

Nader solidarizes himself with extreme right in Terri Schiavo case

Andrea Peters
26 April 2005

Ralph Nader's intervention in the Terri Schiavo case was significant for what it revealed about the former Green Party and independent presidential candidate's political trajectory. In a series of public statements concerning the tragic episode, Nader expressed his agreement with the anti-scientific and anti-democratic positions taken by the extreme right, effectively solidarizing himself with this social layer.

He justified his political bloc with the far-right on this question at a meeting in Los Angeles held April 3, making clear that his intervention in the Schiavo case was the result of conscious political calculations. When asked by this reporter to explain his position on the case he stated, "We have to stop thinking in terms of left and right." He continued, "Right now we are seeing a number of areas where conservatives and liberals are coming together."

Throughout his intervention in the Schiavo case, Nader based himself on many of the same irrationalist claims that were being made by various Christian fundamentalist groups. On March 24, at the height of the turmoil surrounding the misguided efforts of Schiavo's parents to prevent the court-ordered removal of the feeding tube that had been sustaining their daughter's life for the previous 15 years, Nader published a statement asserting that Schiavo's persistent vegetative state was merely a form of physical disability. Charging the courts with imposing "death by dehydration," he insisted that the rights of the unconscious woman were being abrogated by the judicial process.

The press release, published jointly with conservative commentator Wesley Smith, a regular contributor to such right-wing publications as the *Weekly Standard* and the *National Review*, described Schiavo as an "innocent disabled woman." In this fashion, Nader sought to ingratiate himself with far-right groupings claiming to constitute a section of the disability rights movement.

"The medical and rehabilitation experts are split on whether Terri is in a persistent vegetative state or whether Terri can be improved with therapy. There is only one way to know for sure—permit therapy," wrote Nader and Smith.

In order to make this claim, which was thoroughly

dishonest, Nader relied on the medical testimony of doctors with ties to right-wing Christian fundamentalist groups who were recruited by Terri Schiavo's fundamentalist Catholic parents. Throughout the legal battle, independent experts repeatedly refuted these assessments, explaining that Schiavo's permanent vegetative state had ended her conscious existence. On that basis, the courts rejected the position that there was any possibility of recovery.

The unprincipled character of Nader's position on the Schiavo case went beyond simply repeating the ignorant and religiously-inspired claims of the far-right about the woman's physical condition. Portraying himself as a defender of the interests of the woman against the supposed indifference of the judiciary, Nader falsely claimed that the Schiavo case never got its full day in court.

"The court is imposing process over justice," wrote Nader and Smith. "After the first trial in this case, much evidence has been produced that should allow for a new trial—which was the point of the hasty federal legislation. If this were a death penalty case, this evidence would demand reconsideration. Yet, an innocent disabled woman is receiving less justice."

In addition to the fact that the authors of the statement never explain what evidence they are referring to that should have been the basis for a new trial, the claim that the concerns of Schiavo's parents were never given a full hearing in the courts is absurd. The Schiavo case was the most extensively litigated "right-to-die" case in US history.

Thus, under the cover of advocating for the rights of a defenseless person, Nader formed a bloc with the far-right in its attacks on the judiciary, attempting to provide the whole affair a liberal and progressive hue.

Furthermore, as the above statement demonstrates, Nader attempted to lend a veneer of moral legitimacy to Congress' anti-democratic efforts. He implied that the 'spirit'—if not the method—of the effort to override the constitutional separation of powers through the enactment of legislation forcing the federal courts to review the Schiavo case was entirely appropriate.

In a further endorsement of the campaign waged by the Christian fundamentalists, Nader joined in the attack on Michael Schiavo, Terri's husband. In an article entitled "The Many Layers of the Terry [sic] Schiavo Controversy" published on *CommonDreams.org*, Nader suggested that Michael Schiavo wished to end his wife's life by artificial means for reasons of personal expediency and financial gain. (The very fact that Nader carelessly misspelled Terri Schiavo's name discredits his effort to portray his intervention as having been motivated by compassionate concern for the plight of the unfortunate woman).

Nader wrote: "Michael Schiavo has decided, somewhat after the medical malpractice case was settled, that Terri would not want to live under such conditions. So he has made the decision to let her expire and the circuit courts and appellate courts have approved. He has been for nearly ten years in a common law marriage with a woman who has given birth to their two children. He wants to get on with his life, after years of pressure and anguish."

While using language meant to indicate a degree of sympathy for Michael Schiavo's position, Nader's statement completely distorted the truth. What the legal process established, on the basis of the testimony of several witnesses, was that Terri Schiavo herself had said, prior to the seizure that left her in a vegetative state, that she would not want to be artificially kept alive if she ever ended up in such a condition. Nader's insinuation that Michael Schiavo came to this conclusion on his own, and that he did so only after concluding that the extension of his wife's life was personally inconvenient, was not only false, it dovetailed with the slanderous attacks on Michael Schiavo's character issued by far-right groups and their Republican allies.

Furthermore, as the results of an investigation by the Florida Department of Children and Families demonstrated (See: "State investigation clears Michael Schiavo of all abuse charges," April 20, 2005), Michael Schiavo conducted himself with the utmost compassion towards his wife over the last 15 years.

At the Los Angeles meeting April 3, organized to discuss the Iraq war, Nader reiterated his view that Schiavo's predicament was a disability rights case, refused to acknowledge the significance of the 'permanent vegetative state,' and insisted that her husband was driven by "divided loyalties." Asked by this reporter why he had not raised any objections to the threat to democratic institutions embodied in Congress' intervention in the case, Nader said, "Well, they shouldn't have done it that way," but maintained that this was not a major issue.

Nader's complete indifference to the attack on democratic rights spearheaded by the Republican right and its fascistic allies is not a new phenomenon. On numerous occasions he

has not only demonstrated an unwillingness to defend democratic procedures from the machinations of these reactionary forces, but has made clear his desire to work with them politically.

Nader supported the attempted coup d'état by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and Congressional Republicans against Bill Clinton in 1998-99, stating in the aftermath of Clinton's impeachment and Senate trial that had he been in Congress, he would have voted to oust Clinton from office.

In 2000, as part of his presidential campaign on the Green Party ticket, Nader explicitly appealed for support from backers of the right-wing populist Patrick Buchanan on the basis of economic nationalism and American chauvinism. He remained silent about the theft of the 2000 election by the Republican Party and its allies on the US Supreme Court, despite the fact that he had won tens of thousands of votes in the contested state of Florida.

Nader's alliance with the Christian fundamentalist base of the Republican Party in the Schiavo case is an expression of the overall decline and decay of American liberalism. His stance was shared by a significant section of leading so-called liberals in the US, such as Jesse Jackson, who campaigned on behalf of Schiavo's parents, and others in the former Clinton-Gore entourage (including attorneys Lanny Davis and David Boies).

The leadership of the Democratic Party in Congress was complicit in the passage of legislation forcing a review of the Schiavo case in the federal courts, and some prominent figures, such as Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, openly endorsed the measure. Like the Democrats, Nader has responded to the reelection of Bush and the general deepening of the social and economic crisis in the US with a demoralized effort to ingratiate himself with the most reactionary political elements.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact