activism, including renewed attempts to pass the Freedom of Choice Act, which would remove federal restrictions on abortion.

"The Obama administration will use this [murder] as a means to try to punish the pro-life movement," said Mathew D. Staver, founder of the pro-life legal firm Liberty Counsel. "We will diligently and aggressively resist the administration's attempt to use this or any other matter that does not represent the pro-life movement to trample on the constitutional rights of pro-lifers."

Staver was among several pro-life leaders to condemn the murder of the late-term abortion doctor, who was shot and killed Sunday while serving as an usher at his church, Reformed Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kan.

"We categorically condemn the act of vigilantism and violence that took his life," said Focus on the Family founder James Dobson. "Our condolences are extended to the Tiller family."

The person or persons responsible for his death should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry was less conciliatory, calling Tiller a “mass murderer” in a statement released Monday.

“I believe George Tiller was one of the most evil men on the planet; every bit as vile as the Nazi war criminals who were hunted down, tried, and sentenced after they participated in the ‘legal’ murder of the Jews that fell into their hands,” Terry said. “But even Mr. Tiller-like other murderers-deserved a trial of his peers, and a legal execution, not vigilante justice.”

Scott Roeder, 51, of Merriam, Kan., has been identified as the shooter and is being held without bail on suspicion of murder. No formal link has been made between Roeder and national pro-life groups, but the *New York Times* reported that abortion opponent Dave Leach said Roeder was a subscriber and occasional contributor to his newsletter, *Prayer and Action News*, which advocates against abortion.

In a statement sent Monday to *The Topeka Capital-Journal*, Roeder’s brother, David, said the shooting suspect had suffered from mental illness.

“We know Scott as a kind and loving son, brother and father who suffered from mental illness at various times in his life,” the statement read. “However, none of us ever saw Scott as a person capable of or willing to take another person’s life. Our deepest regrets, prayers and sympathy go out to the Tiller family during this terrible time.”

Andrea Lafferty, executive director of the Traditional Values Coalition, said pro-life groups should not have to defend themselves against Roeder’s actions.

"Even if [Roeder] sent a check to a legitimate pro-life group, it doesn't mean that that group should be tagged with his vigilante murder," she told *Charisma*. "It's ridiculous. None of us agree with what happened, a vigilante going out and just shooting [Tiller]. ... He was not a part of us."

Family Research Council President Tony Perkins said Tiller's murder would likely embolden administration officials who listed Christian groups among right-wing extremists in a Department of Homeland Security report naming domestic terror threats.

"I am concerned that there will be some that will exploit this tragedy for [political] purposes," Perkins told *Charisma*. "As Christians, we work to save souls, not take human lives. We're focused on life, both born and unborn."

"I think it's a tragedy for the Tiller family," he added. "Do we oppose him in what he did? Absolutely. But do we see him as a human being, created in the image of God? Yes, we do. And it's a tragedy when any human life is intentionally taken through an act of violence such as that."

Other pro-life leaders worry that Democrats in the House and Senate would use the murder to stifle pro-life viewpoints while questioning of Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor during her upcoming confirmation hearings. Sotomayor's abortion views are unclear, but many pro-life leaders believe she would uphold *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion.

"I'd hope they wouldn't try to broad-brush the entire pro-life movement as some sort of extremist movement because of what happened in Wichita," said the Rev. Patrick Mahoney, director of the Christian Defense Coalition, according to the Associated Press (AP). "That's really important-don't use this personal loss for a political gain."

Tiller, one of possibly three U.S. doctors who performed

abortions after 20 weeks, had been the target of pro-life protests for years and was injured in both arms after a 1993 shooting outside his Wichita clinic. According to the National Abortion Federation, eight U.S. abortion doctors have been killed since 1977.

Abortion supporters said Tiller's murder would energize efforts to maintain abortion access. "Violence and murder will never end the need for abortion," said Dr. Suzanne T. Poppema, board chair of Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health, according to the AP. "With great sadness and discouragement we call on the government to reactivate its protection system for our nation's abortion providers."

But pro-life leaders said they doubt the killing will reduce national opposition to abortion or deter pro-life activism. A May Gallup Poll found that 51 percent of Americans consider themselves pro-life, the highest percentage in 15 years.

Perkins said pro-life activists have always condemned attacks against abortion providers. "But they have never shrunk back from their mandate and their call to continue to speak up legally and peacefully to defend the unborn, and I think that will not change," he said. "They will continue to use our system of laws to work to shape public policy so that it respects all life, born and unborn."