BOSTON -- The medical examiners delivered their autopsy report in the most matter-of-fact tone. Terri Schiavo's brain had atrophied to half the normal size for a woman her age. Her eyes, the focus of that famous videotape, saw nothing. She was blind.

The examiners couldn't say why Terri collapsed 15 years ago. But they could say she wasn't abused by her husband. They could say that "no amount of treatment or rehabilitation would have reversed" her condition. There was no doubt about it.

Case closed? As the news conference replayed, the television screen spelled out a question for cable viewers: "Does This Change Opinions?" Did the facts of a case that had so divided the country, so politicized the fate of one woman, actually make a difference?

For Schiavo's parents, the answer was no. The Schindlers still insist their daughter related to them and tried to speak. Their lawyer said it only proved that "she was not terminal." The president said only that he "was deeply saddened by this case." His brother, the governor of Florida, said he would still have tried to keep Schiavo alive.

And if the autopsy changed the opinions of politicians such as Doctor/Senator Bill Frist, who disgraced his first profession by diagnosing a videotape, they were not in the mood for apologies.

This case was never solely about medicine. But the question on the TV screen illustrated the times we live in -- times when facts can exist in a separate universe from opinions. And a country in which science is seen not as a matter of black and white but increasingly as a matter of red and blue.

The Schiavo case is not the only example. The climate is equally apparent in the struggle over what the Bush administration calls "climate change" -- and everyone else calls global warming. The only way to justify doing nothing about global warming now is to deliberately muddle the science. It's not an accident that Philip Cooney, the White House official caught editing reports on greenhouse gases, left for Exxon Mobil, which has indeed funded doubts.

So, too, the struggle over evolution is no longer overtly between scientists and religious fundamentalists. It's between the science establishment and the handful of front men with PhDs who support "intelligent design." Their credentials make it seem as if evolution were also a matter of genuine scientific debate.

Meanwhile, reports of a link between breast cancer and abortion reappear on Web sites with the tenacity of urban legends. Stories continually report, most recently in Ohio, fantasies presented as facts in abstinence-only education programs being funded by the government. They link birth control pills with infertility, and HIV with French-kissing. But when they are debunked, "Does This Change Opinions?"
James Wagoner of Advocates for Youth describes the trend this way: "If science doesn't fit the ideology, you shop and find your own science." Just last week the Heritage Foundation, an overtly conservative think tank, was given a government platform to attempt to debunk, indeed to attack, an earlier study on virginity pledges.

The original, peer-reviewed study by researchers at Columbia and Yale universities found that young people who make virginity pledges may delay intercourse, but ultimately end up with rates of sexually transmitted diseases similar to their peers. The Heritage team makes a counterclaim, in a paper that was presented at a forum sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services, that pledgers have lower STDs and fewer risky behaviors.

With its flawed methodology, the Heritage study may never be published, but as Wagoner said, "They don't have to win the scientific debate, they only have to muddy the water." In a day when unvetted research becomes public as quickly as rumors on the Internet, it enters the data bank as "scientific proof" that virginity pledges "work."

As Peter Bearman, co-author of the original study, says ruefully, "Science has often been deployed for political reasons. The deployment of science is different than the distortion of science. That's what is happening now."

It doesn't help that 15.5 percent of the scientists in a recent survey said they changed something in a study to satisfy a sponsor. It's bad enough when the sponsor is a drug company, worse when it's an ideological purveyor.

Maybe it's a good sign that even ideologues still need scientists to make their case legitimate. But what happens when science is seen and even skewed as partisan? Is one scientist's fact given no more weight than another's opinion?

At the height of the Schiavo furor, I saw a protester carrying a sign that asked: "How do you kill someone while she's smiling at you?" Now we know beyond any doubt that Terri Schiavo couldn't smile. Does this fact change even one opinion?

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