

ARCHIVE

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## Senator changes mind on Schiavo



By **Adam C. Smith**

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Sen. Mel Martinez, nearly a year after leading the charge for federal intervention in the Terri Schiavo case, now says he may have been off-base.

"Perhaps this was not in the realm of federal concern. It may have been better left to state courts to deal with it," Martinez said in a taped interview for Political Connections that airs today on Bay News 9.

In a wide-ranging interview in which the Orlando Republican for the first time also publicly embraced the Senate candidacy of Katherine Harris, he alluded to the Schiavo controversy as providing a lesson "with a whack across the head."

Martinez was the Senate's point person pushing a bill to give federal courts jurisdiction in the case as part of an effort to force the brain-damaged Pinellas County woman's feeding tubes to be reinserted.

The effort to keep her alive proved unsuccessful and enormously unpopular with the public. It was particularly damaging to Martinez after it turned out his legal counsel had drafted a memo describing the Schiavo legislation as "a great political issue." That aide left Martinez's staff.

"I've enjoyed the year. There are moments of learning, sometimes with a whack across the head," he said when asked about lessons he'd learned in his year in the Senate. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. Staff members that don't quite do what you want them to do, and then big problems develop. You learn from those things and you move on."

Martinez has previously stood by his role in the Schiavo controversy, but his latest comments come two weeks after Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist recounted the lessons he learned from the Schiavo controversy: "The American people don't want you involved in these decisions."

Martinez said supporters of the bill wanted "one last measure of review. That's what the debate was about in the Senate. If I had to take one lesson away it's perhaps decisions of this nature really belong in state courts, not federal courts."



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Political Connections is a joint venture between the St. Petersburg Times and Bay News 9, and it airs at 11 a.m. Starting Monday, the interview can be seen on channel 340 (Tampa Bay on Demand).

Martinez also touted the bill he and Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson are sponsoring to enact permanent restrictions on offshore drilling within 150 miles of Florida, even as he said he ultimately will campaign against Nelson. The Democratic incumbent faces a challenge from Republican Rep. Harris of Sarasota.

"The beauty of it is that (Nelson) and I are working together as Floridians, working side by side on something that's good for Florida. But there's no question that I'm a Republican and I want to support my party's nominee for senator," said Martinez, adding that "politics will come later."

While prominent Republicans for months had been unenthusiastic about Harris' candidacy, fearing she will lose, Martinez for the first time publicly promised he'll campaign for Harris.

"I don't see anyone else out there even thinking or talking about it. So I think she is the candidate. I think she'll be the nominee of our party and I think she'll acquit herself well. She's a fighter, she's a dogged person that I think will demonstrate to Floridians that she'll be a good candidate," he said.

Martinez narrowly beat Democrat Betty Castor in 2004 in a race in which former University of South Florida professor Sami Al-Arian was a central issue. Al-Arian was suspected of financing terrorism while Castor was president of USF, and Martinez criticized her for not taking more decisive action against Al-Arian.

In December, a federal jury found Al-Arian not guilty on eight counts and a judge declared a mistrial on nine others. Despite that, Martinez said he had no regrets about making an issue out of Al-Arian, calling it a "managerial" question and noting that the Castor campaign itself first brought up Al-Arian in the general election.

"I don't have any second thoughts about it. I think it was a valid issue, but I think at this point the legal process isn't through with it, and I would anticipate that there may even be further prosecutions," Martinez said.

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