

Jenn Stanley: Hey, listeners. *Rewire* is a nonprofit publication, which means that funding for our work comes from you. So, if you like what you're listening to, please become a donor today and support our reporting, commentary, investigations, and podcasts, like CHOICE/LESS. Go to [Rewire.news/December](https://rewire.news/December) to make a donation. Now, on to the conclusion of CHOICE/LESS's two-part season finale.

For Rewire Radio, I'm Jenn Stanley.

Sofia Resnick: And I'm Sofia Resnick.

Jenn Stanley: And this is Marching Toward Gilead: a story about the radical group Operation Save America, and the world they want all of us to live in.

If you're just joining us, this is the second part of our special two-part season finale of CHOICE/LESS. So, please go back and listen to Part One.

Jenn Stanley: If abortion is criminalized, what is the punishment, do you think, and who gets punished?

Joseph Spurgeon: I believe that the—that abortion is murder and that whenever someone kills a person or whether they hire a hit man to do it, they are—both the hitman and the person who does it—are liable for murder.

Jenn Stanley: That's Joseph Spurgeon, a local leader of Operation Save America in southern Indiana and Kentucky. You might remember him from the last episode. He's the man who said Louisville's high crime rate was due to God's anger over the abortion clinic and the city's reputation for being LGBTQ-friendly.

So, why am I on the phone with Joe Spurgeon? I didn't call him. He called me. I'll let Joseph explain why.

Jenn Stanley: Can you tell the listeners, like, how this phone call came to be today, why you reached out to me?

Joseph Spurgeon: Yeah, I was just—I was asked by the congressman Dan Johnson. We're working with him and a few others to put some legislation through that will criminalize and end abortion in Kentucky. And so, he was driving and didn't have very good phone service and sent me a message asking me to call you and follow up and be able to answer any questions that you have.

Jenn Stanley: So, I did call state Representative Dan Johnson to ask him a few questions about a bill he'd just introduced that would criminalize abortion. The law likely would not pass. And even if it did, its constitutionality would certainly be challenged in court immediately. But I still wanted to ask him a few questions.

He was in the car when I called, and he said he would be happy to do the interview, but could he give me a call when he gets back to his desk? I assured him that there was no rush, that it was for an ongoing project, and I just wanted to ask him a few questions on the bill. I told him I would send him an email with my contact information and he said he would set up a time to talk to me.

We hang up. And before I could even hit send on that email, I get a call from an unknown number.

It's Joseph Spurgeon.

Jenn Stanley: I was just going to ask, if a state had the death penalty, do you think that that's an appropriate punishment?

Joseph Spurgeon: I would certainly advocate for capital punishment for murder.

Abortion is what it is; it's murder. We have to stop trying to treat it as a health-care issue or use the language of the pro-abortion side.

Jenn Stanley: At this point, I had already met Joseph in Louisville. I've heard what he had to say about Muslims and women and LGBTQ people. And I was very surprised that a state lawmaker would have him field questions from a journalist on his behalf, especially regarding this piece of legislation, which is called the Abolition of Abortion in Kentucky Act. Under the bill, those who perform abortions could be charged with fetal homicide. It would be a capital offense, but it wouldn't be eligible for the death penalty.

But the person he has call me to talk to about the bill does believe in the death penalty for abortion.

At this point, I didn't realize how seriously some politicians were taking Operation Save America's message. Sofia and I were still looking into the claims that a former Kentucky state representative ordered 2,000 copies of the *Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate* and passed it around through the state legislature.

So, I wasn't expecting this call. It was a different area code than Dan Johnson, so I didn't think it was him calling me back. So, when I pick up the phone, I wasn't recording yet.

I also hadn't called to talk to Joseph, and I was a little taken aback about it. I said, "You know, I'd really rather talk to the state representative; I don't have a deadline coming up, and I have a few questions that I think only he could answer."

And Joseph said, "That's probably not going to happen, but you can ask me whatever you would ask Dan Johnson, and I will be totally transparent. So, with his permission, I started recording, and we had this conversation.

Jenn Stanley: Like a ballpark figure, how many politicians would you say you've been working with?

Joseph Spurgeon: Yeah, we're working with a few, ah, there's some people that don't want to be named yet and others that are more public.

Jenn Stanley: This summer when I was in Kentucky, I had heard Rusty Thomas—he told us, and I think he told the congregation, as well—that there was somebody in Kentucky's government who had ordered about 2,000 copies of the *Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate* by Matt Trehwella. What do you know about that?

Joseph Spurgeon: Yeah, that's actually—that was very instrumental in bringing Operation Save America to Kentucky. When they were considering where to go and then someone had mentioned Kentucky, it was just a couple of days later when that congressman or the—called up and made that request and ordered those, those books.

And so, that's been very helpful because that's the message that we bring. It's part of the message that we bring to Kentucky is that the, that the lesser magistrates or the lesser government officials—whether they're state officials or city officials—they have the duty to obey God rather than man. And they have the duty that whenever, like, the Supreme Court or Congress or anyone makes a law that's unconstitutional or breaks the law of God, they have the duty to disobey it and to instead stand up for what is right.

And so we brought that message into Kentucky, and so having someone who bought the book and was giving it out to different legislators, you know, it's the—even the governor has received a copy of the book and has, I think he quoted from it in a couple speeches.

Jenn Stanley: So, you said this was a U.S. congressman?

Joseph Spurgeon: No, no, no, this was a state representative.

Jenn Stanley: A state representative. Oh, okay. And why do you think they don't want to go public with this information?

Joseph Spurgeon: They—this person likes to—I think they just like to be able to work in the background. And they have a lot of different issues that they're working on and across different boundaries. They just don't want to see any of those—like when you're working bipartisan with a lot of stuff, you just don't want to see any of those break down. So, I imagine that's what is going on behind the scenes.

You have in Oklahoma a guy running for governor now, who's gaining quite a traction, named Dan Fisher, who is also putting forth, I think, a bill or an effort to criminalize abortion in Oklahoma and to tell the federal government no on this issue. And so we're seeing that happen in Oklahoma, Texas. Indiana is getting ready to have a bill put forth similar to the one we have here in Kentucky. So, yes, I think it's gaining traction, but we still have a lot of work to do.

Jenn Stanley: Now, I don't mean this in any disrespect to your beliefs or your viewpoint; however, I think that you could agree—and correct me if I'm wrong—but I think you could agree that the *Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate*, regardless of whether you agree with it or not, is a radical text. I mean it's telling people that, you know, you can ignore the federal government if need be to follow God, correct?

Joseph Spurgeon: I don't think it's any more radical than the Declaration of Independence. I mean, that's really what our country was founded on...

Jenn Stanley: At this point, I've gotten used to this when talking to members of Operation Save America. I ask a question of national interest, like, "Do you think women who have abortions should get the death penalty? Or, "Do you think lawmakers loving and quoting a self-published book by someone who has advocated for the justifiable homicide of abortion providers is newsworthy?" They sort of answer my questions, and then they either deflect or they preach to me about God's law.

Joseph Spurgeon: So, I don't really think it's that extreme. I think it's just being faithful to God and being faithful as government officials should be.

Jenn Stanley: Well, I mean, yes, sure, I understand your point. However, I mean, the Declaration of Independence is a hugely radical document. It declared independence from the British. I mean, we fought a war over it, you know? It was radical.

Joseph Spurgeon: Yeah, but I mean, what I'm saying is that this is no more radical than that. Yes, it's radical in our day, *The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate*. But it's needed.

Jenn Stanley: Sure, but don't you think that constituents have the right to know if their lawmakers are reading this document and passing this document throughout the state legislature?

Joseph Spurgeon: Certainly. We want the constituents to read it. So, this is not a, like, a clandestine thing that we're doing.

Because, like I said, Dan Johnson has gone forth boldly on this issue and is going to be speaking more and more about it here soon. Like I told you, the reason he had me call you today was because where he was driving not able to get to service and and [LAUGHS] we've been open about this message of the *Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates* since—

Jenn Stanley: Wait, you've been open about it maybe, but you're an activist. I'm not asking about you. I'm asking about an elected official who allegedly ordered 2,000 copies of this book, and he wants to remain anonymous.

Joseph Spurgeon: Yeah, and that's certainly his right. He doesn't have to come out about that. But yeah, and as I just said, Dan Johnson is willing; he's going to be speaking out more on this. There are more and more people coming out—

Jenn Stanley: Well, I would love to hear from Dan Johnson about his thoughts on the *Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate*.

Joseph Spurgeon: I'm going to—I'm going to end the interview now.

Jenn Stanley: Okay.

Joseph Spurgeon: But I appreciate your time.

Jenn Stanley: All right, thank you very much.

Joseph Spurgeon: All right. God bless.

Jenn Stanley: Representative Dan Johnson has not returned my subsequent requests for an interview.

But on Monday, December 11, the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting and Louisville Public Radio reported that Dan Johnson, who is also a preacher, allegedly sexually abused a member of his church when she was 17. The report also alleged multiple other instances of unethical and criminal activity. And both parties have called on him to resign.

Neither Joseph Spurgeon nor Dan Johnson have returned my calls since the news broke.

On December 13, after we originally published this piece, Johnson publicly denied these allegations, saying his accuser was politically motivated. Louisville detectives then re-opened an old criminal investigation into these assault allegations against Johnson. And that evening Johnson died of an apparent suicide.

After that news broke, Rusty Thomas, the Operation Save America leader we introduced in the first episode, published a blog post on OSA's page, tying Johnson's suicide to Roy Moore's loss. He said, quote, "The loss of the Senate race and the loss of this man's life is related. They both were hounded by the media, and both had a long list of accusations against them. I believe Roy Moore was innocent and still do. As far as Dan Johnson is concerned, I did not know him as well."

Now, back to the story, which, again, was published before Dan Johnson's death.

I need to break this down a little here. So, I call a state representative to ask him a few questions about a bill he proposed that would criminalize abortion. And I get a call back, not from him or his office, but from Joe Spurgeon, a member of Operation Save America, the far-right fundamentalist Christian group that we met in the last episode.

And just as a refresher, they're an anti-abortion group that believes strongly in male headship and ushering in a patriarchy. It's such a part of their mission that in the last episode we heard Rusty Thomas say that having women in leadership roles was causing God to put a curse on the nation.

And they also want to criminalize abortion as a capital offense eligible for the death penalty.

A lot of these views may sound extreme, but their rising influence might surprise you.

At the top of the last episode, we met a 19-year-old Operation Save America member, Eva Zastrow, who also volunteered for Roy Moore's Senate campaign. Eva told us that if Roy Moore won the election, it wouldn't be because he lied about who he was; it would be because he was honest and the voters wanted him. And although he didn't win, he came really close. And the only reason he lost is because of multiple sexual assault and pedophilia allegations.

Months ago, when I started working on this story, I had no idea that elected officials were openly associating and aligning with Operation Save America, let alone that now two of the politicians who they were championing would be accused of sexual misconduct with teenagers.

But here we are.

So, in this episode we're going to be looking at just exactly what they believe and how they hope to reshape American politics.

Anyway, so Joseph calls me, and we're talking about this self-published book by Matt Trehwella, a pro-militia extremist who the FBI was once investigating for his connection to a violent conspiracy.

As we talked about in Part One, Trehwella was one of the 31 signatories of a document defending the murder of an abortion provider who performed abortions as justifiable homicide..

So, his book is being passed around the state legislature. And the state representative that Spurgeon is calling me on behalf of says he has read the book and loves it. And the man he has call me back likens this book to *The Declaration of Independence*.

Now would probably be a good time to talk about what exactly is in that book. Sofia has read it so you don't have to.

Sofia Resnick: I have.

Jenn Stanley: As someone who's read the book, do you think constituents would want to know if one of their lawmakers was reading it and quoting from it and taking policy advice from it?

Sofia Resnick: I do. Because this is a person who has signed a very radical text essentially advocating for the killing of abortion providers, or at least saying that it can

be justified in a court of law. And Matt Trewhella is often categorized with the violent, extreme fringes of the anti-abortion movement.

So, yeah, I think constituents would want to know if lawmakers were reading it, and passing it around to their colleagues and quoting from it in public speeches. Now Matt, on the other hand, told us this is no big deal, this is just a small self-published text.

But he did confirm that someone purchased 2,000 copies of the book and passed them around the Kentucky Legislature. And he also confirmed that this person wanted to remain anonymous and that he respected that.

Jenn Stanley: So, what exactly does the book say?

Sofia Resnick: It's a small book. About 70 pages before the appendices. Basically it's a defense of this idea that lawmakers and government officials must intervene when a particular law or policy is in direct violation of the Bible. And as you might guess, Trewhella is pretty selective about which laws should be challenged, so, like abortion, same-sex marriage.

In the book he cites examples from the Bible and from history to make his point that this idea is a) not new and b) essential to resisting tyranny.

One part that jumped out at me is when he writes about the three "boxes" he says America's founders established in the name of preserving liberty for its citizens. So, you've got the ballot box, the jury box; and—the cartridge box.

Jenn Stanley: The cartridge box?

Sofia Resnick: Yeah, I wasn't familiar with this term either. But he basically means guns.

Matt Trewhella is a big gun-rights supporter. He lives and works in the Milwaukee area, and in 2003 he ran for the school board on an anti-public school platform. [LAUGHS]

He made local headlines for passing out posters outside local schools that said "Never Disarm." And he handed out a brochure shaped like a bullet that said that school shootings nationwide were God's punishment for abortion.

In 1994, at a Wisconsin convention of the U.S. Taxpayers Party, Trewhella addressed the crowd and told them that buying their children an SKS rifle along with 500 rounds of ammunition was a loving thing to do. At the time, he added that he was teaching his own 16-month-old the location of his trigger finger. He's actually one of the first anti-abortion leaders to actively call for militias

And as we mentioned in the last episode, Matt Trehella had a violent past before his conversion.

Jenn Stanley: We met Matt Trehella this fall at another one of OSA's weeklong events. This one is called Leaders a Time Like This Demands, and it's meant to train legislators and civil servants in the doctrines of interposition and the lesser magistrate to govern and interpret the law the way that Roy Moore did when he was twice removed from the Alabama Supreme Court.

But when we meet Matt, he's pretty calm, and I would say less confrontational than Rusty Thomas usually seems. He admits to us that he signed the defensive action statement that activist Paul Hill had written in defense of Michael Griffin who had killed Dr. David Gunn back in 1993.

But Matt also makes a point to tell us that he didn't sign the second Defensive Action Statement, the one written on behalf of Paul Hill after he turned around in 1994 and murdered the doctor who replaced David Gunn, Dr. John Britton, along with his bodyguard. James Barrett. And he tells us that he regrets having signed the document in the first place because the person who drafted it later used it as a means to advocate violence, which he claims not to.

Jenn Stanley: But, why did you sign it to begin with then?

Matt Trehella; Because the pre-born are human beings, just as if a person, you know, defended—you know, like, okay, look at the guy in Virginia Tech. It was somebody who took him down after he killed how many people? Thirty-something people. Nobody questions that. He was shot for doing what he did. Why? Because we all understand these are human beings. Well, the pre-born child is a human being. And so, if we say that it's wrong, it was wrong for Michael Griffin to do what he did, what we're saying is that the pre-born child is not a human being. If the law was what it should be, it would already be a crime to murder pre-born children, as it was in the state of Wisconsin.

Jenn Stanley: And what should the punishment be?

Matt Trehella: Oh, murder.

Jenn Stanley: Matt also thinks that homosexuality should be criminalized, but that he wouldn't advocate for the government investigating what people do in the privacy of their own homes.

Jenn Stanley: What would the punishment be for homosexuality?

Matt Trehella: Oh, whatever the magistrates decided to make it. Well, I haven't sat around and thought pondered much of.

Jenn Stanley: But what do you think is an appropriate punishment?

Matt Trehella: I'm not sure. It's not something I've sat around and pondered much of.

Jenn Stanley: Well, I think maybe you should ponder if you're saying that it should be illegal. You should think about what the consequences are, right?

Matt Trehella: Right. Well, we're not anywhere near seeing that happen, so, I haven't been pressed to give much time to that so [LAUGHS], if you understand what I'm saying. It's like, okay, I'll think about that later.

Jenn Stanley: So, Matt won't tell us what his ideal government looks like because he says it will likely never happen.

But what if it did?

State Representative Dan Johnson is not the only Kentucky politician meeting with and seeming to agree with Operation Save America.

You might remember from the last episode, that the group's leader, the Reverend Rusty Thomas, told his congregation that Governor Matt Bevin had read the book, loved the book, and quoted from it in major speeches.

Here's Rusty.

Rusty Thomas: Now, we did meet with him privately. We gave him the books the *Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate*. He had already read it, you know? And, like I said, he had already praised the book; he had quoted from it.

Jenn Stanley: Governor Bevin's office has not returned multiple requests for an interview. So, we were unable to ask him about his personal views on the book. But he was photographed with Joe Spurgeon at a meeting at the Governor's Mansion.

When Joe posted the photo on social media, he wrote: "Was able to meet with the governor and several representatives this afternoon and talk about abolition and the *Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate*."

Of course, a photo with an elected official doesn't necessarily mean anything. Governor Bevin takes a lot of photos with a lot of people. But Governor Bevin does already seem to be employing the tactics laid out in the book and ignoring the federal government if it means ending legal abortion in Kentucky. I'm not saying that he got the idea from *The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate*. But it seems like he would align with those views.

The legal battle that his administration is fighting with EMW Women's Surgical Center—the last abortion clinic in Kentucky—involves hospital transfer agreements with the University of Louisville Hospital.

Kentucky has passed a lot of regulations on abortion that have made it nearly impossible for clinics to stay open, even though the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and other experts assert that these regulations do nothing to promote women's health. One of those regulations is that clinics must have transfer agreements with local hospitals and ambulance companies. And during a court date in September, Planned Parenthood and their lawyers presented evidence that they allege shows that Bevin interfered and threatened to withhold funding from the University of Louisville if they signed the transfer agreement. That case is still in litigation, and its outcome could determine if Kentucky becomes the only state in the country without an abortion clinic.

In the last episode, Rusty warned Sofia and I that if lawmakers didn't take their message seriously and ignore the Supreme Court rulings on marriage equality and abortion, that there would be a bloody civil war.

[MUSIC]

Rusty Thomas: We got all the pieces in place right now for literally another civil war in the United States of America. You know we're polarized as a people, right? We are seriously polarized.

Jenn Stanley: Others, like Matt Trehwella and Joe Spurgeon, have blamed violent crimes on God's wrath over abortion and homosexuality.

And while they personally may not be violent or advocating violence, they're full of contradictions.

Sofia and I attend Leaders a Time Like This Demands, the conference in Indianapolis. And Operation Save America members show up in decent numbers, a fraction of the crowd in Louisville. but it's still a healthy turnout.

But as far as we can tell, there are no lawmakers there. But they spend the week trying to get their word out to legislators. Matt and Rusty hold a press conference in front of the Governor's Mansion, where they deliver a letter to

Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb, telling him about the Doctrine of Interposition and urging him to end abortion in the state if he wants to hang onto his pro-life base.

But besides this, OSA is up to their usual activity.

[SINGING]

The group started stalking abortion providers at their homes and offices under Flip Benham's leadership. And they're still doing this. They have large wanted-style posters and fliers with the local abortion providers' photos on them.

Under each photo they've printed the doctors' addresses and that they murder babies. They hand the fliers out door to door to doctors' neighbors and protest outside their homes in quiet residential neighborhoods.

Cal Zastrow organized the protests outside the abortion providers' homes.

Cal Zastrow: Ma'am, can we talk and pray with you? We're here because we want abortionist [REDACTED] to stop murdering babies and turn to mercy and love and compassion and healing with his medical gifts?

Jenn Stanley:

We agree to keep the doctor's name and any identifying information out of the piece for safety reasons.

We met Cal in the last episode. He's a volunteer for Roy Moore. He supports Roy Moore. He supported Roy Moore after the sexual assault allegations came out. Cal's daughter, Eva Zastrow, is one of the Mother's Day rescuers.

Jenn Stanley: So, actually, first can you just say who you are and your name and your affiliation?

Cal Zastrow: I'm Cal Zastrow, and I'm Eva's daddy.
[LAUGHS]

Jenn Stanley: And you're here with Operation Save America?

Cal Zastrow: I'm here as a volunteer with Operation Save America. And we are here conducting a neighborhood-awareness campaign. One of the local baby murderers, we're here in his neighborhood. We passed out literature to some of the neighborhood, and now we're here and exposing his murders, his abortions to his neighborhood. That's what we're doing today.

We don't wish violence upon him or his family or anyone else, so that's not us. But we're out here peacefully to bring awareness, community awareness to what's going on and what this abortionist does. So, that's what we're doing.

Jenn Stanley: Is part of your goal to be out here in hopes that he would stop providing abortion?

Cal Zastrow: Bing!

Jenn Stanley: If he's not going to stop on his own, would you want him to be afraid?

Cal Zastrow: I do not want him to feel afraid of us. However, the Bible says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is to hate evil. So, I pray that he would come to know mercy from God. Notice we're not here shouting and chanting loud and pounding on doors and doing that. We're not doing that to just be loud that way. We are here bringing awareness and showing the pictures of what's going on.

Jenn Stanley: Are we live right now?

Tricia Zastrow: What does that mean?

Jenn Stanley: This video?

Tricia Zastrow: No.

Cal Zastrow: No.

Jenn Stanley: What is the video being used for?

Cal Zastrow: For my protection.

Jenn Stanley: Okay, sure. So, I'll just say what's happening right now is that we're here; we're interviewing Cal Zastrow. And Tricia is filming us right now.

Cal Zastrow: Plus, we've got his house then in the background. So, we just film everything.

Jenn Stanley: What if he's afraid that, like, his address is being published?

Cal Zastrow: Then, I have one word: Quit. Quit. Today. Stop murdering the babies.

Jenn Stanley: Is that a threat?

Cal Zastrow: That's not a threat at all. That could not possibly be interpreted as a threat. He may feel threatened by—I don't know what all he could be feel threatened by. He could be threatened by whatever; I don't know on that. We are here saying, "If you're going to murder babies, we're going to tell the world that you're murdering babies and that you're a baby murder. We're going to let people know that this is wrong and we oppose it.

We're going to come to your church. We're going to come to your golf club. We're going to come to your fancy dinner. We're going to come to your place of work. We're going to go, and we're going to expose what's going on. We're going to expose that. And we're going to tell the world, "Hey, this guy's murdering babies." And we're pleading with you to stop.

What this also communicates a very, very strong message is, "Hey, if you're a young person and you're going to med school, and you want to moonlight on Saturdays and rip the arms and legs off babies and make a few grand on Saturdays working at the local death pit, then there will be peaceful people. Hopefully, there will be peaceful people that will come and confront you.

Jenn Stanley: Their daughter Eva is also here. She's been trying to talk to neighbors, but they have not been very receptive.

Eva Zastrow: So, I was just visiting with abortionist [REDACTED] neighbors, just encouraging them to pray for him and inviting him to quit killing children. They were very supportive of him and told me I need to go help other people here, there, whatever. And I was just encouraging them that God's word says to love our neighbor, that we need to love these children, and we need to love the abortionist and invite him to stop killing children. But then they were like, "Oh, we don't want to talk." So, then we walked away.

Jenn Stanley: It's tense and uncomfortable in the neighborhood today. People drive by flipping off the protesters. Some of the neighbors are gathering in small groups outside their homes to keep watch on the group. Some of the neighbors even call the police because they're scared of the protesters. And

they don't want them out there with these graphic images of aborted fetuses when their kids come home from school.

I ask one of the protesters how he would feel if people were protesting like this outside of his home. He's not officially a member of OSA, but he's part of a local organization that he says is even more confrontational.

Local Protester: Well, I think—I think when you have a bunch of people in front of your house—if they're singing, that may not be as intimidating. But if we're standing there and we have megaphones—our group usually uses megaphones, and we have a lot of big guys in our group—that might be a little bit more intimidating.

Jenn Stanley: Would you—I guess—yes, that's a great—

Local Protester: By nature. I mean, just by definition, it seems intimidating when you wake up in the morning and [LAUGHS] there's a bunch of people in front of your home—

Jenn Stanley: You recognize that they might feel threatened?

Local Protester: I don't know about threatened. But they may feel awkward or uncomfortable. Statistically, you know, Christian pro-lifers committing crimes is extremely, extremely low.

Jenn Stanley: But it has happened?

Local Protester: Of course. Of course. And I have personally, openly rebuked that. And another group that I'm affiliated with, he has a radio outlet. He will say that too. And he's the guy that I became a Christian through. And he will say, "We outright condemn that. That's wrong.

Am I sad that an abortionist won't be murdering babies anymore? No, I'm not? I can't speak for everybody in this group. I'm not. But it's wrong that somebody went to his church and murdered him.

Jenn Stanley: If a bunch of people who are pro-choice stood outside of your house with signs and said you were intimidating doctors, how would you feel about that?

Local Protester: It probably wouldn't bother me. But I could see how that would bother other people. But it wouldn't bother me because of my personality. I would probably go out there and grab my signs out and counter-protest them. Because it just doesn't intimidate me or scare me.

Jenn Stanley: Would you mind if they had your address and they knew where your kids lived?

Local Protester: Nope, not at all. We're heavily armed. [LAUGHS]

[MUSIC]

Jenn Stanley: I found the group's messaging on violence to be a bit contradictory. So, I asked Kathryn Brightbill about it. Remember, she grew up in the movement and had been arrested a few times for protest and blockades with Operation Rescue, the group that later became Operation Save America.

Kathryn Brightbill: I think that it's complicated. I think some people are truly anti-violence. Some people it's rhetoric. Other people it's kind of a wink-wink nod-nod we don't support violence but we actually aren't going to complain about it.

But by and large, I think that it is likely true that they don't support violence because they would interpret—they would believe that it's the state's job to execute abortionists. So, they would possibly think that abortion doctors should be executed but they should be executed, like, by the government, by the state and that's one of the arguments against Paul Hill's Defensive Action Statement was that it wasn't Paul Hill's job to be doing the executing.

Jenn Stanley: And that makes sense. The members of Operation Save America come right out and say that they believe abortion is murder and should be tried and punished as murder. Here's what Rusty had to say about it.

Rusty Thomas: Abortion is a crime. That's how God sees it, the God that we're going to stand before to give an account, he calls it murder. That's what it is. I know we don't like to say that word. Women don't like to hear that word. You know what I mean? One of my hardest problems of trying to minister the women who are post-abortive is to get them to say that word. It gets stuck in their throat right about here, right about here. But every time they get it out of their mouth—set free.

Jenn Stanley: Do you think those women should go to jail forever?

Rusty Thomas: I would say whatever's on the books in any state, it applies across the board. If you're found guilty of murder in a court—whether for the pre-born or the born—whatever the penalty is, it's applied. That's it. Equal justice under the law.

Sofia Resnick: That would put a lot of pro-life activists in jail.

Rusty Thomas: I'm not talking about retroactive. I'm not talking about retroactive. You gotta—

Sofia Resnick: It's a little convenient, right?

Rusty Thomas: Well, there's some people that actually are wanting Nuremberg trials, I will tell you there is that element. I'm not one of them, but I will say this, there needs to be a law that penalizes abortion as murder. And it applies across the board.

Jenn Stanley: Do you think there should be a legal penalty for homosexuality?

Rusty Thomas: It's a crime. It's not just—see, there's certain sins that are sins; they're just sins. But there's certain sins in the Bible that are not just sins; they're sins that are designated crime. And they are to be penalized by law.

[MUSIC]

Jenn Stanley: Members of Operation Save America insist that when they protest outside clinics, they are just counseling people, offering them options and not harassing them.

Here's Ante Pavkovic. He's a prominent member of Operation Save America. And he was actually in a recent *Rewire* documentary, *Care in Chaos*, that documented the anti-choice presence outside of a clinic in Charlotte, North Carolina. Ante usually stands outside that clinic shouting loudly into a PA system so that patients can hear him through the brick walls once they're inside the building. I ask him about that on our first day in Kentucky.

Ante Pavkovic: Yeah, the sound system's necessary. Because, if I don't have a sound system, like I'm talking to you right now, if I was trying to talk to that man across the street, what would I have to do? I'd have to lift up my voice to try to communicate with him. It would look like I'm yelling and badgering him. On the mic, I could say, "Ma'am, please, come out here and talk to us," just like that, yet she can hear it clearly. So, the sound system's very effective so that we're not yelling at the top of our lungs hoping they could hear us over there, across the parking lot. So, it does that. It saves your voice. You know, I mean, you cannot yell for hours and then not pay a price down the road with your voice. So, it's useful. We play music out there we feel that's fitting—"Amazing Grace," and things like that, songs that I

feel remind people about the Lord, and what am I doing out here? So, yeah.

Jenn Stanley: Here he is on their last day in Kentucky.

Ante Pavkovic: I wish to God the Federal Marshalls and the police would arrest you all right now and lock you up. That's where you belong, in jail facing capital punishment for murder! You're a pack of murderers! Bloodthirsty savages is all you are!

Jenn Stanley: He, his wife, and daughter were arrested in 2007 for interrupting a Hindu clergyman as he offered the traditional morning prayer on the U.S. Senate floor.

[TAPE FROM THAT INTERRUPTION AND ARREST]

Jenn Stanley: In our reporting, we've found connections between Operation Save America and several lawmakers and candidates, mostly at the state and local level, and mostly with extreme conservative views. Like, Dan Fisher, a former Oklahoma state representative, who's running to be the state's governor. He's basically running on the promise to totally abolish abortion in Oklahoma. He has very little chance of winning. But he was a state representative, and in some cases, like with state Representative Dan Johnson and others in the Kentucky state legislature who wish to remain anonymous, these politicians are getting elected. They're sneaking religiously charged language into bills. And they're legislating legal abortion out of existence.

Here's duVergne Gaines, the director of the National Clinic Access Project for the Feminist Majority Foundation, which was founded in response to growing anti-abortion extremism in the United States, in 1987, one year after Operation Rescue was founded.

duVergne Gaines: I think there are some frightful individuals who have been elected. And the public may have been duped in believing they are less extreme than they truly are. That's one explanation. I also think that some of the individuals may well be—they've failed to do their homework, their due diligence about who they're fraternizing with. And perhaps if they knew, they would be a bit more reluctant.

But there is an extreme fringe that has gained power in this country. That's a fact. And they are exercising that power right now and that muscle that we're seeing. And that's reality.

[MUSIC]

Jenn Stanley: The Reverend Pat Mahoney, who was once the national media director for Operation Rescue, tells us that the reason no mainstream politicians would align themselves with Operation Save America is because of their more extreme views.

Pat Mahoney: Well, Sofia talked about, you know, entrée to the president and this and that. And I say I see no evidence of that at all. It would be hard-pressed for me to see any mainstream politician jumping on board with the kind of verbiage and things that OSA uses, particularly today.

Jenn Stanley: Yeah.

Pat Mahoney: Certainly here in D.C. I don't see that. I know there was a feeling—actually when Sofia—I was torturing Sofia; we were having fun, and I was giving her a really hard time—but there is just no way. I mean, I know a lot of people who work for the Trump administration who are a lot more open and balanced in many ways than the president. But there is no way Operation Save America would have any entrée into the White House.

Jenn Stanley: We did ask Rusty if he had any meetings with anyone in the Trump administration. And here's what he had to say.

Sofia Resnick: Have you tried to meet with Attorney General Jeff Sessions?

Rusty Thomas: No. No. Not yet.

Sofia Resnick: Or anyone in the Trump administration?

Rusty Thomas: [PAUSE] Not yet—I'm not free to say some things. [LAUGHS]

Jenn Stanley: Back in the last episode, Pat told us that he distanced himself from Operation Rescue/Operation Save America. But Mahoney didn't just occasionally tag along sometimes with Operation Rescue. He was their national communications director. He was very active in the Summer of Mercy in Wichita, Kansas. And he's been arrested and put in jail with Rusty Thomas.

So, last episode when we went through the history of group, Pat Mahoney was there for all of that. until Flip Benham takes the group in a different direction.

Sofia, you've known Pat Mahoney for a while now. How would you describe his views on abortion?

Sofia Resnick: I would say that Pat is definitely anti-abortion. But he doesn't like to call it murder. And he doesn't believe that people who have abortions should face criminal charges. He also doesn't agree with many of Operation Save America's tactics. But, you know, he thinks Planned Parenthood should be defunded; he supports anti-abortion legislation.

And, so this is kind of a funny thing. The Trump Administration actually asked Pat Mahoney to be on their Faith Advisory Board, presumably knowing that he's a prominent anti-abortion activist.

But Pat told us that he didn't take the job because of the Trump administration's championing of anti-Muslim views and policies.

Jenn Stanley: Which is interesting because the way that President Trump has talked about and legislated against Muslims kind of makes it seem as though he aligns more with Operation Save America than he does with Pat Mahoney. Also, Jay Sekulow, one of Trump's personal lawyers, built his reputation defending evangelical Christian groups, including Operation Rescue.

And although most mainstream pro-life politicians and lobbyists advocate against punishment for women who have abortions, Trump said in an interview with CNN's Chris Matthews that abortion should be illegal and that women who have abortions should face some kind of punishment.

And then there's Roy Moore, whose views on women and LGBTQ people were not what lost him the election.

Pat Mahoney: But I don't know; I'm trying to think of the 435 members of Congress and the 100 U.S. senators. I don't know one of them who would jump on Operation Save America's agenda.

But in terms of broader mainstream political figures, I don't see that.

Jenn Stanley: Except if Roy Moore gets elected, I guess.

Pat Mahoney: Except what?

Jenn Stanley: If Roy Moore gets elected.

Pat Mahoney: Well, here's the thing. They came in support of Chief Justice Roy Moore. I think the thing is, has Chief Justice Roy Moore spoke—spoken at some of their events?

Jenn Stanley: Yeah, he won an award from Operation Save America. He showed up at the event.

Pat Mahoney: Right, everybody gives awards, but the point being—
[PAUSE] You make a fair point.

Jenn Stanley: Remember that the mainstream Republican Party distanced themselves from the man who is now the president. And Roy Moore is a favorite of former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon. Also, after the sexual assault allegations, but before the election, President Trump and the Republican National Committee threw their support behind Roy Moore.

So, even though he didn't win, the Republican establishment made it clear that sexual assault and pedophilia allegations aren't a deal-breaker for them.

And guess who Roy Moore called to speak in support of him after the allegations came out and it seemed like his campaign was in trouble?

Operation Save America.

Here's Rusty Thomas at the November 16 press conference.

Janet Porter: Next up is Pastor Rusty Thomas. He is the national director of Operation Save America. Did I say it right? Pretty close. Welcome.

Rusty Thomas: Thank you. Thank you. A couple of days ago, somebody contacted me, said that I was needed to come to Birmingham, Alabama to support Chief Justice Roy Moore. My immediate response was, "Without hesitation." Without hesitation. My wife and I traveled here 12 hours. We left yesterday; we arrived this morning. And I want to make two brief statements. One is personal. Chief, those who are gathered here right now, these are not your fair-weather friends. We are not sunshine patriots.

[AMEN]

We are brothers and sisters in Christ who love you and care for your family, deeply.

[AMEN]

And you need to know, Judge, you do not stand alone. There are many around this nation who are standing with you and praying for you during this difficult time.

Jenn Stanley: Flip Benham, Operation Save America's former leader, also spoke.

Flip Benham: You are a law-keeper. You always have been a law-keeper. Now, I gotta just tell you, media, if I had to go back 40 years and look back at my past, I would be in serious trouble. And I don't have an opportunity to face my accusers or anything like that. But just, so long as they can just make the accusation, get it out there, then all of a sudden, my character's completely impinged.

Jenn Stanley: Remembering what Kathryn said about courtship in the evangelical homeschool movement in the last episode, I wondered whether their support for Roy Moore had less to do with them not believing the women, and more to do with thinking that these allegations really weren't a big problem.

So, I asked Pat Mahoney about it.

Pat Mahoney: I can say with 100 percent veracity, even though I haven't had personal talks with them recently in any depth over the last few years—there is no way in hell that Rusty Thomas or Flip Benham or anyone at OSA would tolerate sexual assault on any level.

Jenn Stanley: Well, actually Flip Benham said while standing up for Roy Moore yesterday at the press conference that if you look into his past, he bets a bunch of things that would come up that people wouldn't be so happy about.

Pat Mahoney: I think that's probably—yeah, Flip is maybe one of the least artful people I've ever seen on messaging, on stuff like that. I think he probably means spanking.

Jenn Stanley: But a few days later, Flip Benham appeared on the Alabama radio show, Matt & Annie. The hosts, Matt Murphy and Andrea Lindenberg, asked him about the press conference and the allegations against Moore, and here's what he had to say.

Flip Benham: Well, I think that number one, you need to understand the—40 years ago what the *Sitz im Leben* was like in Alabama. It wasn't unusual. I mean, Judge Roy Moore graduated from West Point and then went on into the service, served in Vietnam and then came back and was in law school. All of the ladies that—or many of the ladies that he said he possibly could have married were not available then. They were already married, maybe, somewhere. And so, he looked in a different direction and always with the parents [permission] of younger ladies. By the way, the lady that he's married to now, Miss Kayla, is a younger woman. He did that because there's

something about a purity of a young woman, and there's something that's good, that's true, that's straight.

Jenn Stanley: Sofia called Rusty to ask him about the Roy Moore campaign and the sexual assault allegations.

Rusty Thomas: Well, it really, you know—I've been up against that spirit, Sofia, for so long, I knew exactly what it was. I knew exactly why it was sent, and I knew its stated purpose. Because in this battle I can't tell you the number of times I've been accused by pro-aborts and sodomites that I'm a child molester, I'm abuser. That is the accusation of choice. So, as soon as that was unleashed on Roy Moore, I knew exactly what it was and what our duty was to do. And we went, it happened, it stopped it, and it turned the corner, and now it's full speed ahead.

Sofia Resnick: Okay. But—just—you just brought up an interesting point. Why would pro-aborts call you a child molester? Are you saying they're just baseless accusations?

Rusty Thomas: Of course! When you don't have a leg to stand on, when you're living and believing a lie, and if you don't submit to the truth, then you're still trying to gain the high moral ground and what's more repugnant than a child molester? Even a non-believer is sickened by that.

And so, what the other side attempts to do—because they're standing on sinking sand and they can't deal with the message, because they believe a lie—is that they have to somehow gain the high moral ground and attempt to make you look like the evil doer, the wicked one, the one that must be stopped. And so, this is spiritual warfare; this is how the demonic realm operates. And most people who are not saved, don't know the Lord, don't know the Bible, don't know the truth, they just kind of go along to get along. But if you've fought this battle, especially on the Lord's side, you know this spirit, and you're the target of it.

And something that again I've been up against for decades now. So when it happened against Roy Moore, it was nothing new to us. We knew exactly what this was all about. And so that's why we weren't fooled by it. That's why we didn't swallow the bait. That's why we didn't play it safe. That's why we didn't back off. That's why we came to his aid. That's why we stood in the gap. And since that time, since we showed up, things have turned around.

[MUSIC]

Jenn Stanley: Roy Moore didn't get elected, almost certainly because of the sexual assault allegations.

But Eva was right.

It wasn't Roy Moore's views of women or his views on the LGBTQ community that didn't get him elected. And conservative politicians know that their evangelical base is important for them to win elections.

What if more people who align with Operation Save America get elected? What happens if these are the people passing laws?

[MUSIC]

Rusty Thomas: There needs to be a law that penalizes abortion as murder.

Protester: You better start thinking hard and fast about Judgment Day.

Ante Pavkovic: You're a bunch of unrepentant fornicators who want to fornicate at will like rabbits and have no consequences! The children are the consequences!

Protester: You don't understand that killing a baby's wrong.

Protester: Killing a wild jahoodi terrorist isn't wrong. Killing a baby's wrong!

Rusty Thomas: I wanted to choke her. She was lashing us with her tongue, you know what I mean? Complain, complain, complain, I mean, bitter complaints. And I needed to survive this, you know, so I figured, you know, the best way is to get rid of her and then maybe the torment would go away.

Ante Pavkovic: I wish to God the Federal Marshalls and the police would arrest you all right now and lock you up. That's where you belong, in jail facing capital punishment for murder!

Jenn Stanley: In the last episode, Kathryn Brightbill told us that their anti-abortion fight was just a means to an end. It was just one tactic, one more way that they can take away women's autonomy and keep them from leadership. It's easy to brush this off, to see this as a fringe group with no power that will never get their way.

Only it has been their way before, through most of history. Their way still exists in many parts of the world.

We called this story *Marching Toward Gilead* after the fictional name of the totalitarian theocracy in Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. When Atwood was writing the book, she made a rule for herself that everything that happened in it had to have a real-world antecedent.

Perhaps that's why it feels so frightening to many of its readers. And why the Hulu show based on the book has struck such a chord with audiences.

All of these things could happen. It may not be likely. I don't know what's likely.

Many Americans never imagined that Donald Trump would win the presidency, that that was too unlikely. But what I do know is that after working on this story, I can see a clear path to power for people who hold this world-view.

And I didn't really expect that going in.

Even Kathryn Brightbill, who was raised in the movement to hope and pray for male leaders to usher in a theocracy, didn't think their world was likely to come to pass.

But now she's not so sure.

Jenn Stanley: I read you say—I read something you wrote on a blog post kind of addressing Flip Benham, you know, about how his society will never come to pass, you know that's a dream but that, you know, equality is winning, feminism is winning. Do you have concerns given what has happened in the country over the past year? That extremist groups could see more legitimacy or be seen as more legitimate by the government or just in general, that they're getting more power?

Kathryn Brightbill: Yeah, I'm definitely concerned that blog post I wrote was when it looked like we were on an upswing and that that kind of Christian theocracy side was losing. And right now, I'm not entirely sure that that's true and because in a lot of ways the election of Donald Trump and especially with Mike Pence as vice president was what we were trained to be fighting for. That was the future that we were supposed to be ushering in. And so it definitely concerns me.

It worries me that the people who are being appointed as judges now, the people who are in the pipeline being groomed to become judges are people who are being groomed in this theocratic way of thinking.

So, in a lot of ways, I think that the violence that happened within the abortion movement in the '90s I don't see it coming back because they don't need it to come back. They are the ones who have influence in government.

So, I think we're at a tipping point right now where it could very easily go swing back fully into theocracy, where when I wrote that blog post about Flip Benham after marriage equality in North Carolina, that I didn't see that future then, but I think there's a danger now.

[MUSIC]

If they actually succeed in taking over, they would implement Old Testament law, including all the stoning parts.

Women's role is entirely in the home having children, as many children as possible and homeschooling those children to train them to be the next generation.

So, it's very much like the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Actually, when I read *The Handmaid's Tale* while I was in law school, it was like reading—I didn't realize it was science fiction—that's the genre it was classed in—because I felt like I was reading the story of the life that I was supposed to have if I had gone along with their vision for the world.

[MUSIC]

Jenn Stanley: Marching Toward Gilead was produced by myself, Jenn Stanley, and Sofia Resnick for Rewire Radio. Mark Faletti executive-produced this episode. We had some reporting and recording help from Andrew Villegas, Rachael London, and Kelly Benjamin. Jodi Jacobson is our editor-in-chief, Brady Swenson is our director of technology. Music for this episode is by Doug Helsel. Thank you to all the staff at *Rewire*, especially Rachel Perrone, Lauren Gutierrez, and Stacey Burns, our Communications and Social Media team, for getting the word out about CHOICE/LESS. For more on this story, including photos and links, visit our website at Rewire.news/CHOICELESS. Thanks for listening.