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US Abortion Opponents Protest on Anniversary of Landmark Court Decision

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Hundreds of anti-abortion activists gathered in Washington Monday on the 32nd anniversary of the contentious Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the United States.

The demonstrators braved freezing temperatures to attend a rally on snow-covered grounds near the Washington Monument. President Bush addressed the crowd by telephone. "The strong have a duty to protect the weak. I appreciate so very much your work toward building a culture of life that will protect the most innocent among us - to promote compassion for women and their unborn babies."

In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that women may legally abort a fetus based on constitutional privacy protections. In the years since, millions of abortions have been performed in the United States. An unknown number were performed prior to the ruling, often in clandestine and unsafe conditions.

For decades, abortion has been one of the most contentious social issues in the United States. At Monday's rally, Missouri Congressman Todd Aiken argued that America's declaration of independence, which enshrined life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as God-given rights, has little meaning if the unborn can be subjected to abortion. "You are fighting for the same basic freedom that our founders fought for: that people have dignity, worth and value. And we believe that, and we will never stop until we put an end to abortion."

The Supreme Court has not revisited the landmark 1973 decision, known as Roe versus Wade. But that could change based on legal challenges being mounted by abortion foes. In addition, President Bush may have an opportunity to reshape the Supreme Court, as Chief Justice William Rehnquist is battling cancer and several other justices are in their 70s and 80s.

But abortion rights defenders are not silent. A leader of a pro-choice umbrella group, Rosalyn Levy Jonas, spoke in Washington Saturday. "This week marks the 32nd anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in Roe versus Wade, which recognized a woman's constitutional right to control and decide the most intimate aspects of her life. That recognition transformed women's experiences. It saved their lives, protected their health, fostered equality, and paved the way for greater partnership with men," he said.

Polls have consistently shown Americans deeply divided on the question of abortion.