

Bernard Nathanson (1926-2011) ^[1]

By: Zhang, Mark Keywords: Abortion ^[2] Reproductive rights ^[3] Obstetrics ^[4]

Bernard Nathanson was an obstetrician and gynecologist in New York City, New York, who argued for, and later against, womens' rights to [abortion](#) ^[5]. Between 1970 and 1979, Nathanson oversaw at least 75,000 abortions, 5,000 of which he performed himself, earning him the nickname of [abortion](#) ^[5] king. However, his views regarding [abortion](#) ^[5] shifted in 1973, after he watched an [abortion](#) ^[5] using [ultrasound](#) ^[6] imaging technology. Afterwards, Nathanson began to oppose womens' rights to [abortion](#) ^[5], and he published the anti-[abortion](#) ^[5] book *Aborting America* and produced the film *The Silent Scream*.

Nathanson was born on 31 July 1926 to Harriet Dover and Joseph Nathanson in Manhattan in New York City, New York. Joseph owned a medical practice and taught obstetrics and gynecology at [Cornell University](#) ^[7] Medical School, in New York City. Nathanson and his younger sister, Marion, grew up in a secular Jewish household, yet Nathanson claimed to be an atheist for most of his adult life until he was baptized in 1996 as a Roman Catholic. In Nathanson's memoir, *The Hand of God: A Journey from Death to Life by the Abortion Doctor who Changed his Mind*, he notes that Joseph had extramarital affairs, was dominating and overbearing, and later drove Marion to suicide at the age of forty-nine. Nathanson also claims that his own support for womens' rights to [abortion](#) ^[5] was due in part to rebellion against his father.

Nathanson began his college education as part of an accelerated program at [Cornell University](#) ^[7] Ithaca, New York in 1943. In 1945 Nathanson attended his father's *alma mater*, [McGill University](#) ^[8] in Montreal, Canada, for medical school. After he graduated with an MD in 1949, Nathanson completed an internship at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, and he did a medical residency at St. Luke's Hospital in New York City. In 1953 he left his residency to enlist in the US Air Force, where he served as an obstetrician and gynecologist for a few years before he opened his own practice in Manhattan. As a result of his experience treating women who had undergone illegal abortions, which he claimed were the leading cause of death among pregnant women, he was motivated to expand access to legal abortions.

In 1969 Nathanson helped found the [National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws](#) ^[9], an [abortion](#) ^[5] advocacy group later called NARAL Pro-Choice America. During his time with NARAL, Nathanson helped repeal a New York statute that prohibited elective abortions, and he led a symposium on [abortion](#) ^[5] techniques at [New York University](#) ^[10] Medical Center. In January 1971, nine months after the state of New York legalized [abortion](#) ^[5], Nathanson began directing the Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health in New York City. The Center was an early [abortion](#) ^[5] clinic in the US. After a two-year stint running the clinic, Nathanson left to become the chief of obstetrics at St. Luke's Hospital, where he worked from 1972 until 1978.

Nathanson changed his views about [abortion](#) ^[5] in 1973 when he watched [ultrasound](#) ^[6]

images of an [abortion](#) [5]. Prior to viewing these images, Nathanson had overseen and performed thousands of abortions in the first few years after the elective procedure was legalized, and he had performed an [abortion](#) [5] on his girlfriend. However, Nathanson claimed he had never felt emotional about the procedure. After using [ultrasound](#) [6] technology, Nathanson said he could see the [fetus](#) [11]'s shrinking away from [abortion](#) [5] tools, which he felt was an indication that the [fetus](#) [11] could feel pain. Prior to the last [abortion](#) [5] Nathanson performed in late 1978 or early 1979, he had restricted his procedures only to those done for the safety of the pregnant patient.

In 1979 Nathanson published *Aborting America* with reporter and writer Richard Ostling, also of New York. In the book Nathanson claims that he and other [abortion](#) [5]-rights activists had falsified statistics in their arguments for the repeal of the ban on abortions. Nathanson produced the film *The Silent Scream* in 1985, in which he narrates the process of an [abortion](#) [5] as it is shown using [ultrasound](#) [6] technology. The film was praised by US President Ronald Reagan, who suggested that if all members of Congress saw the film, fewer members would support [abortion](#) [5] rights. In 1987 Nathanson made the anti-[abortion](#) [5] documentary *Eclipse of Reason*, which shows a late-term [abortion](#) [5] in color video, as recorded through an endoscope.

Nathanson continued to teach obstetrics and gynecology as an assistant professor at his undergraduate *alma mater*, [Cornell University](#) [7], in Ithaca, from 1984 to 1990. From 1990 to 2002, he was a professor at New York Medical College. He married four times and divorced three times, and he fathered a son, Joseph. Nathanson died of cancer in New York City on 21 February 2011 at the age of eighty-four. In his memoir, Nathanson proposed that his change to an anti-[abortion](#) [5] stance was based on science and logical reasoning, and because of his participation in [abortion](#) [5] advocacy, he became an even stronger proponent of restricting women's rights to abortions.

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