

Lawrence Lader, Champion of Abortion Rights, Is Dead at 86

By Douglas Martin

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Lawrence Lader, a writer who so successfully marshaled his literary and political efforts in support of abortion rights that Betty Friedan, the feminist author, called him the father of the movement, died on Sunday at his home in Manhattan. He was 86.

The cause was colon cancer, his wife, Joan Summers Lader, said.

Mr. Lader was a major voice in the abortion debate for four decades, becoming a lightning rod for its critics as well as a beacon for its proponents. He wrote influential books and articles on the subject, organized ministers to refer women wanting abortions to doctors as well as referring 2,000 himself, helped found what was long known as the National Abortion Rights Action League and helped win New York State's repeal of abortion restrictions in 1970.

He unsuccessfully sued the Internal Revenue Service to end the Roman Catholic Church's tax exemptions on the ground that its opposition to abortion had veered into the political arena. He successfully challenged some restrictions on the drug RU-486, known as the morning-after pill, and arranged to manufacture a version of it in the United States.

He organized mothers with baby carriages to demonstrate in favor of abortion on Mother's Day, strove to equate abortion rights with civil rights and became famous (or notorious) for sharply worded arguments.

"Basically, the opposition really hates women, which I think comes out of a woman's sexuality," he said in an interview with *The Body Politic* magazine in 1991. "They fear women's independence — women no longer chained to the home waiting for the man with a rose in their teeth."

Mr. Lader stumbled into the abortion issue while working on a biography of Margaret Sanger, who around 1910 began her crusade for birth control because of her horror of abortions, then dangerous and illegal. By the 1950's, he said, antibiotics and new technology had made the procedure much safer, but it was still illegal and seldom discussed.

Mr. Lader wrote one of the first carefully documented books on the subject, "Abortion" (1966). It began, "Abortion is the dread secret of our society."

The book promoted the argument that the Supreme Court's 1965 decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which enlarged individual rights to privacy in matters of sexuality and

family planning, could apply to abortion. When the court in 1973 made abortion legal in *Roe v. Wade*, it leaned heavily on the Connecticut case and cited Mr. Lader's book at least seven times.

"It is not only an authoritative study of the hypocrisy and absurdity of abortion practices," Ms. Friedan said of the book, "it is a courageous blueprint of what women must do to abolish the state's power to force them to bear a child against their will."

Opponents of abortion differed. "By stigmatizing criticism of *Roe v. Wade* as fanatical, Lader cheapens debate," James R. Kelly, a Fordham University sociology and anthropology professor, said in a letter to *The New York Times* in 1983.



Lawrence Lader in 2001.

Lawrence Powell Lader was born in Manhattan on Aug. 6, 1919, and graduated from Harvard, where he helped found a radio station and worked on *The Crimson*. He was an Army lieutenant during World War II, and *The New Yorker* published war dispatches he submitted. He became a widely published magazine writer in *Look*, *Reader's Digest* and *The New Republic*, among others.

He was also active politically, serving as district leader for Representative Vito Marcantonio, who represented East Harlem and is still considered one of the country's most radical congressmen. In 1948, Mr. Lader ran for the New York State Assembly on Mr. Marcantonio's American Labor Party ticket and lost.

He made fun of his minor-party status in a pamphlet. "Pull the last little lever for Larry Lader," it said.

When Mr. Lader decided to write his first book, he approached Ms. Sanger about a biography. She had already written several autobiographies but welcomed the proposal.

"Working with her completely convinced me that a woman's freedom in education, jobs, marriage, her whole life, could only be achieved when she gained control of her childbearing," he said in an interview with *The Times* in 1991.

Mr. Lader's subjects besides abortion included the role of Boston's elite in the struggle to end slavery.

On July 30, 1968, a small group of what Mr. Lader described as radicals met in his apartment to plan a national organization. The result was a meeting in Chicago in February 1969, where the first order of business was deciding whether to try to change abortion laws, as was already happening in many states, or to try to repeal them.

The answer came in the name they chose: the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws. When the Supreme Court legalized abortion four years later, the name was changed to the National Abortion Rights Action League. After two more name changes, it is now called *Naral Pro-Choice America*.

New York was the first battleground in the fight to repeal state abortion restrictions. An unlikely set of circumstances — including the fact that the Catholic Church's attention was focused on a bill for parochial school aid, miscalculations by abortion opponents and a last-minute vote change — resulted in the repeal.

"The impossible victory," Mr. Lader called it in his book *"Abortion II"* (1973).

In 1976, he left the abortion rights league, in part because he believed it was becoming too establishmentarian. He founded a new group, *Abortion Rights Mobilization*, that aggressively fought his battles against the Catholic Church and for RU-486.

Mr. Lader is survived by his wife and a daughter, Wendy Summers Lader, both of Manhattan. As the abortion debate became violent, Mr. Lader's wife said she did not know how often he was threatened by people opposed to his views. She said he hid his mail and smiled a lot, adding, "He was very capable of denial."