The case of Terri Schiavo and the crisis of politics and culture in the United States

David North
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The following is the text of a report given by David North, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party and chairman of the editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site, *at a public meeting held in New York on Sunday, April 3.*

There occasionally occurs in the life of nations an event, bizarre and unexpected, that seizes the attention of millions of people, and, in a manner that could hardly have been foreseen, raises profound historical, political and moral questions, revealing essential and ugly truths about the society in which the event is unfolding. Such an event is the case of Terri Schiavo. The controversy surrounding the fate of this unfortunate woman and her beleaguered husband is a prism through which the malignant social contradictions of the United States are being refracted.

The death of Terri Schiavo should never have been anything other than the personal tragedy of a single family. While the brain trauma suffered by Ms. Schiavo 15 years ago was of the most extreme character—depriving her of all the elements of conscious existence without which life is reduced to nothing more than the sum total of ongoing biological processes—the choice that confronted her husband was one that is faced by countless spouses and, depending on the precise circumstances, parents and children every day in the United States.

At some point in our lives, every one of us will probably be compelled to decide, in consultation with physicians, whether the time has come to limit or entirely withdraw medical care for a loved one. We can only hope that in such circumstances we will be allowed to make that decision, based on an intelligent assessment of our real medical options and knowledge of the patient's personal wishes, without the intervention of the state, fundamentalist and neo-fascist know-nothings, and the curs of the mass media.

No one could have predicted that this particular case would become a national cause célèbre. And yet, now that it has happened, it cannot be said that it is altogether surprising that such a case has assumed these massive dimensions. The peculiar national environment which has made this case possible is the product of decades of political, social, and, I must add, intellectual degeneration.

Of course, fundamentalist demagogy and charlatanry are hardly new phenomena in the United States. But never before have the national government and the ruling political party embraced American-style Christian fundamentalism as their ideology, and sought to develop out of a wide network of reactionary fundamentalist organizations a mass political constituency.

In earlier and healthier periods of American history, fundamentalist ignorance and demagogy were the subject of national ridicule—whether in the essays of H.L. Mencken or the novels of Sinclair Lewis. Several generations of American youth were introduced by the play and movie *Inherit the Wind* to the absurdities of Bible-thumping dogmatism. The Scopes Trial of 1925, the subject of *Inherit the Wind*, came to be seen as the pathetic last stand of religious bigotry and ignorance in America against the forces of science, reason and progress.

How far America has fallen in 80 years! Who can state with any degree of confidence today that prosecution for the teaching of evolutionary science is not a real and imminent possibility in one or another state of this country? But with or without prosecution, evolution is already being banished from a significant number of high school curricula, or being presented as merely a speculative theory—alongside Bible-based versions of the origins of earth and man, as set forth by Creationist and "Intelligent Design" mythologies.

Its intervention into the Schiavo case is only the most visible example of an anti-science inquisition that is being organized by the Bush administration. The distortion and degradation of scientific research is finding ever-wider and ever-crazier manifestations in the public life of the United States. For example, in 2003 the US Department of the Interior placed in the official bookstore of the Grand Canyon National Park a new book, titled *Grand Canyon: a Different View*. The book argues against the scientifically established understanding, based on more than a century of geological research, that the Canyon evolved over millions of years. Instead, it claims that the Grand Canyon is the product of a single catastrophic event that occurred a few thousand years ago—something like the Biblical flood. Despite angry protests by geological associations, this religious tract is still being stocked in the bookstores of this government-funded national park ("The Attack on Science," by Majorie Heins, December 21, 2004, Common Dreams News Center, www.commondreams.org).

The Union of Concerned Scientists called attention to the seriousness of the situation in a report it issued in March 2004, "Scientific Integrity in Policymaking: an Investigation into the Bush Administration's Misuse of Science." The key findings of the investigation were:

> "1. There is a well-established pattern of suppression and distortion of scientific findings by high-ranking Bush administration political appointees across numerous federal agencies. These actions have consequences for human health, public safety, and community well-being.
>
> "2. There is strong documentation of a wide-ranging effort to manipulate the government's scientific advisory system to prevent the appearance of advice that might run counter to the administration's political agenda.
>
> "3. There is evidence that the administration often imposes restrictions on what government scientists can say or write about 'sensitive' topics.
>
> "4. There is significant evidence that the scope and scale of the manipulation, suppression, and misrepresentation of science by the Bush administration are unprecedented."

This report was signed by more than 60 leading scientists in the United

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States, including many Nobel laureates.

Only in a country where scientific thought is under siege would it be possible for the insane, shameful and degrading spectacle of the Terri Schiavo case to assume such immense political dimensions. The White House, Congress and the governor and legislature of the state of Florida, in alliance with the fundamentalist right, have trampled on the Constitution to "save" a woman whose conscious life ended 15 years ago.

The mass media not only amplifies the lies and misinformation of the "Save Terri" campaign, it provides a forum for open incitements to violence against Michael Schiavo and even the judges who have upheld basic Constitutional principles in allowing his wife, in accordance with wishes expressed by Ms. Schiavo, to end measures that prolonged her unconscious biological existence.

The appalling degeneration of political and intellectual life in the United States finds expression not simply in the agitation of the extreme right, but in the utter prostration of the Democratic Party and other forces that have traditionally postured as defenders of democratic rights and supporters of social progress. Without the complicity of the Democratic Party, it would not have been possible for the Republicans to ram through Congress their blatantly unconstitutional "Terri's Law," which sought to legitimize the abrogation of core democratic rights through legislative fiat.

In the decision denying the latest motion by the Schindler family, Judge Birch of the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals issued a concurring statement in which he warned that "the legislative and executive branches of our government have acted in a manner demonstrably at odds with our Founding Fathers' blueprint for the governance of a free people—our Constitution." He added, in a sentence which is italicized in the text of the court document, "*If sacrifices to the independence of the judiciary are permitted today, precedent is established for the constitutional transgressions of tomorrow.*"

The seriousness of this astonishing warning finds no echo in the statements, let alone actions, of leaders of the Democratic Party. Indeed, following Ms. Schiavo's death, the Democratic Party barely responded to the calls for violent retribution by the petty thug who runs the House of Representatives, Tom DeLay. As DeLay talks openly about killing Democratic leaders, the leaders of this so-called opposition party are capable of no more than shamefaced and frightened admonishments.

The conclusion that must be drawn from this fact is that the Democratic Party is utterly incapable of and disinterested in mounting any defense of constitutional rights. This political fact can come as no surprise to anyone who has followed with any degree of seriousness the political evolution of the Democratic Party over the last two decades, not to mention its degrading subservience to the Bush administration on all critical issues of policy—from the launching of an illegal invasion of Iraq and the massive violations of democratic rights exemplified by the Patriot Act, to the gutting of whatever remains of the social welfare legislation enacted between the 1930s and 1960s.

That the prostration of the Democratic Party reflects a deeper social process is indicated in the response of other political elements traditionally associated with American liberalism to the case of Terri Schiavo. During the past week, the campaign to reinsert feeding tubes into Ms. Schiavo has won the support of Jesse Jackson, Ralph Nader and the noted columnist—often celebrated as a defender of civil liberties—Nat Hentoff, who writes for the *Village Voice*. The statements of these individuals, whose political effect is to disorient public opinion and legitimize the actions of the extreme right, are striking not only in their political opportunism—an evident attempt to find a pathway toward conciliation with the politically ascendant Right. Even more noteworthy is their intellectual crudity and mendacity.

It might be possible to dismiss Jackson's intervention as the action of an inveterate charlatan and political buffoon. But Nader's statement cannot be so lightly ignored. Having mounted several presidential campaigns in which he presented himself as a left alternative to the corporate-controlled two-party system, Nader has issued a joint statement with Wesley J. Smith, a frequent contributor to the right-wing *National Review*, which declares: "A profound injustice is being inflicted on Terri Schiavo. Worse, this slow death by dehydration is being imposed upon her under the color of law, in proceedings in which every benefit of the doubt—and there are many doubts in this case—has been given to her death, rather than her continued life."

Doubts? Many doubts? Whose doubts? Among scientists and neurologists? Among those who understand the chemical and biological foundations of consciousness? In fact, as to the utterly hopeless state of Ms. Schiavo's medical condition—her absence of self-consciousness, her inability to perceive the external world, her loss of the capacity to process sensory data—there was no doubt at all among reputable neurologists.

To the extent that there could be any doubt about the diagnosis of Ms. Schiavo's vegetative state, the very nature of her condition made it theoretically impossible to exclude to a point of absolute certainty the minimal possibility that the patient retained some very dim and marginal level of perceptual awareness. However unlikely this was given the physical condition of Ms. Schiavo's brain, this possibility could not be absolutely excluded—though it is horrible to contemplate this possibility, which would mean that Ms. Schiavo had been compelled to endure, in utter silence and incommunicable hopelessness, an almost unimaginable degree of suffering for 15 years.

Allow me to comment on the *Village Voice* column by Nat Hentoff, which consists largely of a foul diatribe against Michael Schiavo, whom he maliciously accuses of harboring an "insistent desire to have [his wife] die." Hentoff repeats the slanders retailed in the right-wing media, that Schiavo "has violated a long list of his legal responsibilities as [his wife's] guardian, some of them directly preventing her chances for improvement." Hentoff is outraged that Schiavo is living in sin with another woman—which, he insinuates, is the reason Michael Schiavo does not want his wife to be kept alive and rehabilitated. This vicious portrait of Schiavo by a vindictive columnist is contradicted by well-established facts which, in one of the very few honest articles to be found in the mainstream media, were summarized in the current issue of *Newsweek* magazine:

> "In the early years of her condition, Michael and the Schindlers got along harmoniously, even living together in a house on the Gulf Coast for a while. They ensured that Terri received all variety of therapies, including physical, occupational and recreational. When those didn't work, Michael flew her out to California, where a doctor implanted platinum electrodes into her brain as part of an experimental procedure that ultimately failed. Back in Florida, Michael enlisted family members to record audiotapes of their voices, which he played for Terri on a Walkman. He was fastidious about Terri's appearance, spraying her with Picasso perfume and outfitting her in stirrup pants and matching tops from The Limited. At one Florida nursing home, he was so demanding that administrators sought a restraining order against him. But Gloria Centonze, who worked there at the time (and by coincidence later married into the family of Michael's future girlfriend), recalls a frequent comment among the nurses: 'He may be a bastard, but if I were sick like that, I wish he was my husband.' To better care for Terri, Michael even enrolled in nursing school."

Hentoff simply ignores all the scientific and medical evidence relating to the condition of Ms. Schiavo, and makes the absolutely lying claim that

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she had never had “a thorough neurological examination.” In fact, Ms. Schiavo was intensively examined by qualified neurologists, whose findings were subjected to critical court scrutiny. Two CAT scans were performed on her brain, in 1996 and 2002. In an interview conducted last week on MSNBC, neurologist Ronald Cranford of the University of Minnesota reviewed the results of the second CAT scan and explained that it showed that “there is no cerebral cortex left ... any neurologist or radiologist looking at those CAT scans will tell you that her atrophy could not be more severe than it is.”

The many slanders retailed in Hentoff’s column are refuted by the official report submitted to Florida Governor Jeb Bush on December 1, 2003, by Jay Wolfson, the Guardian Ad Litem to Ms. Schiavo appointed pursuant to Florida state law and the order of the chief judge of Florida’s 6th Judicial Circuit. The report details the extent of Ms. Schiavo’s neurological injury, the aggressive but futile efforts to restore cognitive functions, and also—in direct contradiction to the claims of the right-wing slander machine—the completely appropriate use of money awarded to Ms. Schiavo as a result of a malpractice suit initiated by Michael on her behalf. The report states: “The court established a trust fund for Theresa’s financial award, with SouthTrust Bank as the Guardian and an independent trustee. This fund was meticulously managed and accounted for and Michael Schiavo had no control over its use. There is no evidence in the record of the trust administration documents of any mismanagement of Theresa’s estate, and the records on this matter are excellently maintained.”

As for the decision of Michael Schiavo in 1994, after four years of failed efforts to restore even the faintest glimmer of cognitive awareness, to instruct doctors not to resuscitate his wife if she experienced cardiac arrest, the Wolfson report stated:

> “Michael’s decision not to treat was based upon discussions and consultation with Theresa’s doctor, and was predicated on his reasoned belief that there was no longer any hope for Theresa’s recovery. It had taken Michael more than three years to accommodate this reality and he was beginning to accept the idea of allowing Theresa to die naturally rather than remain in the non-cognitive, vegetative state.”

The diagnosis that Theresa Schiavo was in a persistent vegetative state was made by competent neurologists and repeatedly confirmed. An individual who is in a vegetative state is not a disabled person, but rather a being who has lost awareness of self and all capacity for conscious interaction with the external world. The misrepresentation of Ms. Schiavo’s condition—the product of a combination of mendacity and ignorance—has been among the most disgusting elements of the entire “Save Terri” campaign. The vegetative state has been described by the *New England Journal of Medicine* as:

> “a clinical condition of complete unawareness of the self and the environment, accompanied by sleep-wake cycles with either complete or partial preservation of hypothalamic and brain-stem autonomic functions. The condition may be transient, marking a state in the recovery from severe acute or chronic brain damage, or permanent, as a consequence of the failure to recover from such injuries. The vegetative state can also occur as a result of the relentless progression of degenerative or metabolic neurologic diseases or from developmental malformations of the nervous system.
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> “The vegetative state can be diagnosed according to the following criteria: (1) no evidence of awareness of self or environment and an inability to interact with others; (2) no evidence of sustained, reproducible, purposeful, or voluntary behavioral responses to visual, auditory, tactile, or noxious stimuli; (3) no evidence of language comprehension or expression; (4) intermittent wakefulness manifested by the presence of sleep-wake cycles; (5) sufficiently preserved hypothalamic and brain-stem autonomic functions to permit survival with medical and nursing care; (6) bowel and bladder incontinence; and (7) variably-preserved cranial-nerve reflexes ...
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> “ ... Patients in a vegetative state are usually not immobile. They may move the trunk or limbs in meaningless ways. They may occasionally smile, and a few may even shed tears; some may utter grunts or, on rare occasions, moan or scream.... Such activities are inconsistent, nonpurposeful, and coordinated only when they are expressed as part of a subcortical, instinctively patterned, reflexive response to external stimulation. These motor activities may misleadingly suggest purposeful movements, yet these responses have been observed in patients in whom careful study has disclosed no evidence of psychological awareness or the capacity to engage in learned behavior.”

It is impossible to imagine what existence was like for Terri Schiavo, for the state she was in precludes the possibility of any imagining at all. Terri could not think about her condition, for that portion of the brain upon which thinking and feeling depend, the cerebral cortex, had been destroyed as a result of prolonged oxygen deprivation. The clinical examinations of Ms. Schiavo could only confirm what was clearly indicated by CAT scans of her brain. The attempts to deny that Ms. Schiavo was in a vegetative state—a fact, by the way, that was not challenged by the Schindlers until rather late in their unending campaign of litigation—can appear convincing only to those who reject the scientific fact that consciousness arises on the basis of and is dependent upon biochemical processes in the brain.

One of the terrible mysteries of the Schiavo case is why her parents remained determined, even after 15 years, to maintain the elemental biological existence of their daughter. The answer cannot be found in the nature of parental love, because the most basic and instinctive component of such love is to spare a child from suffering. If it had been true, as the Schindlers came to insist, that their daughter retained some minimal consciousness of her condition, their insistence on keeping her alive could only be described as unspeakably cruel. Indeed, in his report to Governor Jeb Bush, the guardian ad litem could barely restrain his own shock at statements made by members of the Schindler family during the protracted pre-trial litigation process and at the trial of January-February 2000, which ended in the decision by Judge Greer to allow the withdrawal of feeding tubes from Terri Schiavo’s body. Wolfson reported:

> “Throughout the course of the litigation, deposition and trial testimony by members of the Schindler family voiced the disturbing belief that they would keep Theresa alive at any and all costs. Nearly gruesome examples were given, eliciting agreement by family members that in the event Theresa should contract diabetes and subsequent gangrene in each of her limbs, they would agree to amputate each limb, and would then, were she to be diagnosed with heart disease, perform open heart surgery.... Within the testimony, as part of the hypotheticals presented, Schindler family members stated that even if Theresa had told them of her intention to have artificial nutrition withdrawn, they would not do it. Throughout this painful and difficult trial, the family

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> acknowledged that Theresa was in a diagnosed persistent vegetative state."

This testimony allows no other conclusion than that the actions of the Schindlers were motivated far less by rational considerations of their daughter's best interests than by the requirements of religious dogma. No amount of scientific evidence to the contrary could persuade the Schindlers and their fundamentalist supporters that Terri Schiavo was physiologically incapable of thinking or feeling. After all, from their standpoint, consciousness is not to be understood in terms of a material biochemical process taking place in the 100 billion neurons of the brain, but rather as the emanation of a non-material "soul."

The declaration of the Schindlers in the trial of 2000 that they would not sanction the withdrawal of life support to their daughter, even if Ms. Schiavo had expressed to them her desire not to be kept alive, brings us to the core legal issue at stake in the struggle over the fate of Ms. Schiavo. In their efforts to turn reality on its head, the fundamentalist right and their political patrons in the Bush administration have sought to portray the "Save Terri" movement as a defense of the "right to life." But it is a fact of law that the really essential democratic issue raised by the Schiavo case was the right of all individuals to retain agency over their own bodies, free of state coercion—which in this case meant upholding the right of Theresa Schiavo to stop the artificial prolongation of her life.

"The right to life"—as this term is used by the Bush administration and the right-wing politico-religion organizations—means precisely the opposite of what that concept has actually come to mean in American law. A seminal article written in 1890 Louis D. Brandeis and Samuel D. Warren, published in the *Harvard Law Review*, discussed the evolving legal meaning of the "right to life" recognized in common law (and proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence). In a justly celebrated passage, Brandeis and Warren wrote that "now the right to life has come to mean the right to enjoy life—the right to be let alone..." This article marked an intellectual milestone in the recognition of a constitutional right to privacy.

The significant democratic implications of the arguments of Brandeis and Warren were realized 75 years later, in the landmark 1965 Supreme Court ruling in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, that upheld the freedom of individuals from government interference in matters of a personal character. The specific controversy that led to this ruling arose out of the prosecution by the state of Connecticut of Estelle Griswold, a director of the Planned Parenthood League, for having violated a nineteenth century state law that criminalized the giving of information, instruction or medical advice to married couples on the use of contraceptives. In declaring the state law under which Ms. Griswold was prosecuted unconstitutional, the Supreme Court explicitly recognized that individuals must enjoy a "zone of privacy" within which the state could not constitutionally interfere. In this case, the Court asserted that the decision to use contraceptives was one which fell within that zone.

The *Griswold* decision was the basis of the landmark *Roe v. Wade* ruling of 1974 that established a legal right to abortion. The issue was posed in a different form in 1975, in the case of a young woman, Karen Ann Quinlan, who suffered massive and irreversible brain damage as a result of ingesting a combination of drugs and alcohol. Once it was clear that Quinlan's vegetative condition could not be cured, her parents sought permission to withdraw artificial respiration.

This request was initially denied by a circuit court in New Jersey, and was then appealed to the Supreme Court of the state. Citing *Griswold*, the state Supreme Court found that the right of privacy "is broad enough to encompass a patient's decision to decline treatment under certain circumstances, in much the same way as it is broad enough to encompass a woman's decision to terminate pregnancy under certain conditions."

In reversing the lower court, the New Jersey Supreme Court declared that it had "no hesitancy in deciding ... that no external compelling interest of the State could compel Karen to endure the unendurable, only to vegetate a few measurable months with no realistic possibility of returning to any semblance of cognitive or sapient life." Though Karen Ann Quinlan had left behind no instructions, the court forthrightly asserted that it had no doubt that the young woman, if she were capable of being consulted, would not want her life to be prolonged. On this basis, the court allowed her parents to assert the constitutional right to privacy on their daughter's behalf. Life support was withdrawn. As it turned out, Quinlan lingered in a vegetative state for another seven years before dying.

The next crucial case involving the right of an individual to refuse life support was that of Nancy Cruzan. In 1983, this 25-year-old woman was involved in a car accident on a Missouri road that left her in a vegetative state. Again, it was the parents, acting as one would expect loving parents to act, who sought to have their child removed from life support.

The parents claimed they were acting on the basis of statements made by their daughter. The hospital at which Nancy Cruzan was being artificially sustained refused to honor the parents' request, and the matter went to court. At the conclusion of a trial, the court instructed the hospital to cease life support measures—in this case, as in that of Terri Schiavo, artificial nourishment and hydration. The state appealed the ruling of the lower court, arguing that Nancy Cruzan's instructions had not been sufficiently explicit. The Supreme Court of Missouri agreed with the state, and the lower court decision to end life support was overturned. The matter was then appealed to the US Supreme Court.

Its majority upheld the Missouri Supreme Court, on the grounds that the state's requirement of a "clear and convincing" statement of the patient's desire for the withdrawal of life support was not unreasonable and did not violate the right to privacy. The issue upon which this case was decided was one of procedure. The Supreme Court stated explicitly, "we assume that the United States Constitution would grant a competent person a constitutionally protected right to refuse lifesaving hydration and nutrition."

In an important and compassionate dissent, Supreme Court Justice William Brennan eloquently argued that the procedures of the state of Missouri "impermissibly burden" the right of Nancy Cruzan to be free of unwanted medical intervention. In another dissenting opinion, Justice John Paul Stevens raised the crucial issue of the quality of the life that the state of Missouri insisted on "saving." He noted the overwhelming evidence that Nancy Cruzan was "oblivious to her environment" and that recovery was impossible. By insisting that Ms. Cruzan be kept alive, the state of Missouri "imposed upon dying individuals a controversial and objectionable view of life's meaning." Stevens quoted approvingly from the opinion of Missouri State Supreme Court Judge Charles Blackmar, who wrote in opposition to the majority decision:

> "It is unrealistic to say that the preservation of life is an absolute, without regard to the quality of life. I make this statement only in the context of a case in which the trial judge has found that there is no chance for amelioration of Nancy's condition. The principal opinion accepts this conclusion. It is appropriate to consider the quality of life in making decisions about the extraordinary medical treatment. Those who have made decisions about such matters without resort to the courts certainly consider the quality of life, and balance this against the unpleasant consequences to the patient. There is evidence that Nancy may react to pain stimuli. If she has any awareness of her surroundings, her life must be a living hell. She is unable to express herself or to do anything at all to alter her situation."

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Following the US Supreme Court decision, there were further hearings in Missouri in which additional witnesses substantiated the claims of the parents as to the wishes of their daughter. The State of Missouri then accepted that "clear and convincing" evidence did exist that Nancy Cruzan would not want to live. The tubes for nutrition and hydration were withdrawn, and Nancy Cruzan died within two weeks.

A study of the Schiavo case makes clear that medical science, constitutional law and ethics all spoke in behalf of the right of Terri Schiavo to be relieved of unwanted efforts to keep her alive. There was nothing in the facts of the case itself that was particularly unusual, and justified the efforts by the US government and the Florida state government to keep Terri Schiavo on life support. The cause of this controversy is to be found in politics, not in law or ethics.

For the first time in the history of the United States, its government is attempting to build a social constituency on the basis of religion. The repudiation of secularism and the attempt to cast Bush, an incumbent president, as the leader of a religious revivalist movement have no real precedent in American history. In a manner wholly inimical to the constitutional foundations of the American Republic, the Bush administration represents a *merging* of church and state—a development that must have disastrous consequences for democracy in the United States. The ceaseless invocation by Bush and the Republican Party of the Bible as the appropriate guide for political and legal decisions leads logically to the abridgement and repudiation of the secular Constitution. The use of religion as an instrument of political mobilization will lead inexorably to the breakdown of the basic structures of bourgeois democracy and the incitement of all sorts of communal conflict.

But for all the cynicism and hypocrisy of its official sponsors, it would be simplistic to see the increasing influence of religious fundamentalism in politics as merely or primarily the product of the calculations of Karl Rove and his henchmen. The breakdown of democratic secularism is a manifestation of deeper social processes, whose essential source must be found in the vast socioeconomic changes in American society during the past quarter century.

The staggering enrichment of the small segment of American society that constitutes its ruling elite, the simultaneous decay of the middle social strata which traditionally provided the main basis of a democratically oriented petty bourgeoisie, and the general economic polarization of society have drastically eroded the constituency for bourgeois democracy. Unable to advance an economic and social program with genuine mass appeal, and facing an increasingly dissatisfied and economically insecure population that lives from paycheck to paycheck, the ruling elite is seeking to find in religion an alternative basis for generating popular support.

The Democratic Party, which is no more capable than the Republicans of developing a genuinely popular program on the basis of capitalist economics, can do no more than adapt itself to the Bush administration's manipulation of religion. One after another, the political invertebrates of the Democratic Party attempt pathetically to burnish their religious credentials. In doing so, they manage merely to appear insincere and stupid, and contribute to the legitimization and strengthening of the Republicans and the Christian right.

The reactionary political trajectory of the bourgeois parties is clear enough. But to what extent does it generate a response among the broad masses, let alone reflect their most profound political sentiments? If the case of Terri Schiavo shows anything, it is that the political aims of the Christian right enjoy very limited support among the broad mass of the American people.

Despite all the efforts of the government and the mass media on behalf of the "save Terri" campaign, the American people didn't buy it. The experiences of their own lives—with aged parents and incurably ill spouses—left them entirely alienated from the religious demagogy of the Republicans. When asked by pollsters, the overwhelming majority expressed sympathy for the plight of Michael Schiavo. A substantial majority of those polled said that, were they in his position, they would make the same decision he had—that is, to end life support.

And yet, it would be complacent and short-sighted to ignore the evident growth of religious influence on the political orientation of the American working class. This development must be carefully studied and explained. It is not sufficient to attribute the phenomenon of religious revivalism to the pernicious influence of cynical bourgeois politicians and the foul mass media. As always, the source of ideological convictions must be found in the real conditions of life.

In attempting, if only briefly, to explain the reason for the rising influence of religion in American life, I would like to stress the far-reaching consequences of the almost complete collapse of the American labor movement during the past 25 years. The victim of their own political bankruptcy and cowardice in the face of the offensive launched by the corporations, with the backing of the government, against the working class in the early 1980s, the trade unions have more or less disappeared as a significant social force in the United States.

The virtual disappearance of what had been the principal form of mass organization and popular resistance to corporate power radically changed the nature of the relationship between workers and the economic structure within which they live. Whereas in the past they confronted this structure, however inadequately, as a class, they now confront this structure as isolated individuals. They find themselves in a situation where they are compelled to confront problems not as part of a social collective, but by themselves.

Religion serves to fill the great social void in the lives of workers. Unable to fight for their interests as part of a class movement, workers believe that they must fight on their own. Hence the importance of having Jesus "in one's corner," to tend to life's bruises and whisper encouragement.

How, then, is this to be overcome? The good news, as the saying goes, is that objective conditions themselves will lead, inexorably, to a revival of social struggles and a renewed differentiation of class forces. The persistence of reactionary ideologies is a barrier to the development of social struggles and increased class consciousness. But it is not an absolute barrier. In the final analysis, the objective contradictions of capitalist society will move masses of people into struggle and create the possibility for a renewal and quickening of genuine intellectual and social life.

But it is a superficial, naïve and self-defeating optimism that entrusts the ideological liberation of the masses from the grip of religious mysticism and backwardness to the spontaneous working out of objective forces. Now, as in every period of history, progress must be fought for.

This fight is not limited to practical efforts to organize workers, as important as these are. An essential component of efforts to organize workers politically as a class is the struggle to raise their intellectual and cultural level, to champion the cause of scientific thought against all forms of religious superstition and backwardness—that is, to champion a materialist Marxist understanding of not only the socioeconomic relations of society, but also the foundations and structure of human consciousness. As in the past, the socialist movement must recognize the vast scope of its theoretical and pedagogical responsibilities to the working class.

We can draw great encouragement from the fact that science is providing the socialist movement with a vast new array of intellectual weapons. It is ironic that the field of science at the very center of the Terri Schiavo controversy—neurobiology—is the scene today of the most spectacular theoretical breakthroughs. Astonishing advances are being made in the understanding of the physiology of the brain, the most complex of all material structures. And these, in turn, substantiate the materialist understanding of consciousness and cognition championed by

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Marxism. It is no wonder that the ruling elite should so fear the work of the finest scientists, whose discoveries in the field of neurobiology and related areas of research are systematically demolishing the last redoubts of religious mysticism.

The working class cannot advance without the aid of science. But science itself requires the advance of the working class. Today, the growth of political reaction in the United States places the scientific researcher under siege. But the isolated scientist cannot defend him- or herself any more successfully than the individual worker. In the final analysis, the progress of science as a whole, not to mention the physical safety of individual researchers, depends on the resurgence of a new revolutionary movement of the working class. In the most profound historical sense, the socialist movement unites under its banner both the pursuit of scientific truth in all its forms and the struggle for human equality.

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