

Disabled state: The Terri Schiavo case

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Backed by conservative Christians, the Florida legislature and Florida Governor Jeb Bush jumped into the case of Terri Schiavo, the 39-year-old woman in a vegetative state since 1990. Her husband and legal guardian, Michael, claims Terri had expressed the desire not to have unusual measures used to keep her alive, and so he asked for her feeding tube to be removed. State officials countered with special legislation forcing the tube to be reinserted, thereby keeping Schiavo alive.

Is this a case where conservative Christians and the state are acting to prevent a death with dignity and enforce a dogmatic insistence on life at all costs? It's not that simple. Nat Hentoff of the *Village Voice*, not exactly a conservative newspaper, claims the media have gotten this story wrong. Although Schiavo is not able to talk, she's not in a permanent vegetative state, claims Hentoff. He says he has talked with some neurologists who believe that, with appropriate therapy, she could learn to feed herself and be more responsive. Further, there is no proof that she ever rejected the use of unusual measures to stay alive. And her husband may have his own reasons for wanting her dead. Keeping her alive is eating away at the \$750,000 malpractice payment he received.

What has also gone unreported in the media, according to Hentoff, is that many disabled Americans and their organizations have come to Schiavo's defense. Some of the disabled are incensed by the view that since Schiavo is not responsive, her life is meaningless. In reaction to a *New York Times* editorial which argued that Schiavo's life had become meaningless, and that she should be allowed to go gently into the night, a representative of a disability group said that "many would lump into this category [of meaningless lives] people with severe autism, multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy who, like Mrs. Schiavo, are nonverbal and are often described as being 'in their own world.' The judicial sanctioning of such attitudes," the spokesman continued, "moves America back to the days when the sterilization and elimination of people with disabilities did not merely reflect private prejudices but were

embraced as the law of the land.”

Christians operate with some general principles as they approach cases like this: life must be protected, human dignity must be maintained, and death isn't the worst thing that can happen. How the principles are applied in cases like Terri Schiavo's is not simple. And the details of such cases are, on inspection, usually messy. In this case there is a debate about medical prognosis and treatment. And there is a complicated family saga. Michael Schiavo's behavior has raised questions about whether he has his wife's best interests at heart. But should the parents' wishes trump the spouse's legal position as guardian? Who decides?

We agree on this much: The voices of the disabled need to be heard. And when faced with a perplexing case, it's better to come down on the side of protecting life.