Editorial:
Pulling the plug on religion-free law

The case of Terri Schiavo has incited fierce debate throughout the United States. Schiavo currently dominates the headlines of many well-known newspapers and television news outlets and her case is indeed a fascinating one. However, the most important development to come out of this controversy both in the present and extending into the future, is the U.S. government’s most recent push to legislate morality in our country.

Schiavo has been in a persistent vegetative state since 1990, when she suffered massive brain damage after her heart stopped temporarily. In 1998, her husband, Michael, began petitioning to have her feeding tube removed and, last week, succeeded in his goal. Terri Schiavo’s parents have fought her husband relentlessly on this matter and are currently pressing for the U.S. Supreme Court to intervene and order the tube reinserted. They were not successful and, barring a last-ditch effort by Florida governor Jeb Bush, Schiavo will eventually die of dehydration and malnutrition.

This situation is a deeply personal one that should be left to the family members to decide. However, President George W. Bush’s administration has made it a point to ensure that Schiavo lives, despite her husband’s assertions that she would rather die. Even Jeb Bush, the President’s brother, has said that he would do “everything within my power” to restore Schiavo’s feeding tube. President Bush himself even changed his schedule so that he could be in Washington last Sunday in order to sign an emergency bill into law that would move Schiavo’s case to federal jurisdiction. This was done because federal courts have the power to order Schiavo’s feeding tube reinserted while they decide the case.

This bill could set a dangerous precedent for the handling of such cases in the future. President Bush has said that “in cases like this one, where there are serious questions and substantial doubts about our society, our laws and our courts should have a presumption in favor of life.” However, in Schiavo’s case, several Florida courts have ruled that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Schiavo would have wanted to die if she could speak for herself. What happens in the future if other individuals like Schiavo, who did not write a living will, are forced to live in a persistent vegetative state for the rest of their lives?

This is not a decision for the federal government to make, but rather that of the victim’s family. If there is a dispute, as there was in the Schiavo case, it should be resolved on a case-by-case basis by the state court system. However, by getting the federal government involved, Bush and the U.S. Congress have set another precedent that could lead to the legislation of morality.

This concept is a dangerous one that must be avoided at all costs. One of the founding principles of our country is the separation of church and state. When a particular religion’s beliefs are allowed to filter into politics, those who disagree with those principles often find themselves oppressed and discriminated against. Obviously, this violates our country’s deep and long-standing conviction that all people should be free. Let’s not forget that this country’s founders sailed across the ocean because of the intense religious persecution in old England. However, President Bush seems to have disregarded this fact in an effort to make America safe for Christians, and only Christians.

Obviously, there are many, many aspects to the Schiavo case that require legal attention. However, it is not necessary for the federal government to intervene in these matters. Affairs of this nature should be decided by the victim’s family and the state court system. President Bush should stop using the plight of this long-suffering woman to advance his own political agenda.

This weekly editorial expresses the majority opinion of The Rider News editorial board and is written by the Opinion Editor.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“He who doesn’t fear death dies only once.”

— Giovanni Falcone