

---

March 27, 2005

## The Dangers of Political Theater

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#)

**W**ASHINGTON — The day-to-day minutiae of Washington politics - "what Congress does when the subcommittee on acoustics and ventilation meets," in the words of Senator Ron Wyden, the Oregon Democrat - is often achingly dull, which is why most Americans pay scant attention.

But occasionally politics turns into national theater, and when it does, the politicians love playing a lead role. So when the case of Terri Schiavo came along - a brain-damaged woman, grieving parents, a husband painted as a villain and a Greek chorus of protesters - many in Congress leaped into the stage lights.

Lawmakers interrupted their Easter recess for a mad dash back to Washington and a midnight vote on a measure to allow the federal courts to intervene in Ms. Schiavo's case. President Bush flew back from his Texas ranch to sign the legislation in the wee morning hours. The public was riveted. But by week's end, when the poll results rolled in, it turned out that the high drama in Washington was not playing well in Peoria.

One survey, by CBS, found that 82 percent of Americans thought Congress and Mr. Bush should not have gotten involved in the Schiavo case; 74 percent thought they had done so to advance a political agenda. An ABC poll found that 70 percent opposed Congressional involvement in the case.

Pollsters say it's hard to remember a time when Congress acted in a manner so contrary to popular opinion - especially when the public was paying such close attention. "I never would have predicted that," said Marshall Wittmann, a senior fellow at the Democratic Leadership Council, a centrist group. Neither did Congress, which is what makes political theater so risky.

Americans "don't usually study what Congress does," said Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, "but they look at Congress getting involved in a case like this and they wonder: 'What's going on?' "

Some lawmakers wondered as well. "It went through like a tsunami," said Senator Susan Collins, the Maine Republican, who was one of a handful of senators who spoke against Congressional intervention, on the grounds that it was a private family matter.

Another Republican, Alan Simpson, the former senator from Wyoming, said, "I think that somebody must have pushed the button and said this is a political advantage. If that is the case, then it's been a very embarrassing spectacle."

To be certain, some Republicans were genuinely moved by Ms. Schiavo's plight. But there were also political motivations at work. For Representative Tom DeLay, the Texas Republican and House majority leader, the issue provided a welcome distraction from allegations of ethical lapses. For the Senate majority leader, Bill Frist, the Tennessee Republican who is contemplating a White House run in 2008, it provided an opportunity to appeal to social conservatives.

"The calculation," said Ross K. Baker, a political scientist at Rutgers University, "is that even though a large majority of the public is turned off by this intrusion into a private matter, it's the party's base that will remember it fondly, and the general public will have forgotten about it by 2008."

Democrats, meanwhile, made little protest, fearful of being on the wrong side of another values issue - especially in Florida, where Senator Bill Nelson, a Democrat, faces re-election next year. They also calculated that if they blocked the measure, Republicans would blame them for the woman's death, casting them as the villains of the story. In the end, only a handful of Democrats, including Senator Wyden, spoke out against the bill, which passed by voice vote.

Political melodrama, of course, is a Washington tradition. As far back as 1912, a Senate subcommittee convened hearings on the sinking of the Titanic - never mind that it was not an American vessel. As Mr. Baker explained: "There were Americans on the ship. That's what gave them the hook."

More recently, some Congress watchers wondered what the hook was when a House panel summoned some of baseball's biggest stars to testify about steroid use. As with the Schiavo matter, critics accused lawmakers of grandstanding, but in this case, the hearings made Congress look good. Democrats and Republicans cooperated and got a boost when Mark McGwire, the retired slugger, refused to answer their questions.

"In those baseball hearings, one can imagine the larger interests that cross party lines," said the historian Robert Dallek. "Somehow it has less of a political ring to it, and it's part of that tradition of grandstanding through investigative action, rather than putting across this piece of midnight legislation."

Not so the Schiavo case, he added. "It's so personalized, so much a violation of Congressional tradition."

Indeed, while Congress occasionally adopts bills on behalf of an individual (so-called private-relief bills), usually in immigration-related matters, it generally steers clear when controversy arises. Five years ago, for example, lawmakers contemplated passing a private-relief bill to grant United States citizenship to Elián González, the 6-year-old

Cuban boy at the center of an international custody dispute. The measure died in committee, leaving lawmakers free to pontificate without consequence.

The question now is whether the actions in the Schiavo matter will have any lasting repercussions. Already, they have created divisions among Republican conservatives, some of whom opposed the legislation as a violation of separation of powers. "I think it seriously weakens the arguments of conservatives that we respect process, that we respect precedent, that we respect the courts," said Bob Barr, the Republican former congressman from Georgia. But he said it would not have "long-term political ramifications."

Republican strategists are not so sure. One, speaking on condition of anonymity, predicted a mini-revolt among the Republican rank and file who followed their leaders in the Schiavo case - particularly those who may have difficult races in 2006.

"They walked the plank on Social Security reform under much duress, and now they were walking the plank on Schiavo," this strategist said. "You're going to see the beginning of Bush's difficulties with Congress for a second term because congressmen deal in self-preservation and these are two strikes for 2005, and we're just getting through the first quarter."