

Democrats complicit with Christian right, Republicans in Schiavo case

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The Democratic Party has once again demonstrated its complicity in the assault on democratic rights in the United States and its prostration before the Republican right. Congressional Democrats were instrumental in ensuring passage Monday morning of legislation overriding the rulings of the Florida courts in the case of Terri Schiavo, bringing the family dispute over the severely brain-damaged woman into the federal courts.

The bill that was signed into law by President Bush early on Monday was a bipartisan piece of legislation. It could not have been passed without the collaboration of the Democratic leadership in both houses of Congress.

Democratic Party support was stated most clearly by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, who, after negotiating a compromise in the Senate, chastised Republicans in the House of Representatives, declaring: "If the House Republicans refuse to pass our bipartisan bill, they bear responsibility for the consequences."

On March 16, before recessing for Easter break, the House passed a bill that was broader in scope than the bill eventually signed into law. Working with Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Reid negotiated a compromise specifically tailored to the case of Terri Schiavo. Both the Senate and the House then passed this bill, in each of the chambers with support from Democrats.

In the Senate, the Democrats ensured that the bill never received a full vote. Instead, the Senate leadership used a voice vote procedure that did not require a quorum (a simple majority) to pass. Only three Senators were on hand to vote the bill through. If one Senate Democrat had opposed the procedure, the Senate sponsors would have been forced to assemble a quorum for a roll call vote.

Once the compromise bill passed the Senate, it was sent to the House, where the objections of a handful of Democrats forced a vote by the entire House. Again, however, passage was possible only because of the acquiescence of the Democratic leadership. The final vote, which took place just after midnight on Monday morning, was 203-58. Included among those who supported the bill were 47 Democrats, as

opposed to 53 Democrats who voted against. Nearly half the Democrats who returned from Easter recess for the session voted in support of the unconstitutional and deeply anti-democratic bill.

The Democratic Party whip, Steny Hoyer, made no attempt to rally Democrats against the bill. Instead he told them to "vote their conscience," an injunction meant to indicate that the Democratic leadership in the House had agreed to allow the bill to pass.

The vote in the House was particularly significant since the Democrats could easily have blocked the legislation had they so desired. Because the bill was given a special expedited process, it required a two-thirds majority of those present to pass. If all the Democrats present had voted against the bill, the vote would have been 156-100, and the measure would have failed. Alternatively, if 146 of the 202 House Democrats had returned to vote against the bill, it would have failed even with the support of the remainder of the House.

Many House Democrats, such as Representative Steven Lynch from Massachusetts, openly backed the reactionary position of the Republicans. "My bottom line was to stand up for the parents," Lynch declared. "It is so exasperating and painful for them."

Brushing aside constitutional issues concerning privacy rights, the system of checks and balances between the three branches of government, and the authority of the state courts, Lynch said, "Hey, we play doctor on every national health policy decision we make in Congress." According to this logic, Congress has the arbitrary right to make health decisions for any individual, if and when it so chooses.

Most Democrats in both the House and the Senate simply absented themselves from any debate and avoided making public comments. Senators Hillary Clinton and John Kerry have said nothing, and did not show up to oppose the bill.

Senator Edward Kennedy issued a tepid statement that he intended "to do all I can to see that any action Congress takes is constructive and free from partisan politics, and does not make a tragic situation worse by exploiting this terrible

tragedy.” Kennedy did not show up to vote against the bill in the Senate, presumably because he decided that the compromise was sufficiently “free from partisan politics.”

Opinion polls published since the weekend make clear that the public is overwhelmingly opposed to the intervention of the federal government in the Schiavo case. This demonstrates that in collaborating with the Republicans to pass the law, the Democrats were not bowing to significant popular support for the measure.

An ABC News poll released on Monday found that “Americans broadly and strongly disapprove of federal intervention in the Terri Schiavo case, with sizable majorities saying Congress is overstepping its bounds for political gain.” The poll results show that 63 percent of the population supports the removal of Schiavo’s feeding tube and 60 percent opposes federal intervention. Even a majority of those describing themselves as Republicans support the removal of her feeding tube.

According to the poll, two-thirds of the population believes that the intervention of Congress is motivated by political calculation rather than concern for Terri Schiavo.

Despite the confusion resulting from the relentless right-wing propaganda to which Americans have been subjected for decades, and in spite of the absence of any genuine democratic or progressive counterforce within the political establishment, there remain deep-seated sentiments within the population in support of democratic principles. These sentiments contrast sharply with the utterly unprincipled, cowardly and indifferent attitude of the Democratic Party.

The real concerns of Democratic politicians were clearly outlined in a statement made to the *Washington Post* by an unnamed high-ranking House Democratic aide. “Our folks are nervous about this,” he said, referring to the legislation on the Schiavo case. The *Post* reported, “Democrats are aware of the polls [indicating public opposition to the bill], he said, but also wary of the intensity and determination of the conservative groups—many of them steeped in the politics of abortion—that are demanding that Schiavo be kept alive.”

In other words, the Democratic Party is more concerned about appeasing a frenzied, reactionary fringe of the American population—the Christian fundamentalist and semi-fascist outfits that have been pushing for government intervention in the Schiavo case as part of their anti-democratic and anti-abortion agenda—than they are about the views of the vast majority of their own constituency, let alone longstanding democratic principles. The position of the Democrats is no less cynical than that of the Republicans, with one major difference: with the Democrats, cynicism is combined with prostration and cowardice.

This adaptation to the Republican right in spite of public

opposition to Republican policy is by no means an aberration.

During the late 1990s, there was widespread hostility to the campaign waged by the Republican Party to unseat the Clinton administration by manufacturing a scandal. Public opposition to the witch-hunt led by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and the accompanying impeachment drive was expressed in the major defeat handed to Congressional Republicans in the mid-term elections of 1998. Nevertheless, the Democratic Party failed to wage a serious fight against the impeachment process and refused to expose the right-wing conspiracy behind the Starr investigation.

Capitulation in the Clinton impeachment set the stage for capitulation to the theft of the 2000 election, when Bush, who had lost the popular vote, was handed the presidency through the suppression of votes. Democratic candidate Al Gore urged his supporters to abide by the unconstitutional Supreme Court ruling that halted the Florida recount and installed Bush in office.

Since the reelection of Bush in 2004, made possible by the right-wing campaign of Democratic candidate John Kerry, the Democrats have been at even greater pains to appease the Republican right, particularly on religious and “cultural” issues. Leading Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, have made statements indicating a willingness to compromise on abortion rights.

The complicity of the Democratic Party in the Schiavo case must be taken as a clear warning by all those opposed to the escalating attack on democratic rights. The supporters of federal intervention in the case have quite deliberately justified this gross invasion of privacy on the grounds of Terri Schiavo’s “right to life.” They clearly intend to use the case to step up their campaign on the other “right to life” issue: abortion.

If the Democrats are so willing to capitulate on the Schiavo case, why should anyone doubt that, in the end, they will capitulate on the abortion question as well? The role of the Democratic Party in the lawless assault on personal liberty in the Schiavo case is one more proof of this party’s inability and unwillingness to defend democratic rights.



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