

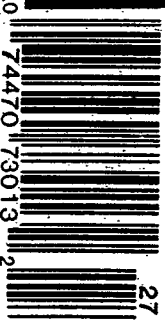
Seneca Falls draws
pro-life feminists
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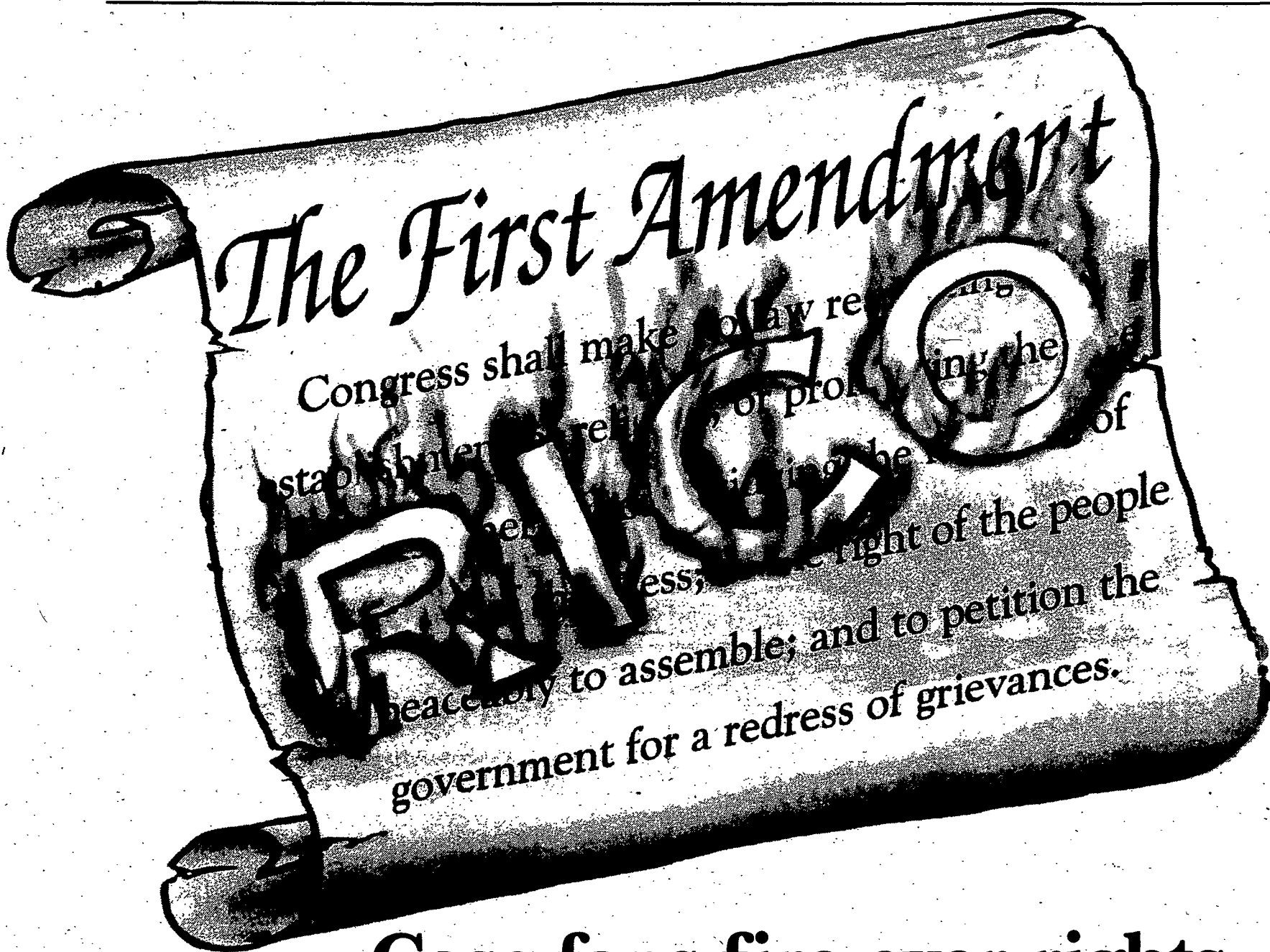


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Case fans fire over rights

A law designed to punish mobsters has instead united pro-life activists, environmentalists, animal rights advocates, peace protesters and pro-choice civil libertarians.

Indeed, activists from the left, right and center of U.S. political and social spectrum are united in their contempt for the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), which was passed in 1970.

None of these activists are friends of organized crime. But they fear that RICO could be used to portray them as organized criminals because they might trespass while picketing against a corporation, sit in at a government office, or simply engage in a heated discussion with an opponent.

A variety of political and social activists now see RICO as one of the greatest threats ever to emerge against this country's First Amendment rights. Those rights, in brief, are to the free exercise of one's religion, free speech, peaceable assembly, and to petition the government for redress of grievances.

According to the Pro-Life Action League, former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark is arguing that RICO "with its vague standards and draconian penalties against groups engaged in political advocacy ... would have an impermissible chilling effect on the ex-

ercise of fundamental First Amendment and due process rights."

RICO targets organizations of two or more people who break a law or who achieve a legal purpose illegally. Organizations and individuals convicted under this statute face heavy monetary damages because RICO calls for the tripling of punitive damages against any convicted defendant.

Used for years against organized crime, RICO recently became a tool in the National Organization for Women's class-action lawsuit against pro-life leaders and pro-life groups who were convicted in April of conspiracy to break the law. The Chicago case was the first time that protesters — rather than mobsters, the original targets of the law — had been convicted under the statute.

The Illinois chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union dismissed criticism of the decision, claiming First Amendment supporters need not fear it.

"Nobody's saying you can't walk down the sidewalk hold signs saying abortion is murder," the chapter's Associate Legal Director Colleen Connell commented in an ACLU newsletter. "But the Constitution has never been found to protect extortion ..."

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