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Hold Principles Sacred (in principle)

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Right now two issues are roiling the country that involve the question of “principle” – whether “in principle” the U.S. Congress has the right to intervene in hopes of saving Terri Schiavo’s life, and whether the CIA “in principle” should torture captured al Qaeda fighters in hopes of getting information from them that might prevent another 9-11-type attack on our country.

Well, it’s about time we started talking about principles. So just for a moment, put these two issues aside, settle back and let me tell you a little story:

A few years ago I was in Australia on business, and one day *The Sydney Morning Herald* published a delightful feature article about the type of man known as an Australian “bloke,” written by a woman reporter who was obviously very talented and, judging from her photo, very pretty. Her description of the bloke was priceless: he is muscular, hairy-chested, not very articulate. He’s the sort of man who comes home from work, unbuckles his tool-belt and drops it on the floor, cracks open a beer, then sits in front of the television watching a show about fishing. He will cheerfully fix anything around the house that’s broken, but he isn’t the sort of man you wake up at 2 a.m. because you have an overpowering need to discuss your feelings about the relationship. Her point was that the bloke had become an embarrassment to the country; that as Australia became a very hip, very with-it, very “now” sort of place the bloke was like a Neanderthal, and that the sooner the species became extinct the better off Australia’s image would be.

A Lawyer Who Gets It

The article brought in an avalanche of letters-to-the-editor in the next few days, and each

morning I would read them at breakfast in the hotel dining room. The very last letter published was from a woman who acknowledged that everything the reporter had written was true, and that her description of the bloke was simply perfect. Then the letter-writer went on to describe her own situation:

She was in her late-thirties, and had just been made a partner at one of Sydney's most prestigious law firms. She owned a condo overlooking the city's great Harbor Bridge, had season tickets to the opera, and a BMW in the garage. As this was a Friday, she went on, she would leave her office at 6 p.m., stop on her way home to rent a movie, then make a second stop at the Chinese take-away. She would spend the evening sitting on her bed in her pajamas, with her cat, watching the movie and eating chop suey out of a cardboard box. The last sentence of her letter read: *To tell you the truth, I could do with a bit of bloke.*

I nearly fell off my chair laughing, and I remember thinking that if I ever needed a lawyer in Australia, this woman would be the one I wanted. She understood the importance of principles – and she understood that in the real world, you sometimes need to set them aside.

Now, let's get back to current events. The conservatives are correct about the Terri Schiavo issue: the U.S. Congress has absolutely no right to intervene in what is so obviously a State issue. Doing so violates every principle of federalism that we conservatives have been fighting for over the years. And the liberals are right about how we should treat captured al Qaeda fighters: under no circumstances whatsoever should the CIA torture them or ship them off to other intelligence services that will. Torture is wrong, and allowing it to happen in our country's name violates every principle of human decency for which this country stands.

But we live in the real world, not in a political-science seminar. So the U.S. Congress should do whatever it can to save Terri's life, and the CIA should do whatever is necessary to capture al Qaeda fighters if there is even a chance that by doing so we can prevent another horrific attack on our country.

The principle of principles is this: Principles matter hugely, and we must adhere to them. But the real world is sometimes a sloppy place. When there is a direct conflict between standing on a principle and doing what is right, then we must have the maturity, and the wisdom, to see this conflict and to make a choice; to take a deep breath, to utter a silent prayer for guidance and forgiveness -- and to do what in our hearts we know must be done.

Herbert E. Meyer served during the Reagan Administration as Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence and Vice Chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council. His DVD on [The Siege of Western Civilization](#) has become an international best-seller.

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