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## The GOP's Attacks on Margaret Sanger and Planned Parenthood

By [Peter Dreier](#) - November 30, 2011

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Margaret Sanger, the pioneering advocate for birth control and women's rights, is back in the news, forty-five years after her death in 1966. The renewed interest in Sanger is due to the escalation of attacks on Planned Parenthood by Republicans and anti-abortion activists. In her time, Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, was a controversial figure, even among feminists, and she often ran afoul of the law in her quest to promote women's health and birth control. But the recent attacks are filled with lies and misconceptions.



Planned Parenthood, in addition to providing women's health clinics offering birth control and abortion services, has been a leading force in mobilizing opposition to state ballot measures to restrict abortion. Most recently, Planned Parenthood helped defeat Proposition 26 in Mississippi, which, if passed, would have defined "personhood" as beginning at "the moment of fertilization" and ended abortions in the state. On November 8, 58 percent of Mississippi voters rejected the measure.

As a result of its health and advocacy work, Planned Parenthood has been targeted by abortion and birth control opponents. For years protesters have gathered outside Planned Parenthood clinics, hoping to embarrass and frighten its patients into not using its services. Earlier this year the House of Representatives passed, by a 240 to 185 margin, an amendment sponsored by Republican Mike Pence of Indiana to slash all federal funding for Planned Parenthood. During the debate in the Senate, Jon Kyl of Arizona claimed that abortion constitutes "well over 90 percent of what Planned Parenthood does." (In fact, according to Planned Parenthood, abortion accounts for less than 3 percent of its services.) The Senate rejected the House budget, but the strategy hasn't disappeared. GOP presidential hopefuls Rick Perry, Newt Gingrich, Michelle Bachmann, Rick Santorum, Ron Paul, and Herman Cain have pledged to pull federal funding from Planned Parenthood; Mitt Romney hasn't signed the pledge but has called for revoking federal funds for family planning.

Cain went further than the other candidates, accusing Sanger and Planned Parenthood of racism. Last March, at a speech to the conservative Heritage Foundation, Cain claimed, "When Margaret Sanger – check my history – started Planned Parenthood, the objective was to put these centers in primarily black communities so they could help kill black babies before they came into the world. It's planned genocide." At the time, Cain's candidacy was barely visible, so his remarks generated little interest. But on October 30, in an interview on *Face the Nation*, Cain, by then a top contender in the polls, reaffirmed his attack on Sanger and the organization she founded, insisting that "75 percent of [Planned Parenthood's clinics] were built in the black community." Cain added: "Margaret Sanger's own words – she didn't use

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the word 'genocide,' but she did talk about preventing the increasing number of poor blacks in this country by preventing black babies from being born." Cain also accused Planned Parenthood of encouraging women to have abortions rather than counseling them about their options.

Cain was wrong about Planned Parenthood and about Sanger, who is a far more interesting figure than the straw woman created by opponents of reproductive freedom.

SANGER WAS born Margaret Higgins in 1879, the sixth of eleven children in a working-class family in Corning, New York. Her father, Michael Higgins, a stonemason, was a freethinking atheist who gave Margaret books about strong women and encouraged her idealism. Her mother, Ann, was a devout Catholic and the strong and loving mainstay of the family. When she died from tuberculosis at age fifty, young Margaret had to take care of the family. She always believed that her mother's many pregnancies had contributed to her early death.

Sanger longed to be a physician, but she was unable to pay for medical school. She enrolled in nursing school in White Plains, New York, and as part of her maternity training delivered many babies—unassisted—in at-home births. She met women who had had several children and were desperate to avoid future pregnancies. Sanger had no idea what to tell them.

Soon after her 1902 marriage to architect and would-be painter William Sanger, she became pregnant, developed tuberculosis, and had a very difficult birth, followed by a lengthy illness and recovery. The young family moved from New York City to the suburbs for Margaret's health, but two babies and eight years later, Sanger insisted that they return to the city.

In New York the Sangers were part of a left-wing circle that included John Reed, William "Big Bill" Haywood, Lincoln Steffens, and Emma Goldman. Goldman had been smuggling contraceptive devices into the United States from France since at least 1900 and greatly influenced Sanger's thinking. Sanger joined the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World, working with other radicals to provide support for its strikes.

Sanger also returned to nursing, working as a visiting nurse and midwife at Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement in the Lower East Side. There, again, women repeatedly asked her how to prevent future pregnancies. In those days poor women tried a range of quack medicines and dangerous methods to end pregnancies, including the use of knitting needles. After one of Sanger's patients died from a self-induced abortion, she decided her life's mission would be fighting for the right of low-income women to control their destinies and improve their health through family planning.

After visiting France to learn more about contraceptive use, Sanger returned to the United States and launched a newsletter, the *Woman Rebel*, in 1914, with backing from unions and feminists. As Sanger and her friends sat around her dining room table addressing newsletters, they brainstormed about what to call their emerging movement for reproductive freedom. From that conversation, the term "birth control" was born. Encouraging working-class women to "think for themselves and build up a fighting character," Sanger wrote that "women cannot be on an equal footing with men until they have full and complete control over their reproductive function."

Sanger began writing on women's issues for the *Call*, a socialist newspaper. She expanded her columns into two popular books, *What Every Mother Should Know* (1914) and *What Every Girl Should Know* (1916), and later wrote an educational pamphlet called *Family Limitation* that would sell 10 million copies in thirteen languages. Around this time, Sanger wrote a column on the topic of venereal disease and went up against United States postal inspector Anthony Comstock, a one-man army against all things sexual.

In 1873 Congress had passed the Comstock Law, which made illegal the delivery or

transportation of “obscene, lewd, or lascivious” material and banned contraceptives and information about contraception from the mail. When postal officials refused to allow the *Call* to be mailed with the offending column, the paper responded by leaving empty the space where Sanger’s article would have appeared, except for the title: “What Every Girl Should Know – NOTHING!” And when Comstock seized the first few issues of the *Woman Rebel* from Sanger’s local post office, she got around him by mailing future issues from different post offices. Thousands of women responded to the newsletter, anxious for information on contraception.

Sanger received an arrest warrant for distributing the *Woman Rebel* and ended up in court. With very little time to prepare her defense and faced with a judge who seemed hostile to her cause, she decided to jump bail and flee, alone, to England. After a year in exile, Sanger returned to the United States in 1916. By then, Comstock had died, and Sanger hoped that the laws might not be so vigorously enforced and that she might not have to stand trial. A well-publicized open letter to President Woodrow Wilson, signed by nine prominent British writers including H. G. Wells, praised Sanger and her work. She gained more sympathy when newspapers reported that her five-year-old daughter, Peggy, had died suddenly of pneumonia. In the face of public pressure, the government dropped the case, though the laws remained on the books.

That same year Sanger opened the nation’s first birth control clinic, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, primarily serving immigrant Jewish and Italian women. Sanger, her sister Ethel Byrne (a registered nurse), and Fania Mindell (who helped translate for the immigrant patients) rented a small storefront and distributed flyers written in English, Yiddish, and Italian advertising the clinic’s services. Sanger smuggled in diaphragms from the Netherlands, but she couldn’t recruit doctors to fit them properly in her patients. Although doctors were allowed to provide men with condoms as protection against venereal disease, it was illegal to provide women with contraception.

Sanger and her sister provided the services instead. The first day the clinic opened, they saw 140 people. Women – some from Pennsylvania and Massachusetts – stood in long lines to avail themselves of the clinic’s services. After nine days, the vice squad raided the clinic, and Sanger spent the night in jail. As soon as she was released, she returned to work. Again, the police came, and this time they forced her landlord, a Sanger sympathizer, to evict them.

Following the eviction, Sanger, her sister, and Mindell were arrested for “creating a public nuisance” and went on trial in January 1917. Sanger was convicted, but the judge offered her a suspended sentence if she agreed not to repeat the offense. She refused. Then offered a choice between a fine or thirty days in jail, she chose the latter. Sanger appealed the decision, but a year later the New York Court of Appeals upheld her conviction. However, the judge ruled that physicians could legally prescribe contraception for general health reasons, if not exclusively for venereal disease.

Sanger continued writing and advocating for reproductive health rights, founding (in 1921) the American Birth Control League, the precursor to Planned Parenthood, and (in 1923) the Birth Control Clinic Research Bureau, the first legal clinic to distribute contraceptive information and fit diaphragms, under the direction of women doctors. But it was not until 1936 that a federal district court in New York City ruled that the U.S. government could not interfere with the importation of diaphragms for medical use. In 1952, Sanger would help found the International Planned Parenthood Federation. She spent the end of her career raising money for research, in efforts that contributed to the development of the birth control pill.

FEMINIST AND progressive reformers were divided over Sanger’s crusade for birth control. Alice Hamilton, Crystal Eastman, and Katharine Houghton Hepburn supported Sanger, but

others, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Carrie Chapman Catt, thought that birth control would increase men's power over women as sex objects. But what about Herman Cain's accusations that Sanger targeted black women in her birth control crusade?

In 1930, with the support of the prominent black activist and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, the Urban League, and the *Amsterdam News* (New York's leading black newspaper), Sanger opened a family planning clinic in Harlem, staffed by a black doctor and black social worker. Then, in 1939, key leaders in the black community encouraged Sanger to expand her efforts to the rural South, where most African Americans lived. Thus began the "Negro Project," with Du Bois, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of Harlem's powerful Abyssinian Baptist Church, journalist and reformer Ida Wells, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, educator Mary McLeod Bethune, and other black leaders lending support. Sanger explained that the project was designed to help "a group notoriously underprivileged and handicapped...to get a fair share of the better things in life. To give them the means of helping themselves is perhaps the richest gift of all. We believe birth control knowledge brought to this group, is the most direct, constructive aid that can be given them to improve their immediate situation."

Sanger viewed birth control as a way to empower black women, not as a means to reduce the black population. And according to Hazel Moore, who ran a birth control project in Virginia in the 1930s under Sanger's direction, black women were very responsive to the birth control education under the "Negro Project." At the same time, however, a number of Southern states began incorporating birth control services unevenly into their public health programs, which were rigidly segregated, providing health services to blacks that were poorly funded.

To the detriment of her reputation and to the cause of reproductive freedom, Sanger was also attracted to aspects of the eugenics movement. In the 1920s, some scientists viewed eugenics as a way to identify the hereditary bases of both physical and mental diseases; others, however, viewed it as a means to create a "superior" human race. But eugenics and contraception did not go hand in hand. The Nazis opposed birth control or abortion for healthy and "fit" women in their effort to promote a white master race. In fact, Nazi Germany banned and burned Sanger's books on family planning.

Race-based eugenics were practiced in the United States as well. Blacks were used as unwitting subjects for medical experiments, such as the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service from 1932 to 1972. Poor and especially black women were frequently sterilized in hospitals, often without their knowledge. Many of the eugenics movement's leaders were racists and anti-Semites who promoted involuntary sterilization in order to help breed a "superior" race.

But Sanger was not among them. Her primary focus was on freeing women who lived in poverty from the burden of unwanted pregnancies. She embraced eugenics to stop individuals from passing down mental and physical diseases to their descendants, whatever we may think of that practice today. In a 1921 article, she argued that "the most urgent problem today is how to limit and discourage the over-fertility of the mentally and physically defective." These words are certainly troublesome, but Sanger always repudiated the use of eugenics on specific racial or ethnic groups. She believed that reproductive choices should be made by individual women. Neither Sanger nor Planned Parenthood sought to coerce black women into using birth control or getting sterilized. In the 1920s, when anti-immigrant sentiment reached a peak and some scientists justified restricting immigration (as in the Immigration Act of 1924) by claiming that some ethnic groups were mentally and physically inferior, Sanger spoke out against such stereotyping.

Even so, over the years Sanger's flirtation with eugenics has provided fodder for attacks from across the political spectrum. As several of her biographers have documented, a number of racist statements have been falsely attributed to Sanger. Herman Cain's most recent

anti-Sanger diatribe is simply the latest in a long string of bogus accusations against her and Planned Parenthood, designed to score political points with the GOP's base.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, less than one in ten of all 1800 clinics that perform abortions are located in predominantly African-American neighborhoods, and only about 110 of Planned Parenthood's 800 clinics are in areas where the blacks make up over 25 percent of the overall population. Planned Parenthood establishes clinics based on where medical needs—including a shortage of primary care providers and a high poverty rate—are the greatest. They provide women with birth control information and devices, test women for infections, offer antibiotics, pregnancy tests, and Pap smears, and teach women how to check their breasts for lumps. They also provide abortions and give women an alternative to ending pregnancies in unsafe conditions.

In 1961, Estelle Griswold, executive director of Planned Parenthood of Connecticut, opened a clinic in New Haven with Dr. C. Lee Buxton, a physician and professor at Yale's medical school. They were arrested in November 1961 for violating a state law prohibiting the use of birth control. Their case made it to the U.S. Supreme Court, which in 1965 ruled in *Griswold v Connecticut* that the law violated the right to marital privacy. The case established couples' right to birth control and women's right to privacy in medical decisions, which paved the way for *Roe v Wade*, the landmark 1973 Supreme Court ruling that recognized a woman's right to choose abortion.

THROUGH THE 1960s and early 1970s, the Republican Party embraced family planning and abortion. Prescott Bush, a Republican Senator from Connecticut and father and grandfather to the two Bush presidents, was Planned Parenthood's treasurer in the late 1940s. Senator Barry Goldwater, the GOP's 1964 presidential candidate, supported Planned Parenthood; his wife was a board member of its Phoenix affiliate. In 1968, while President Richard Nixon advocated federal funds for family planning, Congressman George H. W. Bush of Texas argued that "We need to make family planning a household word."

After *Roe v Wade*, however, Republican operatives and the religious-right activists joined forces to promote a "family values" agenda against the political and cultural victories of the women's liberation and civil rights movements. Since then, conservatives have steadily sought to restrict a woman's right to an abortion. In recent years, that effort has escalated into a fervent crusade, including state-level ballot measures to limit abortions and daily vigils outside clinics that perform abortions. The movement's most extreme wing has engaged in bombings at clinics and even encouraged (and in some cases carried out) the assassination of those who work at abortion clinics.

Captured by its most conservative elements, the Republican Party jumped on the anti-abortion bandwagon. This explains the attacks on Planned Parenthood by the current crop of GOP presidential candidates. And it explains why Margaret Sanger—who founded the birth control movement and Planned Parenthood to allow women to make their own reproductive decisions—is back in the news.

*Correction: an earlier version of the article quoted Herman Cain as saying that "5 percent of [Planned Parenthood's clinics] were built in the black community." The number he claimed was "75 percent."*

Peter Dreier teaches politics and chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. This essay is drawn from his book, *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*, which Nation Books is publishing next year.

Image: Margaret Sanger (seated middle); Library of Congress

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