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## The God Racket, From DeMille to DeLay

**A**S Congress and the president scurried to play God in the lives of Terri Schiavo and her family last weekend, ABC kicked off Holy Week with its perennial ritual: a rebroadcast of the 1956 Hollywood blockbuster, "The Ten Commandments."

Cecil B. DeMille's epic is known for the parting of its Technicolor Red Sea, for the religiosity of its dialogue (Anne Baxter's Nefretiri to Charlton Heston's Moses: "You can worship any God you like as long as I can worship you.") and for a Golden Calf scene that DeMille himself described as "an orgy Sunday-school children can watch." But this year the lovable old war horse has a relevance that transcends camp. At a time when government, culture, science, medicine and the rule of law are all under threat from an emboldened religious minority out to remake America according to its dogma, the half-forgotten show business history of "The Ten Commandments" provides a telling back story.

As DeMille readied his costly Paramount production for release a half-century ago, he seized on an ingenious publicity scheme. In partnership with the Fraternal Order of Eagles, a nationwide association of civic-minded clubs founded by theater owners, he sponsored the construction of several thousand Ten Commandments monuments throughout the country to hype his product. The Pharaoh himself - that would be Yul Brynner - participated in the gala unveiling of the Milwaukee slab. Heston did the same in North Dakota. Bizarrely enough, all these years later, it is another of these DeMille-inspired granite monuments, on the grounds of the Texas Capitol in Austin, that is a focus of the Ten Commandments case that the United States Supreme Court heard this month.

We must wait for the court's ruling on whether the relics of a Hollywood relic breach the separation of church and state. Either way, it's clear that one principle, so firmly upheld by DeMille, has remained inviolate no matter what the courts have to say: American moguls, snake-oil salesmen and politicians looking to score riches or power will stop at little if they feel it is in their interests to exploit God to achieve those ends. While sometimes God racketeers are guilty of the relatively minor sin of bad taste - witness the crucifixion-nail jewelry licensed by Mel Gibson - sometimes we get the demagoguery of Father Coughlin or the big-time cons of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker.

The religio-hucksterism surrounding the Schiavo case makes DeMille's Hollywood crusades look like amateur night. This circus is the latest and most egregious in a series of cultural shocks that have followed Election Day 2004, when a fateful exit poll question on "moral values" ignited a take-no-prisoners political grab by moral zealots. During the commercial interruptions on "The Ten Commandments" last weekend, viewers could surf over to the cable news networks and find a Bible-thumping show as only Washington could conceive it. Congress was floating such scenarios as staging a meeting in Ms. Schiavo's hospital room or, alternatively, subpoenaing her, her husband and her doctors to a hearing in Washington. All in the name of faith.

Like many Americans, I suspect, I tried to picture how I would have reacted if a bunch of smarmy, camera-seeking politicians came anywhere near a hospital room where my own relative was hooked up to life

support. I imagined summoning the Clint Eastwood of "Dirty Harry," not "Million Dollar Baby." But before my fantasy could get very far, star politicians with the most to gain from playing the God card started hatching stunts whose extravagant shamelessness could upstage any humble reverie of my own.

Senator Bill Frist, the Harvard-educated heart surgeon with presidential aspirations, announced that watching videos of Ms. Schiavo had persuaded him that her doctors in Florida were mistaken about her vegetative state - a remarkable diagnosis given that he had not only failed to examine the patient ostensibly under his care but has no expertise in the medical specialty, neurology, relevant to her case. No less audacious was Tom DeLay, last seen on "60 Minutes" a few weeks ago deflecting Lesley Stahl's questions about his proximity to allegedly criminal fund-raising by saying he would talk only about children stranded by the tsunami. Those kids were quickly forgotten as he hitched his own political rehabilitation to a brain-damaged patient's feeding tube. Adopting a prayerful tone, the former exterminator from Sugar Land, Tex., took it upon himself to instruct "millions of people praying around the world this Palm Sunday weekend" to "not be afraid."

The president was not about to be outreached by these saps. The same Mr. Bush who couldn't be bothered to interrupt his vacation during the darkening summer of 2001, not even when he received a briefing titled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S.," flew from his Crawford ranch to Washington to sign Congress's Schiavo bill into law. The bill could have been flown to him in Texas, but his ceremonial arrival and departure by helicopter on the White House lawn allowed him to showboat as if he had just landed on the deck of an aircraft carrier. Within hours he turned Ms. Schiavo into a slick applause line at a Social Security rally. "It is wise to always err on the side of life," he said, wisdom that apparently had not occurred to him in 1999, when he mocked the failed pleas for clemency of Karla Faye Tucker, the born-again Texas death-row inmate, in a magazine interview with Tucker Carlson.

These theatrics were foretold. Culture is often a more reliable prophecy than religion of where the country is going, and our culture has been screaming its theocratic inclinations for months now. The anti-indecency campaign, already a roaring success, has just yielded a new chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Kevin J. Martin, who had been endorsed by the Parents Television Council and other avatars of the religious right. The push for the sanctity of marriage (or all marriages except Terri and Michael Schiavo's) has led to the banishment of lesbian moms on public television. The Armageddon-fueled worldview of the "Left Behind" books extends its spell by the day, soon to surface in a new NBC prime-time mini-series, "Revelations," being sold with the slogan "The End is Near."

All this is happening while polls consistently show that at most a fifth of the country subscribes to the religious views of those in the Republican base whom even George Will, speaking last Sunday on ABC's "This Week," acknowledged may be considered "extremists." In that famous Election Day exit poll, "moral values" voters amounted to only 22 percent. Similarly, an ABC News survey last weekend found that only 27 percent of Americans thought it was "appropriate" for Congress to "get involved" in the Schiavo case and only 16 percent said it would want to be kept alive in her condition. But a majority of American colonists didn't believe in witches during the Salem trials either - any more than the Taliban reflected the views of a majority of Afghans. At a certain point - and we seem to be at that point - fear takes over, allowing a mob to bully the majority over the short term. (Of course, if you believe the end is near, there is no long term.)

That bullying, stoked by politicians in power, has become omnipresent, leading television stations to practice self-censorship and high school teachers to avoid mentioning "the E word," evolution, in their classrooms, lest they arouse fundamentalist rancor. The president is on record as saying that the jury is still out on evolution, so perhaps it's no surprise that The Los Angeles Times has uncovered a three-year-old "religious rights" unit in the Justice Department that investigated a biology professor at Texas Tech because he refused to write letters of recommendation for students who do not accept evolution as "the central, unifying principle of biology." Cornelia Dean of The New York Times [broke the story](#) last weekend that some Imax theaters, even those in science centers, are now refusing to show documentaries like "Galápagos" or "Volcanoes of the Deep Sea" because their references to Darwin and the Big Bang theory might antagonize some audiences. Soon such

films will disappear along with biology textbooks that don't give equal time to creationism.

James Cameron, producer of "Volcanoes" (and, more famously, the director of "Titanic"), called this development "obviously symptomatic of our shift away from empiricism in science to faith-based science." Faith-based science has in turn begat faith-based medicine that impedes stem-cell research, not to mention faith-based abstinence-only health policy that impedes the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and diseases like AIDS.

Faith-based news is not far behind. Ashley Smith, the 26-year-old woman who was held hostage by Brian Nichols, the accused Atlanta courthouse killer, has been canonized by virtually every American news organization as God's messenger because she inspired Mr. Nichols to surrender by talking about her faith and reading him a chapter from Rick Warren's best seller, "The Purpose-Driven Life." But if she's speaking for God, what does that make Dennis Rader, the church council president arrested in Wichita's B.T.K. serial killer case? Was God instructing Terry Ratzmann, the devoted member of the Living Church of God who this month murdered his pastor, an elderly man, two teenagers and two others before killing himself at a weekly church service in Wisconsin? The religious elements of these stories, including the role played by the end-of-times fatalism of Mr. Ratzmann's church, are left largely unexamined by the same news outlets that serve up Ashley Smith's tale as an inspirational parable for profit.

Next to what's happening now, official displays of DeMille's old Ten Commandments monuments seem an innocuous encroachment of religion into public life. It is a full-scale jihad that our government signed onto last weekend, and what's most scary about it is how little was heard from the political opposition. The Harvard Law School constitutional scholar Laurence Tribe pointed out this week that even Joe McCarthy did not go so far as this Congress and president did in conspiring to "try to undo the processes of a state court." But faced with McCarthyism in God's name, most Democratic leaders went into hiding and stayed silent. Prayers are no more likely to revive their spines than poor Terri Schiavo's brain.