Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry, left, confronts abortion-rights advocates outside Wichita, Kan., abortion clinic last August.

Operation Rescue's Mission to Save Itself

By Charles E. Shepard
Washington Post Staff Writer

Randall A. Terry stood back, waving off a local reporter's request for a few words and melting into the solemn crowd of 800 antiabortion protesters circling a Binghamton, N.Y., medical clinic last month under a gray, blustery sky.

It was an unfamiliar role, a reflection of how much had changed for Terry and his organization, Operation Rescue, since their blockades of abortion clinics first seized national attention in 1988. Scanning the Binghamton marchers, Terry remembered the thrill of leading through passionate rhetoric and personal charisma, Terry popularized the gospel of civil disobedience in the crusade against abortion. "Rescue as often as you can," he exhorted Operation Rescue's supporters from a jail cell in 1989. "Go to jail as often as you can."

His followers responded to such appeals, even defying court orders to stay away. Since 1988, police have logged more than 40,000 such arrests, including 2,600 at this summer's headline-grabbing confrontations in Wichita, Kan.

The resulting jail sentences, fines and legal bills stood as emblems of the impact that Terry and Operation Rescue were willing to risk their jobs and their possessions. Operation Rescue's top leadership fractured, pulled apart by tensions between Terry and several of his lieutenants. And Terry's resolve—so critical to the organization—seemed shaken by the effect that his own jail term had on his family, co-workers and followers.

Now Terry—at 32 arguably the antiabortion movement's most recognizable celebrity—is leaving the organizing front lines for the broadcast booth. Hoping to spread his message to a larger audience, he is scheduled to begin a national radio talk show early next year.