Autopsy proves Terri Schiavo was in vegetative state

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Findings of the autopsy performed on Terri Schiavo and released to the press on Wednesday confirm the diagnosis of all the independent doctors involved in her case—and upheld by numerous court decisions—that the woman had suffered massive and irreversible brain damage, and was in a persistent vegetative state.

The autopsy report provides confirmation that there was no legitimate basis—either scientifically or legally—for the frenzied campaign mounted by right-wing religious forces, and adopted by the Bush administration and congressional Republicans, against court rulings granting the request of Michael Schiavo, Terri's husband and legal guardian, to remove her feeding tube.

The *World Socialist Web Site* published extensive analysis and commentary on the Schiavo case and its far-reaching political and cultural implications. (See: "The case of Terri Schiavo and the crisis of politics and culture in the United States").

Terri Schiavo collapsed on February 25, 1990 when her heart suddenly stopped beating. By the time an emergency crew had revived her, her brain had been without blood for several minutes and was severely damaged. After years of seeking remedies for his wife's condition, Michael Schiavo petitioned the courts to allow his wife to die.

He argued that she would not have wanted to continue her life in such a vegetative state, and had expressed her wishes to that effect. Some 40 judges in six court decisions upheld Mr. Schiavo's request to have his wife's feeding tube removed, and the US Supreme Court consistently refused to intervene in the case. But the religious right mounted a vicious campaign against Michael Schiavo, vilifying him as a "murderer."

The autopsy conducted by Penellas-Pasco (Florida) Medical Examiner Jon Thogmartin decisively refutes the claims of Terri Schiavo's parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, and their allies in the Christian right that Terri merely had diminished brain function, and that her condition might have improved with further treatment.

The autopsy involved 274 external and internal tests on Terri Schiavo's body. Thogmartin said that Ms. Schiavo's brain weighed about 615 grams, far less than normal, when the 41-year-old woman died on March 31 of this year, 13 days after her feeding tube had been removed. "This damage was irreversible," he said, "and no amount of therapy or treatment would have regenerated the massive loss of neurons."

Thogmartin commented, "Mrs. Schiavo's brain showed marked global anoxic-ischemic encephalopathy (brain damage from lack of oxygen and blood flow) resulting in massive cerebral atrophy. Her brain weight was approximately half of the expected weight."

Thogmartin also said that the entire region of the brain that processes visual images was gone, meaning that she had been blind. This is important, because Terri's parents had maintained that their daughter had been capable of using her eyes to see and communicate with relatives when they visited her in the hospice, and that this was evidence of her cognitive function.

Doctors involved in the autopsy said its findings were consistent with the diagnosis of numerous doctors involved in Terri's case over the last decade and a half—that she had no cognitive functions, only the ability to breathe and keep her heart beating, and that her actions were reflexive responses.

Michael Schiavo's attorney, George Felos, commented to the press, "Mr. Schiavo was pleased to hear the evidence and hard science of those findings. We have been saying for years and years and years that

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the expert testimony has shown that Terri's eye movement and apparent response to visual stimuli was a reflexive action."

The autopsy showed no signs that Ms. Schiavo had been abused before she lapsed into her unconscious state, a charge lodged by her parents and various right-wing spokespersons against Michael Schiavo. Thogmartin said there were no signs of trauma or neck injury, and no other evidence of either neglect or abuse.

The report also showed that Terri Schiavo's death after the removal of the feeding tube was caused by dehydration, not starvation, and that she would not have experienced pain as she died. The autopsy also established that after her feeding tube had been removed, it would have been impossible for her to eat or drink on her own. Terry's parents and their supporters among the Christian right had demanded that she be offered water in the final days and hours of her life.

Michael Schiavo plans to release some of the autopsy photos to the press, according to his attorney.

Those who had campaigned for the reinsertion of Terri Schiavo's feeding tube responded to the autopsy results by turning a blind eye to the irrefutable scientific evidence and reiterated their claims that the issues in her case were the "right to life" and the rights of disabled people.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan commented, "Our thoughts and prayers remain with her family and friends. The president was deeply saddened by this case."

Florida Governor Jeb Bush said, "We will continue to strive to protect our most vulnerable citizens. All innocent human life is precious and government has a duty to protect the weak, disabled and vulnerable."

Rev. Frank Pavone, national director of the anti-abortion group Priests for Life, declared, "Terri did not die from an atrophied brain. She died from an atrophy of compassion on the part of her estranged husband and those who helped him to have her deliberately killed."

In reality, the religious right and its allies in the Republican Party and the Bush administration cynically exploited the Terri Schiavo case to advance their own reactionary agenda.

On March 20, the US House and Senate met in emergency session to pass an extraordinary bill enabling the Schindlers to file suit in federal court to block the withdrawal of life support from their daughter. In an unusual display by a president not known to cut short his vacation time, Bush flew back from Texas to sign the bill.

The Democratic leadership in Congress, which could have easily blocked the bill, did not oppose it, and some prominent Democrats openly supported it.

The intervention by Congress and the White House was profoundly reactionary and anti-democratic from a number of standpoints: it was an assault on the independence of the judiciary and the constitutionally mandated separation of powers; it was an attempt to promote—in violation of the separation of church and state—the most reactionary and anti-scientific religious conceptions; it was an attack on privacy rights and an illegitimate insertion of government into the most personal of matters.

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