

IF IT WAS WRONG TO FORCE-FEED TERRI SCHIAVO, WHY IS IT RIGHT TO FORCE-FEED GITMO DETAINEES?

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Back when he was running for President, Barack Obama said his biggest mistake in the Senate was in not voting against the March 2005 unanimous consent motion to intervene in the Terri Schiavo dispute.

And yet the same man is ultimately responsible for the 11 Gitmo detainees who are being forced to prevent them from starving themselves to death.

To be sure, Obama's regret about not speaking up against Terri Schiavo's force-feeding is not precisely parallel to that of Samir Haji al Hasan Moqbel and others.

Obama described his objection to Congress' intervention in the Schiavo matter in constitutional terms, presumably objecting to the Congressional interjection into a state legal matter. Unlike Congress and Schiavo, as President, Obama has clear responsibility for those at Gitmo.

Moreover, Schiavo was brain dead. Withdrawing her feeding tube amounted to her husband's fully cognizant decision to fulfill her wishes not to be kept alive in a vegetative state. Whereas the Gitmo hunger strikers are (aside from the impact of 11 years of indefinite detention and forced feeding, which is significant) largely physically and mentally healthy. The Gitmo hunger strikers are choosing for themselves to stop taking nourishment – or at least trying to.

There's also this difference: the forced-feeding of Gitmo detainees involves a great deal more

physical coercion than the feeding tube Terri Schiavo had.

A team from the E.R.F. (Extreme Reaction Force), a squad of eight military police officers in riot gear, burst in. They tied my hands and feet to the bed. They forcibly inserted an IV into my hand. I spent 26 hours in this state, tied to the bed. During this time I was not permitted to go to the toilet. They inserted a catheter, which was painful, degrading and unnecessary. I was not even permitted to pray.

I will never forget the first time they passed the feeding tube up my nose. I can't describe how painful it is to be force-fed this way. As it was thrust in, it made me feel like throwing up. I wanted to vomit, but I couldn't. There was agony in my chest, throat and stomach. I had never experienced such pain before. I would not wish this cruel punishment upon anyone.

All those significant differences aside, though, here's a question I kept asking myself, as I thought about this: how are men who've been cleared for release but nevertheless indefinitely detained – so far at least three years beyond the time they were cleared, and for a number of them, far longer – all that different from being in a legal vegetative state (particularly now that the government has put them back in solitary detention)? I know these men, in theory, retain all their human cognitive selves, but we'll only let them use it to occupy an apparently indefinite, unnecessary detention, not to truly live.

We're fine with Terri Schiavo and her husband choosing to end her life because she was, according to her husband's understanding of her beliefs, not fully living in any case. I don't know the answer, honestly, but how is that different than the life of indefinitely detained

innocent men? Without some concrete hope they'll be able to resume their lives, and particularly now that they've been deprived of human contact, what has Gitmo made of their fully human lives?

Ultimately, it seems the underlying issue is the same: human dignity. "I've been on a hunger strike since Feb. 10 and have lost well over 30 pounds. I will not eat until they restore my dignity," Samir said.

Why is it Obama saw the legal justice of letting Schiavo die with dignity but he deprives these hunger strikers of their human dignity?