

U.S. SEN. SAM BROWNBACK

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Remarks Following the Death of Terri Schiavo

Statement: “Is Human Life Sacred *Per Se*”

As Terri Schiavo’s we witnessed over the legally-sanctioned death-by-starvation and –dehydration of Terri Schiavo, it is time to look beyond the politics of the debate in order to see clearly what is really at issue in this case.

While many in the media have attempted to portray the events leading to Terri’s death as a politically-motivated attempt to exploit a family tragedy for partisan political advantage, it is much more significant than this. Ultimately, one’s position on the matter of Terri Schiavo depends on one’s view of the human person.

Few cases have evoked such an emotional response as this one. I think this is because of the fact that Terri Schiavo’s plight highlights the question at the core of every issue related to the protection of human life: Is the value of an individual dependent on their “quality of life,” their level of sentience, their physical or cognitive abilities, or, rather, is the value of an individual inherent in the fact that they are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of their Creator, possessing a unique, immortal soul, and therefore of infinite worth, regardless of physical condition or mental state? Is human life sacred *per se*, or does the dignity with which we treat individuals depend on their physical or mental “status” as human beings?

If the latter, utilitarian notion is true, then life and death decisions about the most vulnerable among us—the unborn, those with mental and physical disabilities, the aged and infirm—become relative matters to be determined by resort to [family decisions] doctors, judges, lawyers, and legislatures.

But if a subjective judgment of “quality of life” is not what determines the value of an individual or the protections accorded to that individual, this has enormous implications for every one of us: both for the way we conduct our own lives and for the way we order our society. If we have a fundamental mandate to protect the most vulnerable among us—not just those with social or political influence or those who are regarded as “productive”—a reordering of our priorities, and our laws, becomes necessary. And Terri Schiavo’s plight becomes apparent for what it is: the forced starvation of a living human being with a diminished “quality of life” for the sole reason that her continued existence has a quality that is below some subjective standard put forth by a judge. God help us.

Even with the advances in medical technology of recent years, this is a debate that has been with us for a long time, much longer than many Americans are aware. Early in the twentieth century, the euthanasia movement began to spread the doctrine that “quality of life” was the determinant of human value, and that some lives—the defective, the racially inferior, the sick—are not worth preserving and protecting. The first government to widely implement this doctrine of doing away with “life unworthy of life” was Germany

between 1938 and 1945, when the Nazis were in control. During those years, the German government collaborated with “progressive thinkers” in the medical community in terminating the lives of thousands of what they called “empty shells of human beings”—the terminally ill and mentally retarded, as well as individuals with brain damage or psychiatric conditions. After the War, German doctors who worked on this program to eliminate “useless eaters” were judged guilty of “crimes against humanity.”

We should be aware that some of the same ideology is being debated today. Recent changes in state laws allowing the withdrawal of ordinary means of sustenance—food and water—in cases of “persistent vegetative state” have been driven by ardent euthanasia advocates. Judicial decisions denying the legislatively-mandated review of the “finding of fact” that Terri Schiavo is in a “persistent vegetative state” are an explicit violation of Constitutional guarantee that individuals cannot be deprived of life without due process of law—simply on the basis of “quality of life” judgment.

Thankfully, there are many on both sides of the political aisle—including half of the Democrats who came back to Washington to vote in favor of the bill to save Terri Schiavo—who understand that this is not a political issue.

Ultimately, the debate over Terri Schiavo is not about states’ rights or medical ethics or “end-of-life” decisions. It’s about whether we measure life by a subjective or objective test. Is life a test of sufficient value or is it precious and sacred *per se* in all its various conditions?