

Protect and Defend

Richard North Patterson. Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.
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Reviewed by Terry McKenney Person

Kerry Kilcannon, the newly elected president of the United States, will need all of his considerable political skill and charisma to deal with a Republican senate, as well as powerful forces both within and outside his own party who are not crazy about him or his politics. Then, while swearing Kilcannon into office, the 79-year-old chief justice of the United States, who was hoping for a Republican president so he could retire, suffers a massive stroke and dies. The president's first significant act in office will be to nominate a new chief justice, and his female vice president strongly urges him to nominate a woman. Kilcannon faces a tough political dilemma: should he nominate the judge he feels is the best candidate, even if it costs him considerable political capital to get her confirmed?

Meanwhile, in California, a very pregnant 15-year-old girl, who happens to be the daughter of a law professor who is a formidable pro-life activist, seeks assistance from a volunteer lawyer at a women's legal clinic. The girl pleads for help in obtaining a judge's permission to have a late-term abortion of her likely hydrocephalic fetus. Even the girl's own pro-life physician confirms there is only a fraction of a chance the baby has a brain or can survive after birth. He concedes that forcing the girl to give birth to the baby exposes her to a small, but statistically significant, risk of damaging her future ability to bear children.

The law clinic lawyer is an associate from a big San Francisco firm and the partners of the firm are none too thrilled about getting involved in this political hot potato. The federal trial judge puts the case on a fast track for trial. To add to the complications, the clinic lawyer once clerked for, and remains close to, the appellate judge who President

Kilcannon wishes to nominate to fill the Supreme Court vacancy. But will President Kilcannon be able to get his candidate confirmed if the Republicans can establish that she is a pro-choice supporter?

The action summarized above all takes place in the first three dozen pages of this 546-page, ambitious novel. *Protect and Defend* is a whirlwind of political maneuvering and private soul-searching, swirling around a young girl trying to keep private the most painful decision of her life. Author Richard North Patterson has created a mostly believable plot with strong characters, that necessarily moves as quickly as the girl's rapidly-advancing pregnancy. Patterson takes great pains to balance the competing forces behind the abortion controversy, creating characters who illustrate these opposing forces, and giving nearly every major player a secret inconsistent with his or her public position on the abortion issue.

Patterson spends so much time balancing the merits of the opposing views that he takes a few literary short cuts. Some major characters are quickly defined by comparing them to actors or political figures. Early on, Patterson compared President Kilcannon to John F. Kennedy so many times a grassy knoll seemed imminent. Given the magnitude of the issues involved and the resources of the pro-choice supporters, why a relatively inexperienced associate is left handling a case the entire nation is focusing on is not explained in a convincing manner.

Patterson mentions in an interview included in the press packet that he tried to interview as many key players as possible, from President Clinton to doctors, lawyers, and

judges. He added that he was unable to get anyone from the prominent pro-life groups to spend much time with him and that may be why the pro-life supporters other than the girl's parents seem to be the less well-rounded characters.

Protect and Defend is a passionate work. It explores interesting angles in the current law on parental permission for minors and late-term abortions, including whether an abortion can be performed if the mental health of the mother is in jeopardy. The role of the media in our political and judicial systems, especially in the fly-specking of the lives of Supreme Court nominees, is also a major theme. Patterson interviewed many lawyers who have argued abortion cases at every level of our court system, and the courtroom scenes are well depicted.

Patterson, a former trial lawyer, has said his goal in this, his 11th novel, was to write a political novel as reflective of its times as was Allen Drury's *Advise and Consent* 40 years ago. He succeeds in crafting a novel that illuminates one of the most controversial issues of our times. ♦

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