

Right-wing propaganda and scientific fact in the case of Terri Schiavo

David North
28 March 2005

The following is a letter from a reader of the WSWs on the case of Terri Schiavo and a reply by David North, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US). The reader, CR, wrote the letter in response to Patrick Martin's article, "'Culture of life' or culture of lies: an exchange with WSWs readers on the Terri Schiavo case". Martin was replying to an earlier letter from CR, among others.

I was very saddened to read your analysis of Terri Schiavo's defenders and I assume I fall into the category of individuals whose response has been informed by ignorance. I am disgusted that you would try to turn this into a political argument. You quote parts of my letter, having claimed that you received a barrage of letters, after having gone to great length to suggest that those of us who responded to your article were misinformed Christian fundamentalists. I would like to tell you I am not a Christian. I would also like to inform you that I am a socialist who lives in the United Kingdom, and have relied on your site for analysis of world events for the past three years. I have always admired the writing of WSWs. But this has sickened me.

I would like to inform you that I am the mother of a child that is being fed by gastrostomy having been brain damaged at the age of four months. So I think I would be qualified to comment on the so-called diagnosis of PVS. My daughter is now nine years old. My daughter will always be dependent upon me for all her care. My daughter could very easily be diagnosed as suffering PVS. However, like Terri she is cognitive and aware of her family, our friends and able to communicate her needs. I have watched the videos of Terri. Have you? In these videos I see a woman who, although impaired by the brain damage suffered, is able to similarly respond to her caretakers and parents.

Secondly, to attribute the reaction of those who wish Terri to be treated with dignity to the right-wing press is incorrect. In the mainstream press and on the Internet, the majority of journalists coming from both the left and right have continued to distort and misrepresent the truth. I have been following Terri's life for the past two years and I have found journalists on both sides of the political spectrum resorting to lazy journalism and quoting from official sources and from Michael Schiavo. Very rarely have her parents been allowed to express their opinions and feelings about Terri's case. Your article was no exception. I have read exactly the same points you made in the right-wing press. That is surprising to me.

Perhaps to a reader with no prior knowledge of Terri Schiavo, your article will appear to be well researched and sourced. It was for this reason that I wrote to you, hoping that you would at least take the time to look more deeply into the situation. I am disappointed that you did not and that you chose to misrepresent who I am and what I stand for. I was completely humiliated by the way in which you used my letter to make the point that I was part of a fundamentalist, right-wing, Christian constituency and misinformed.

Your position is clearly hostile to Terri and her parents. If we wish Terri to "die with dignity" then why not give her a lethal injection and be done with it? To allow her to die a slow death by dehydration and starvation is

the cruelest thing imaginable. It is this image that I as a human being and mother cannot shake from my mind. If the idea is to allow her to die with dignity then why not use euthanasia? Besides having the tube removed, Terri is being refused water and food orally. We treat animals with more dignity.

I am sorry that you could not even take the time to respond personally to my initial letter.

Yours sincerely,

CR

25 March 2005

Dear Ms. R,

You state in your letter of March 25 that you are "disgusted" that the *World Socialist Web Site* "would try to turn [the case of Terri Schiavo] into a political argument." If you disapprove of the politicization of issues related to the medical condition of Terry Schiavo, it would be more appropriate to direct your anger against others—namely, (1) Florida Governor Jeb Bush, who latched on to the Schiavo case in the autumn of 2003 and rammed "Terri's law" through the state legislature as a means of rallying the Republican Party's extreme right-wing Evangelical base prior to the presidential election; (2) Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who sought to exploit the Schiavo case to distract attention from the innumerable corruption scandals in which he is implicated; and (3) President George Bush, whose extraordinary and blatantly unconstitutional intervention in the Schiavo case was aimed at reenergizing his hard-core reactionary religious constituency to counter broad public opposition to the administration's social policy—especially its attack on Social Security.

Without the intervention of these political forces, the fate of Ms. Schiavo would have been decided—as it is in thousands of similar cases every year in hospitals throughout the United States (and, I might add, the United Kingdom)—by her spouse, in consultation with physicians. Rarely do such cases attract attention beyond the sphere of the immediate family and the doctors and nurses involved in the care of the patient. The tragedy of Terri Schiavo was that a conflict within her family, apparently triggered by a dispute over money, escalated into a public battle that placed the fate of this woman, whose conscious life ended more than 15 years ago, in the hands of the most reactionary, ignorant, dishonest and unscrupulous political forces in the United States.

You tell us that you are a socialist and a long-time reader of the WSWs, upon whose analyses of world events you have relied for the last three years. This information does come as a surprise, because your initial letter (to which we responded) was based largely on misinformation concocted by neo-fascist fundamentalist elements who have been leading the "Save Terri" campaign. Your letter quoted selectively and uncritically from a grotesquely dishonest and provocative account written by one Barbara Weller, a right-wing attorney for the Schindler family, of a visit to Terri Schiavo's hospice room. Published in the Baptist Press, this account portrays Ms. Schiavo as a somewhat disabled young woman,

communicating intensely with her family, as she awaits anxiously the outcome of her parents' efforts to block her impending "gruesome execution."

This account conforms to the mythology of the neo-fascist fundamentalist movement, which incites its ignorant, superstitious and deluded followers with lurid images of Ms. Schiavo's imminent martyrdom. Nothing Ms. Weller writes bears any resemblance to the reality of Ms. Schiavo's medical condition. For example: "Terri was in good spirits that morning. The mood in her room was jovial ... Suzanne and I were talking, joking, and laughing with Terri, telling her she was going to Washington, D.C. to testify before Congress, which meant that finally Terri's husband Michael would be required to fix her wheelchair." The letter proclaims that Terri shouted out, "I want to live." This alleged plea has since been quoted extensively in the American media. Of course, Ms. Schiavo could never have said this, or anything else, as her cerebral cortex was long ago destroyed. But the words have shock value. After all, "I Want to Live," was the title of a celebrated 1959 movie, in which the late Susan Hayward played a condemned woman who suffers an excruciating death in a gas chamber.

Based on your second letter, it seems that your acceptance of the right-wing misrepresentation of Terri Schiavo's condition is based on your personal experience as the mother of a nine-year-old child who suffered brain damage at the age of four months. You write: "My daughter could very easily be diagnosed as suffering PVS [Permanent Vegetative State]. However, like Terri she is cognitive and aware of her family, our friends and able to communicate her needs." I certainly accept your description of your daughter's capabilities. But to the extent that your daughter is cognitive and aware, she is most decidedly different from Ms. Schiavo. If your daughter is aware and able to communicate consciously, she is not, fortunately, in a vegetative state. Ms. Schiavo, however, is in such a state. Every neurologist who has examined Terri Schiavo concurs that all portions of her brain associated with intellectual and emotional consciousness are non-functional.

Your evaluation of Ms. Schiavo's condition is based on brief video clips that have been edited by the Schindler family and broadcast by the media. You write: "In these videos I see a woman, although impaired by the brain damage suffered, is able to similarly respond to her carers and parents."

As someone who has had to deal with serious brain damage, you should be familiar with the specific characteristics of the vegetative state. The video to which you refer is propaganda, and can be persuasive only to those who lack any knowledge of PVS. Permit me to quote from a scientific document published in 2003 by the Royal College of Physicians in Britain, entitled "The Vegetative State: Guidance on Diagnosis and Management." It states:

"A patient in the vegetative state (VS) appears at times to be wakeful, with cycles of eye closure and eye opening resembling those of sleep and waking. However, close observation reveals no sign of awareness or a 'functioning mind': specifically, there is no evidence that the patient can perceive the environment or his own body, communicate with others, or form intentions."

The facial reactions of Ms. Schiavo that are shown in the video in no way refute the diagnosis of PVS. As described by the Royal College of Physicians, "As well as showing signs of a cycle of sleep and wakefulness, patients in the vegetative state may make a range of spontaneous movements including chewing, teeth grinding, swallowing, roving eye movements and purposeless limb movements; they make facial movements such as smiles or grimaces, shed tears, or make grunting or groaning sounds for no discernable reason.... It is unusual for patients in a VS to follow a moving target for more than a fraction of a second, to fixate a target or to react to visual menace."

The study of the Royal College of Physicians explicitly distinguishes the Vegetative State from the "minimally conscious," "minimally

responsive," or "low awareness" states "of patients who show minimal but definite evidence of awareness despite profound cognitive impairment."

As for the correctness of the diagnosis of Terri Schiavo as suffering from PVS, this has been conclusively established. As the Second District Court explained based on an exhaustive review of Ms. Schiavo's medical records:

"The evidence is overwhelming that Theresa is in a permanent or persistent vegetative state. It is important to understand that a persistent state is not simply a coma. She is not asleep. She has cycles of apparent wakefulness and apparent sleep without any cognition or awareness. As she breathes, she often makes moaning sounds. Theresa has severe contractions of her hands, elbows, knees and feet.

"Over the span of this last decade, Theresa's brain has deteriorated because of the lack of oxygen it suffered at the time of the heart attack. By mid 1996, the CAT scans of her brain showed a severely abnormal structure. At this point, much of her cerebral cortex is simply gone and has been replaced by cerebral spinal fluid. Medicine cannot cure this condition. Unless an act of God, a true miracle, were to recreate her brain, Theresa will always remain in an unconscious, reflexive state, totally dependent upon others to feed her and care for her most private needs. She could remain in this state for many years."

The above statement by the District Court sums up the real scientifically established facts of Ms. Schiavo's physical and mental condition. In all the lurid propaganda of the evangelical right, trumpeted in the media, not a single fact has been brought forward to counter the diagnosis of physicians who have actually examined Terri Schiavo. The few physicians who have denied the validity of the diagnosis of PVS have been linked to evangelical fundamentalist organizations.

While you attempt in your letter to suggest that you stand above the left-right divide in the case of Terri Schiavo, your arguments are based entirely on the falsifications and outright lies of the extreme right. You make the following astonishing statement: "Very rarely have her parents been allowed to express their opinions and feelings about Terri's case." What are you talking about? The views of the Schindlers are blasted across the United States every day and night, by the rabid attack dogs of Rupert Murdoch's media empire and innumerable fascistic talk show hosts. Indeed, this case only became a public controversy because the Schindler family solicited the support of right-wing groups.

In a lengthy article that chronicles the development of the dispute between the parents and husband of Theresa Schiavo, the *New York Times* writes: "Mr. Schiavo's anger intensified as the Schindlers went increasingly public, winning support from religious groups, news media outlets, and, ultimately, Gov. Jeb Bush."

With the assistance of the Bush administrations in Florida and Washington, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of dollars poured into the "Save Terri" media campaign sponsored by the extreme right, truth and reality have been turned on their head. The most noxious lie of all is that the parents of Terri Schindler have been acting in the interests of their daughter. I will not attempt to offer here an analysis of the tortured mixture of misdirected love, personal desperation, self-delusion, egotism, resentment of their son-in-law, and religious fanaticism led them to act in a manner that is, given the real facts of Terri Schiavo's condition, so horribly blind to the interests and dignity of their daughter. But it is worth reiterating—because this aspect of the case is so rarely mentioned—that the decision to end life support is based on a court finding "by clear and convincing evidence that Theresa Schiavo was in a persistent vegetative state and that Theresa would elect to cease life-prolonging procedures if she were competent to make her own decision."

If you are, as you claim, a socialist, then it is your responsibility to base your judgments on the operation of reason and the analysis of facts. The *World Socialist Web Site* retracts nothing that it has previously written on

the Schiavo case, and we urge you to reconsider your own position.

Yours sincerely,

David North

Access the full text of CR's first letter here.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact