

Florida Governor Jeb Bush renews persecution of Michael Schiavo

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In an action that combines personal vindictiveness and political calculation, Florida Governor Jeb Bush has sought an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the original injury to Terri Schiavo, the severely brain-damaged woman who died last March 31 after a lengthy court battle over terminating her life support.

Bush's clear aim in this latest intervention into the Schiavo tragedy is to suggest that Terri's husband Michael Schiavo contributed to her brain damage either by poisoning her or by a delay in calling 911 after she collapsed. Bush is using his office to curry favor with the Christian fundamentalists and persecute a man who has been subjected to years of vilification and slander by the religious right.

The chief medical examiner for Pinellas and Pasco counties released a June 15 report on the autopsy of Terri Schiavo, confirming that she had suffered severe and irreversible brain damage, with her brain shriveled to half its normal size because of the massive destruction of cells due to oxygen deprivation.

Two additional findings refuted myths peddled by the ultra-right. The examiner found that the entire section of the brain devoted to sight had been destroyed, meaning that Terri was blind and that her eye movements were random and not indicative of a conscious response to stimuli. And he found that there were no indications that Terri had been physically abused.

Two days after the autopsy report was made public, Governor Bush sent a letter to Bernie McCabe, state attorney in Clearwater, Florida. His aim was to divert attention from the medical examiner's incontrovertible findings, which have dealt a devastating blow to right-wing Republican politicians like Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay,

and both himself and his brother, the president. He cites two issues that he claims remain "unanswered": the cause of Terri Schiavo's original brain damage, and the timeline of Michael Schiavo's response when he first discovered her collapsed on the floor of their home in 1990.

The medical examiner found little evidence of an eating disorder as the cause of her collapse, while ruling out any "overt or blunt trauma," as Bush admits. The governor's letter, however, asserts that the blood tests administered at the time of her collapse "would not necessarily have detected or ruled out many types of drugs or toxins." This empty claim would apply to just about any forensic investigation. What it clearly insinuates, however, is that Terri collapsed because she was administered some undetected drug, presumably by her husband.

Bush's innuendo is followed by an outright fabrication: he suggests that Michael Schiavo waited for up to 70 minutes to call 911, essentially allowing his wife to suffer severe brain damage. Bush manufactures this alleged "gap in time" by citing three unconnected reports: the 911 log showing the call came in at 5:40 a.m., Schiavo's 1992 testimony at a medical malpractice trial that he found his wife collapsed at about 5:00 a.m., and his comments in a 2003 television interview on Larry King Live, when he placed the time of discovery at 4:30 a.m.

Bush concludes his letter by urging the state's attorney "to take a fresh look at this case without any preconceptions as to the outcome." His clear purpose, however, is to feed the preconceptions of the religious fanatics who laid siege for a month to the hospice where Terri Schiavo died, shrieking that the brain-damaged woman was conscious, aware, responsive, even "disabled," and that her death was a court-ordered

murder.

George Felos, Michael Schiavo's attorney, said Bush was pandering to his political supporters. "It's just shameful and disgraceful that Governor Bush has for years used this case to perpetuate his own agenda." Felos added, "There is no hour gap or other gap to the point Michael heard Terri fall and called 911. We've seen the baseless allegations in this case fall by the wayside one by one ... That's what I would call it, a baseless claim to perpetuate a controversy that in fact doesn't exist."

In a statement issued through his lawyer, Schiavo himself called the proposed investigation an "outrage," charging Bush with seeking to divert attention from the autopsy findings. On the alleged 70-minute gap, Schiavo said, "I have consistently said over the years that I didn't wait, but ran to call 911 after Terri collapsed. I wasn't wearing a watch or looking at a clock and I have stated in my sworn testimony that 'I'm not good with dates and times.'"

Several Florida newspapers published material rebutting the suggestions in Bush's letter. The *Miami Herald* noted that the autopsy report itself made no mention of any time discrepancy, and quoted one expert in brain resuscitation who said that the fact that EMTs were able to restore Terri's heart and lung function suggested that her husband had called 911 as soon as he discovered her.

"If she's in ventricular fibrillation, the chances are she collapsed within 15 to 20 minutes prior to their arrival," John Kuluz, an intensive-care specialist and expert in brain resuscitation at the University of Miami medical school, told the *Herald*. "Otherwise, they would never have got her heart going again."

The *St. Petersburg Times* sent the autopsy reports to a pathology professor at the University of South Florida, who agreed that Terri Schiavo could not have been revived if her husband had waited 70 minutes before calling 911. In an editorial, the newspaper called Bush "a desperate politician abusing his power in an attempt to justify his previous interference in this tragedy."

Frank Cerabino, a columnist for the *Palm Beach Post*, denounced "the pandering horde of flat-earth politicians who had been practicing their unholy medicine for far too long." Bush's call for an investigation comes just as the autopsy report exposed the lies previously used to bolster the "save Terri"

campaign, he noted. Those who joined this effort "can now indulge themselves in a murder fantasy orchestrated by the state's chief executive, a kind of Tallahassee CSI," he wrote.

While most of the national Republican leaders who jumped into the Terri Schiavo case in March have sought to downplay their role in this political debacle, Jeb Bush has embraced it. He combined his letter to the state's attorney with a letter to the *New York Times* in which he denounced what he called its "grotesque and chilling disrespect for the sanctity of life." Bush's defense of the "sanctity of life" of course includes his support for capital punishment and for the slaughter of thousands of innocent people in the wars launched by his brother in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Governor Bush's latest attempt to incite state persecution of Michael Schiavo is a monstrous abuse of power that demonstrates the viciously anti-democratic character of the ultra-right political agenda. It also shows the extent to which the Republican Party is in thrall to the most backward and deranged elements of the Christian fundamentalists, those who insist, against both scientific evidence and majority opinion, that their religious nostrums must be imposed by the state on the entire American population.



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