



CONGRESS, PRESIDENT INTERVENE IN SCHIAVO CASE

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The U.S. Congress and President Bush intervened in the dispute over the life of Terri Schiavo early Monday, sending the case of the severely brain damaged Florida woman to federal court. The case, which has deeply divided many, has also convinced more people to create "living wills" to prevent a similar situation.

Terri Schiavo, now 41 years old, suffered heart failure in 1990 due to a chemical imbalance from the eating disorder bulimia. She lies in a Florida health center with brain damage that makes her unable to speak or care for herself.

The political battle, which has pit many Republicans against Democrats and the governor of Florida against the state courts, emerged from a bitter family fight. Schiavo's husband contends that Terri would not have wanted to live in such a limited way, while her parents say that removing her life-sustaining feeding tube will lead to a cruel death of starvation and dehydration.

On Friday, a Florida judge ruled that the feeding tube sustaining Schiavo's life be removed as per her husband's request. Lawmakers in Congress are now fighting that ruling.

Lawmakers argue over the role of law

President Bush returned to Washington early from his Texas ranch Sunday in order to sign a bill that would allow courts to review Schiavo's case.

"Today I signed into law a bill that will allow federal courts to hear a claim by or on behalf of Terri Schiavo for violation of her rights relating to the withholding or withdrawal of food, fluids, or medical treatment necessary to sustain her life," the president said in a statement after he signed the measure after 1 a.m..

"In cases like this one, where there are serious questions and substantial doubts, our society, our laws, and our courts should have a presumption in favor of life. This presumption is especially critical for those like Terri Schiavo who live at the mercy of others."

Opponents of the bill said Congress was unconstitutionally overstepping its authority and setting a dangerous precedent by using federal legislation to usurp the power of state courts and intervene in the case of one person.

"Congressional leaders have no business substituting their judgment for that of multiple state courts that have extensively considered the issues in this intensely personal family matter," House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi said in a statement.

Democrats also said that Congress will now be besieged by requests from individual citizens seeking help in similar family matters.

Personal and political issues

The Schiavo case has drawn national media attention and the focus of both "right to life" and "right to die" advocacy groups

Many Republicans see the vote as an opportunity to strengthen their support among religious conservatives, a vital constituency group, ahead of next year's congressional elections.

For the most part, minority-party Democrats argue that congressional involvement in such a heart-wrenching private matter is unwise, but they are treading carefully because "values" issues hurt them in last year's elections.

New attention to "living wills"

Meanwhile, many Americans have seen Schiavo's case as a warning that they should create so-called "living wills" clearly stating whether they would like to live if they become unable to make their own treatment decisions.

"The main message here, for everyone, is end-of-life decisions are rightfully ours to make and it's up to us to make sure our decisions are documented and discussed ahead of time to make our wishes a reality," said Paul Malley, president of Aging With Dignity, a nonprofit organization that provides resources to help individuals prepare documents such as a living wills.

Malley said thousands of people have begun writing living wills since the Schiavo story began making headlines.

However, experts point out that such documents may not prevent a similar court fight. In Schiavo's case there is a disagreement over her medical condition. Doctors appointed by the Florida courts said she is in a "persistent vegetative state" with little or no chance for recovery. Other doctors have disputed that diagnosis and the family has released videotape of Terri smiling to show that she is responsive and not in a coma.

Doctors estimate that Terri Schiavo could remain alive for several days without the feeding tube.

-- Compiled by Leah Clapman for NewsHour Extra

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