

Jesse Jackson at the Schiavo hospice: Democrats make common cause with Christian right

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The appearance by the Reverend Jesse Jackson in Florida, in support of the right-wing religious hysteria over Terri Schiavo, was a public demonstration of the position taken by virtually all the leading figures of the Democratic Party. On an issue where the actions of the Bush administration and the congressional Republican leadership are opposed by the vast majority of the American people, the Democrats have abandoned any pretense of being an “opposition” party and joined forces with the ultra-right.

Jackson, one of the best-known public figures in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and a two-time candidate for the party’s presidential nomination, solidarized himself with the right-wing campaign against the withdrawal of life support from the severely brain-damaged woman. He echoed the language of the Christian fundamentalists, comparing Schiavo’s condition to martyrdom and demanding the restoration of the feeding tube, removed March 18 at the behest of Terri’s husband Michael.

Jackson held a private discussion with Robert and Mary Schindler, Terri Schiavo’s parents, outside the hospice where she was dying. The topic was the resurrection of Christ, a family spokesman said. Jackson made phone calls to several black Democrats in the Florida state legislature, urging them to reverse their opposition to a bill that would require restoration of the feeding tube. He joined with a Roman Catholic priest in a publicity stunt, offering to participate in administering holy communion to Schiavo.

(Michael Schiavo, himself a Catholic, authorized the last rites for his wife, including communion, but rejected demands by clerics allied with the Schindlers to administer communion to the vegetative woman every day. Since Terri is incapable of swallowing the wafer, communion is administered in the form of a few drops of wine on her tongue.)

Afterwards, Jackson appeared on the sidewalk in front of the hospice to speak with the media. “Today we pray for a miracle,” he declared. Referring to Terri Schiavo, he said, “She is being starved to death. She is being dehydrated to death. That is inhumane.”

This represents a clear stand on the side of religion and against science. Jackson never addressed the well-established facts of the case: that Terri Schiavo is in a persistent vegetative state, that her brain has not functioned for 15 years, that she has no sensation, no thought, no emotion, no control of her own movements.

Instead, Jackson suggested that Schiavo was fighting to live: “Without water or food, without even ice cubes for her lips, for 12 days she is still alive,” he said. “That should send a message to all of us.” Actually, Terri Schiavo’s slow deterioration after the shutoff of

life support is typical. It says nothing about her internal state of mind, which, according to electrical monitoring, is nil. Terri Schiavo is not conscious and does not feel hunger or thirst, nor the will to live, nor anything else.

Calling the Schiavo case “one of the profound moral and ethical issues of our time,” Jackson indirectly condemned the position of Michael Schiavo, Terri’s husband, as immoral and unethical. “This is a global issue, and oftentimes the big issues of life are reduced to a single person who brings clarity,” he continued. “We cannot hide behind the law and not have mercy.”

He continued: “We watch her struggle. We see her on TV. She is now part of our lives. We are all potentially Terris.” He added that Terri Schiavo was a symbol of the starvation and lack of medical care afflicting so many people today, declaring that one lesson of this case was that “no one should be left behind.”

Behind this display of sympathy is a lie: Jackson equates Michael Schiavo, Terri’s husband, with those who are really responsible for the suffering of hundreds of millions of people around the world: the financial oligarchy which places its profits above basic human needs like food and medical care, and above human life itself.

Michael Schiavo is not George Bush or Donald Rumsfeld. He is not Merck or Enron. He is a working class man who has made the agonizing decision to terminate life support in accordance with Terri’s wishes, expressed not only to him, but to his brother and his brother’s wife. The three have testified repeatedly in court and their testimony has been found credible in dozens of court hearings.

The flip side of Jackson’s lie is to present the right-wing campaign against Michael Schiavo as an effort to vindicate the rights of the disabled. Misguided groups such as Not Dead Yet play a similar role, grotesquely identifying themselves with a woman who lacks precisely what they possess: a conscious life and the will to fight for it, no matter how difficult the circumstances.

Jackson’s arrival was greeted with applause by the demonstrators who have assembled in small numbers outside the hospice and made repeated efforts to invade the premises, as well as threatening violence against Michael Schiavo and his supporters. Patrick Mahoney of the Christian Defense League, who initiated the invitation to Jackson but was not at the hospice on the day of his visit, expressed regret: “I wish I could have been there to see people who probably cursed the Rev. Jesse Jackson in the past suddenly cheering him.”

Jackson lent the prestige of his association with the civil rights struggles of the 1960s to this group of fascists and religious fanatics, saying, “It’s a transcendent moment and a transcendent opportunity.

This is where blacks and whites find common ground. Conservatives and liberals.”

The former Democratic presidential candidate once claimed to favor the building of a political movement that would unite ordinary people across lines of color, ethnicity and religion, which he dubbed a Rainbow Coalition, to enact progressive reforms. But in Florida Tuesday, he embraced a different kind of coalition: a unity of “left” and right, on the basis of the anti-democratic program of the extreme right.

The symbol of this unity was Jackson’s appearance side by side with Randall Terry, founder of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue. “I’m honored to stand with the Rev. Jesse Jackson,” Terry said. He is more used to blockading abortion clinics or making statements that give political and moral support to violent attacks on abortion providers.

One of Terry’s supporters assassinated Dr. Bernard Slepian, a doctor in Buffalo, New York who performed abortions. According to the *New York Daily News*, Terry added this comment about his new and unexpected alliance with Jesse Jackson: “I couldn’t have written this script if I was on acid.”

This leading Democrat is allying himself with Christian fundamentalists and other elements of the fascistic right, the principal social base of support for the Republican Congress and the Bush administration. These forces are responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan. They support social policies in the United States and around the world that impoverish the majority of humanity and kill millions. They embrace capital punishment. They endorse torture and indefinite imprisonment without trial in the name of the “war on terror.” And yet in the Schiavo case, they claim to represent a “culture of life.”

Jackson is far from alone. Congressional Democrats by and large supported, or refused to oppose, the blatantly unconstitutional bill pushed through the House and Senate last week by the Republican leadership, giving the Schindlers the right to litigate the feeding tube shutoff in federal court. Eight members of the Congressional Black Caucus, including Jesse Jackson Jr., a congressman from Chicago, voted for the Republican bill.

The Reverend Al Sharpton, also a former candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, endorsed Jackson’s views on the Schiavo case, although he opposed the congressional intervention as intrusive. He said in a press interview, “I do as a minister support her being reconnected, but I do not feel that I could respond to the request and at the same time criticize the president for intervening.”

In the Senate, where a single senator could have blocked a vote on the legislation by objecting, not one Democrat did so. Senator Tom Harkin, an Iowa liberal, was the only Democrat present and he voted aye.

According to at least one press report, Harkin had the support of former President Bill Clinton for his stance.

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, an opponent of abortion rights, assured the Republican leadership that there would no resistance. Senator Hillary Clinton did not oppose the measure, and has made no public comment on the Schiavo case over the past two weeks. She did find time, however, to join with fundamentalist Republican senators Rick Santorum and Sam Brownback in supporting a \$90 million effort to suppress violent videogames.

Then there is the defeated Democratic presidential candidate, Senator John Kerry. According to a spokeswoman, Kerry supported the legislation giving Robert and Mary Schindler the right to take the

Schiavo case into federal court, adding only the characteristic Kerry quibble that “any intervention by Congress is temporary and Mrs. Schiavo’s family must come together. It’s a question for her family, and their doctors, and their faith.” Given that Michael Schiavo and the Schindlers have been locked in legal combat for seven years, Kerry’s appeal for them to “come together” only underscores his refusal to take sides on a clear question of democratic and constitutional principle.

It is worth recalling that 45 years ago, Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, issued a public pledge to strictly uphold the separation of church and state, addressing both anti-Catholic bigotry and legitimate concerns that the Vatican would have undue political influence over his administration. No Democrat would make such a pledge today, for fear of being branded hostile to religion or, even worse, an atheist. In last year’s presidential campaign, for example, Kerry went out of his way to legitimize church interference in political matters, even when several Catholic bishops called for his excommunication because of his position on abortion rights.

The Democratic Party has moved steadily to the right over the past three decades, abandoning any association it once had, particularly in the civil rights era, with the defense of democratic rights. This process has been especially pronounced over the past decade, as Democrats retreated before the right-wing campaign of subversion against the Clinton administration, culminating in impeachment, then capitulated to the theft of the 2000 presidential election, then embraced repressive measures like the USA Patriot Act after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and, finally, lined up behind a war of aggression in Iraq launched on the basis of lies.

Their stance on the Schiavo case, however, is the most craven surrender yet to the extreme right. And it cannot be attributed—despicable as that would be—merely to opportunist calculations about what is popular. On the Schiavo case, the vast majority of the American people oppose congressional intervention and regard the right-wing antics outside the Florida hospice with disgust. There is no immediate electoral advantage to be gained for the Democrats by pandering to a right-wing fringe that alienates even some sections of the Republican Party. The Democrats are supporting the Christian fanatics because they are in agreement with them.

This is the reality that confronts working people in America. The two-party system is an instrument of political and social control wielded by a financial oligarchy that is repudiating any commitment to democratic rights and constitutional procedures. The defense of basic rights and all of the social interests of working people requires an uncompromising break with the Democratic Party and the building of a new, independent mass political party of the working class, based on a democratic and socialist program.



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