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Moving beyond slogans about abortion

● An editor's column failed to address the complexities of the pro-choice viewpoint.

By TOM ALLEN

The April 24 march and rally in Washington, D.C., that my family, friends and colleagues joined bore little resemblance to the event described by M.D. Harmon in his May 3 column ("March for Women's Lives leaves some women on the sidelines").

On that cool and overcast Sunday, they witnessed a diverse and peaceful assembly of about a million Americans. This multigenerational, multi-ethnic gathering of men, women and their children came from all walks of life and all parts of the country.

They were united by a conviction that women must have the right to choose whether to continue an unsafe or unwanted pregnancy.

The vast majority of demonstrators looked like soccer moms and dads, grandparents and assorted young people. But Harmon chose to focus on marchers with "piercings, tattoos, spiked hair and . . . bizarre signs." He quoted one National Review editor as interpreting some signs using "choice" as a synonym for "kill."

At the same time, he condoned counter-demonstrators displaying huge, gruesome photographs of

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U.S. Rep. Tom Allen, D-Maine, represents the state's First District in Congress.

dismembered fetuses. He praised "pro-life" beliefs as faith-based, but disparaged the sincerity of "pro-choice" marchers.

Quoting an ally, he wrote: "I didn't sense they really cared about their right to abortion as much as they were looking for attention and a place to belong."

The words we choose are important. Demonizing your opponents is dangerous. Portraying the other side as evil or fundamentally different from the rest of America halts dialogue on an issue that cries out for understanding.

Compare Harmon's description with what a young man on my staff told me:

"I don't protest many things and generally feel out of place marching and chanting slogans. But I went because I thought I should stand up and be counted in support of the women I know and love. Both sides have a very strong point, and so there is no easy answer. That is how I view it anyway."

A young woman told me that her favorite chant at the march was "Never Go Back." She explained:

"I marched in honor of all the women in my life now and all the women who had marched before to make the changes to this country that have given me the opportunities I have. And I want to make sure my daughter will have the same opportunities and choices, if not more, than I did. To me, this march was about being proud of where we are and being unwilling to go backward even one little bit."

Harmon's view reinforces the feeling that each side of this issue speaks a different language and sees a different reality. For instance, although family planning was a major focus of the march, he fails to acknowledge how his position affects access to birth control, international family planning and reproductive health care services, especially for the very people who often need them the most — single, teenage and poor women.

In a democracy, debates can become angry and messy, especially when an issue is so closely tied to core beliefs. But I believe that even on this divisive matter, a lot of common ground exists.

Most Americans understand its moral complexity. They know that few if any women who choose to end a pregnancy do so lightly or without real anguish, and that abortion means the end of at least the potential for life.

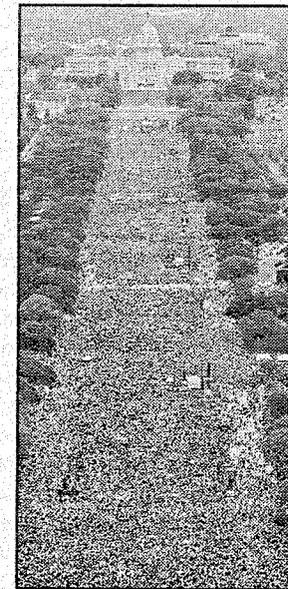
But they also understand that it can be cruel or dangerous to deny women the right to make that decision, and that every child deserves to come into this world welcomed and loved.

If advocates trusted the good faith of the other side, there would be more room for compromise. That would allow policymakers to do more to prevent unwanted pregnancies, or to agree on situations where abortions should not be permitted.

Until the rhetoric becomes less strident and exaggerated, however, this issue will

remain as heated and irreconcilable as ever.

Only by framing the issue in a balanced and honest way will we be able to talk about it constructively and honestly.



The Associated Press

Marchers filled the Mall.

— Special to the Press Herald