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Schiavo Case Exposes Political Divide in U.S.

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - By intervening in the fate of a severely brain-damaged Florida woman, President Bush (news - web sites) and Congress have turned up the volume on cultural and social issues that divide Republicans and Democrats in the United States.

The "moral" rift -- including on the questions of abortion and gay marriage -- laid bare in last year's presidential election was exposed again on Monday over an emergency bill to prolong the life of Terri Schiavo, whose feeding tube was removed three days ago.

Democrats accused Republicans of pandering to the religious conservatives who helped re-elect Bush on an issue they said should be decided by the Schiavo family and the state courts.

"They clearly viewed this as a political opportunity," one Democratic official said. "They saw this as a chance to service their base. ... It was a no-brainer for them."

Although Republicans publicly rejected any ulterior motives, a memo surfaced over the weekend calling the Schiavo case "a great political issue" and saying that Christian conservatives would be "excited" by the Senate debate.

On Monday, they characterized the extraordinary decision to step into the middle of a legal dispute as the U.S. government taking a stand for "the culture of life."

Democrats, for their part, faced a "no-win" situation, another party official said. Although Senate Democrats could have objected in order to delay the proceedings, none did so. Only three senators actually showed up for the voice vote.

"The Republicans were demagoguing it to the point where they would go in and basically attack Democrats saying, 'They want to kill her, they want to kill her,'" the official said.
The courtroom wrangling between Schiavo's husband and her parents over whether to remove the feeding tube and allow her to die has raged for years.

When a Florida judge ordered its removal on Friday, the Republican leadership in Congress recalled lawmakers from an Easter recess to pass a law requiring a federal court review.

The case has become an emotional cause for anti-abortion activists and religious conservatives, groups that will be key to Republican victories in the 2006 mid-term congressional elections and the 2008 presidential race.

"This isn't about politics," said Tracey Schmitt, spokeswoman for the Republican National Committee (news - web sites). "We support and commend those who support and defend life. The president and Republicans consistently work to promote a culture of life."

But Americans broadly and strongly disapproved of Congress' intervention and two-thirds said they believed lawmakers were using her case for political gain, according to an ABC News poll published on Monday. Seventy percent deemed the congressional action inappropriate.

Bush for the first time interrupted a vacation to return to Washington to sign the bill. He was awoken shortly after 1 a.m. 0600 GMT on Monday, left his bedroom and signed the legislation at 1:11 a.m. 0611 GMT in a hallway in the White House.

The bill could have been flown to Bush's ranch in Texas, a round trip of about seven hours, but White House spokesman Scott McClellan said time was important even though doctors estimate Schiavo could survive for up to two weeks without the feeding tube.

Bush's dramatic decision to rush back to the White House was seen by some critics -- who pointed out that neither a deadly tsunami nor hints of possible terror attacks elicited the same response -- as political grandstanding.

McClellan denied any such considerations, saying the bill was simply designed to give Schiavo's parents "another chance to save her life."

"It is a complex case, where serious questions and significant doubts have been raised," he said. "And the president is always going to stand on the side of defending life."

But Bush also supports the death penalty. And conservative Republicans have traditionally defended states' rights.

"What they're setting themselves up to say is questions of life supersede almost everything else," said Jennifer Duffy, a political analyst with the nonpartisan Cook Report. "That's the path they're going down."
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