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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

September 9, 1976

MEMORANDUM FOR:

JIM CANNON

FROM:

JIM CONNOR *JEC*

SUBJECT:

Letter from John D. Rockefeller III

The President reviewed the attached letter from John D. Rockefeller III concerning abortion.

It is returned to you with the request that an appropriate response be prepared for the President's signature.

cc: Dick Cheney  
Jim Field

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

September 8, 1976

MR PRESIDENT:

The attached is for your information.  
It will be handled in a routine manner  
unless you indicate otherwise.

Jim Connor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JC", written in a cursive style.

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

September 7, 1976

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM:

JIM CANNON

SUBJECT:

Letter from John D. Rockefeller, III

Attached is a letter from John D. Rockefeller, III,  
to you about your position on abortion.

attachment

THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN....

30 Rockefeller Plaza  
New York, N.Y. 10020

Room 5600

Circle 7-3700

PERSONAL

August 31, 1976

Dear Mr. President:

For many years now the world population problem has been a major interest and concern of mine. As you may remember in the early 1970's I was Chairman of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future established by the Congress. Because of this long-time exposure, I am fully informed about abortion and its relationship to society today.

I would also mention that all my life I have been a Republican although sometimes independent as a voter. Like so many Americans, I felt a satisfaction and a lift when you were sworn in as President.

With this background, as you can imagine I am distressed to find that our party appears to be rapidly becoming the party opposed to a woman's right to choose abortion. I say this because of the Republican platform, Senator Dole's record, the Hyde Amendment to the HEW/Labor appropriations bill and, if I may say so, your own position on the subject.

I realize that legalized abortion raises difficult questions for those in political life. However I have come to realize that most public officials voting for a woman's right to choose an abortion are voting from conviction, from concern for the welfare of our society, particularly of women; that most public officials who oppose legalized abortion are voting primarily from fear, fear engendered by the pressure of small, well organized, well financed groups which threaten to prevent their re-election.

It must be remembered that until recently abortion was illegal in most of the world but widely practiced under unsafe conditions in spite of the risk of such an operation.

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The situation is very much the same today in many South American countries where abortion continues to be illegal. When I visited Colombia, I was told that there is one abortion for every two live births. In Mexico I was told that there are more than half a million illegal abortions performed every year, and in Chile I was told hospital admissions caused by illegal abortions gone wrong exceed 50,000 a year.

What I am saying is that the issue we are facing today in this country as elsewhere is not whether abortion will be eliminated but rather whether it will be safe. If we make the mistake of reverting back to illegal status for abortions, we will be forcing poor people to seek unsafe abortions while the wealthy have the means to obtain expert medical attention.

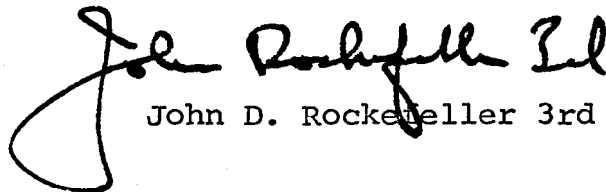
I hope you will be understanding of my writing so frankly. To me the question of legal abortion is one of the most important questions facing our society today. Your leadership in relation to it is badly needed. The majority of American women, including Catholics, want the freedom to choose. This is the way it should be, it must be, in a democracy such as ours.

May I suggest, Mr. President, that you assign one of your most trusted advisors the responsibility of preparing an indepth report for you on the basic facts relating to abortion. When this issue is approached objectively and unemotionally it becomes clear that much more than the life of the fetus is involved.

I am enclosing a brief statement I wrote on abortion which appeared in the June 21st issue of NEWSWEEK. Also I should say that I am taking the liberty of sending a copy of this letter to Mrs. Ford.

With warm best wishes, I am

Sincerely,



John D. Rockefeller 3rd

The President  
The White House  
Washington, D. C. 20500

# My Turn

John D. Rockefeller 3d



## No Retreat on Abortion

It is ironic that in this Bicentennial year there is a strong effort across the nation to turn the clock back on an important social issue. Ever since the Supreme Court legalized abortion in January 1973, anti-abortion forces have been organizing to overturn the decision. They have injected the issue into the campaigns of 1976, including the appearance of a Presidential candidate who ran on the single issue of opposition to abortion.

There have been efforts within the Congress to initiate a constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion. There is litigation being pressed in state courts and appeals to the Supreme Court. Last November the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a "Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities" calling for a wide-ranging anti-abortion effort in every Congressional district, including working to defeat any congressman who supports the Supreme Court decision.

Those who oppose abortion have won the battle of the slogans by adopting "Right to Life" as theirs. And, by concentrating on the single issue of the fetus, they have found abortion an easy issue to sensationalize. Thus, they have tended to win the publicity battle, too.

### CONSCIENCE AND COERCION

In contrast, those who support legalized abortion—and opinion polls demonstrate them to be a majority—have been comparatively quiet. After all, they won their case in the Supreme Court decision. Legalized abortion is the law of the land. It is also in the mainstream of world opinion. The number of countries where abortion has been broadly legalized has increased steadily, today covering 60 per cent of the world population.

In this situation, there is a natural tendency to relax, to assume that the matter is settled and that the anti-abortion clamor will eventually die down. But it is conceivable that the United States could become the first democratic nation to turn the clock back by yielding to the pressure and reversing the Supreme Court decision. In my judgment, that would be a tragic mistake.

The least that those who support legalized abortion should do is try to clarify the issue and put it in perspective. The most powerful arguments about abortion are in the field of religious and moral

principles—and this is where the opposing views clash head-on. Abortion is against the moral principles defended by the Roman Catholic Church, and some non-Catholics share this viewpoint. But abortion is *not* against the principles of most other religious groups. Those opposed to abortion seek to ban it for everyone in society. Their position is thus coercive in that it would restrict the religious freedom of others and their right to make a free moral choice. In contrast, the legalized abortion viewpoint is non-coercive. No one would think of forcing anyone to undergo an abortion or forcing doctors to perform the procedure when it violates their consciences. Where abortion is legal, everyone is free to live by her or his religious and moral principles.

### SAFETY VS. DANGER

There are also strong social reasons why abortion should remain legalized. In a woman's decision to have an abortion, there are three key considerations—the fetus, the woman herself, and the future of the unwanted child. Abortion opponents make an emotional appeal based on the first consideration alone. But there is steadily growing understanding and acceptance of a woman's fundamental right to control what happens to her body and to her future. In the privacy of her own mind, and with whatever counseling she seeks, she has the right to make her decision, and no one is better qualified. If she is denied that right, the result may well be an unwanted child, with all the attendant possibilities of abuse and neglect.

Finally, as a practical matter, legalization of abortion is a much more sound and humane social policy than prohibition. Banning abortions does not eliminate them; it never has and it never will. It merely forces women to go the dangerous route of illegal or self-induced abortions. Even worse, it makes abortion a "rich-poor" issue. At a high price, a well-to-do woman can always find a safe abortion. But, unable to pay the price, the poor woman all too often finds herself in incompetent hands.

Experience in three Catholic countries of Latin America that I visited provides dramatic evidence of a high incidence of abortion even when it is against the law. Estimates are that there

is one abortion for every two live births in Colombia, and that more than half a million illegal abortions are performed every year in Mexico. In Chile, hospital admissions caused by illegal abortions gone wrong exceed 50,000 per year.

In contrast, the access to safe procedures in the United States has resulted in a drastic decline in deaths associated with abortion. In the period 1969-74, such deaths have fallen by two-thirds. Statistics also strongly suggest that about 70 per cent of the legal abortions that have been performed would still have occurred had abortion been against the law. The only difference is that they would have been dangerous operations instead of safe ones.

When you combine the religious, moral and social issues raised above with the fact that women need and will seek abortions even if they are illegal, the case for legalized abortion is overwhelming. We dare not turn the clock back to the time when the religious strictures of one group were mandatory for everyone—not in a democracy.

### A PLEA FOR FREEDOM

We must uphold freedom of choice. Moreover, we must work to make free choice a reality by extending safe abortion services throughout the United States. Only one-fourth of the non-Catholic general hospitals and one-fifth of the public hospitals in the country now provide such services. It is still extremely difficult to have a legal and safe abortion if you are young or poor or live in a smaller city or rural area.

On a broader front, we must continue the effort to make contraceptive methods better, safer and more readily available to everyone. Freedom of choice is crucial, but the decision to have an abortion is always a serious matter. It is a choice one would wish to avoid. The best way to do that is to avoid unwanted pregnancy in the first place.

*John D. Rockefeller 3d is chairman of the Population Council and headed the recent Presidential Commission on Population Growth and the American Future.*