

# Unborn-victims bill signed

WASHINGTON (CNS) — President Bush April 1 signed into law the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, which recognizes an unborn child as the second victim when a violent federal crime is perpetrated against a pregnant woman.

"We applaud the president for bringing justice to women and their children who are victims of violent crime," said Cathy Cleaver Ruse, director of planning and information for the U.S. Catholic bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.

"Thanks to him, and to a bipartisan majority of Congress, a woman who loses her child to a brutal attacker in a federal jurisdiction will no longer be told that she has lost nothing," she said in a statement.

During the signing ceremony in the East Room of the White House, Bush said, "As of today the law of our nation will acknowledge the

plain fact that crimes of violence against a pregnant woman often have two victims, and therefore, in those cases, there are two offenses to be punished."

"Any time an expectant mother is a victim of violence, two lives are in the balance, each deserving protection and each deserving justice," he said. "If the crime is murder and the unborn child's life ends, justice demands a full accounting under the law."

The Unborn Victims of Violence Act is also known as "Laci and Conner's Law" after Laci Peterson and her unborn son, Conner, whose disappearance and death drew national attention. The California woman was nearly eight months pregnant when she disappeared in December 2002; Laci and Conner's bodies were found the following April.

Under the law, anyone who harms

a woman's unborn child while committing a federal crime, such as assaulting the woman on federal property, commits a distinct federal crime against the child in addition to the crime against the woman.

The Senate approved the bill 61-38 March 25. It passed in the House Feb. 26 by a vote of 254-163. The House previously passed such a bill twice, in 1999 and 2001, but the Senate took no action either time.

Laci Peterson's mother, Sharon Rocha, and stepfather, Ron Grantski, attended the 10-minute signing ceremony, along with others whose pregnant family members had been killed and a handful of members of Congress.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., by a 50-49 vote, lost on her attempt to replace the measure with a "single victim" substitute bill which would have eliminated language defining an unborn child as "a member of the species homo sapiens, at any stage of development, who is carried in the womb."

Her substitute proposal would have increased penalties for an attack on a pregnant woman by adding a second charge of harm to the pregnancy, avoiding any mention of a second victim.

Although the legislation adopted specifically excludes any application of the law to voluntary abortion,



Reuters/CNS

Jeremiah Evans, brother of murder victim Debra Evans, is comforted by an unidentified mourner in November 1995 in Keeneyville, Ill. Evans and two of her children were killed, and attackers fled the scene with her near-term fetus.

Feinstein called it "the first strike against all abortion in the United States."

Ruse pointed out that the new law "exempts abortion, but the abortion lobby fought it anyway because it commits the unpardonable pro-choice sin: In the words of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, it recognizes that a child in utero is 'a human being.'"

"Abortion activists recoil from any acknowledgment of a child's existence before birth, whatever the context, and however bizarre the argument, in order to protect the 'logic' of *Roe v. Wade*," Ruse said. "But a woman who has lost an unborn child in a violent attack deserves the law's recognition that both she and her child were victims of the crime. Anything less is an affront to women and their children."

Currently, about 30 states have laws offering some form of protection to unborn victims in crimes against pregnant women.

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