

# Mother of fallen soldier camps outside Bush ranch: “Why did you kill my son?”

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To date, 1,843 US troops have been killed in the Iraq war. Cindy Sheehan, the mother of one of these soldiers, has put a public face on the suffering of the families left behind by the deaths of these men and women. Her personal cause has also brought to light the anger of growing numbers of Americans over the war, and their contempt for George W. Bush.

Ms. Sheehan's son Casey, a 24-year-old Army specialist and Humvee mechanic, was killed in Sadr City, Iraq, on April 4, 2004. Since her son's death, the 48-year-old from Vacaville, California, has taken a courageous stand in the face of tragedy, becoming an outspoken critic of the Bush administration, appearing at antiwar rallies and calling for US troops to be brought home.

Speaking at a rally in Fayetteville, North Carolina, last March, Ms. Sheehan said, “I didn't lose my son. I know where he is. He is buried here. He was put in a grave by George Bush and the neo-conservatives, a government of psychopathic killers.”

Last Saturday, Ms. Sheehan brought her battle to Crawford, Texas, where the president is spending a five-week “working vacation” on his ranch. She arrived in Crawford aboard a bus with the words “Impeachment Tour” painted on its side, fresh from a Veterans for Peace convention in Dallas with other antiwar activists.

The bus traveled down the road leading to Bush's ranch at about 15 miles per hour, followed by about 20 cars carrying protesters and reporters. They parked their vehicles after several miles and began to march in the sweltering heat toward the ranch on the narrowing country road, chanting, “W. killed her son!” Ms. Sheehan and her supporters were stopped by police a few miles from Bush's sprawling 1,600-acre property and told they could go no further. She has vowed to remain until the end of the month unless Bush speaks with her personally or she is arrested.

While Cindy Sheehan's struggle is intensely personal,

her sentiments reflect growing opposition to the Bush administration's war policy on a more general level. Bush's insistence that progress is being made in Iraq is belied by persistent reports of casualties, which have numbered 44 in the first 10 days of August alone.

The impact of this death toll is being felt in communities across the US. Earlier this month, 20 marines from one reserve unit based in the Cleveland suburb of Brook Park, the 3rd battalion, 25th Marines, were killed in Haditha, Iraq. Forty-five of the 900 marines of the 3/25 have been killed since they arrived in Iraq in March.

Such tragedies are having a profound impact on the consciousness of those left behind. Rosemary Palmer, 57, from Cleveland is the mother of Lance Cpl. Edward A. Schroeder II, 22, one of the Ohio soldiers who lost their lives. Countering some in the community who argued that criticizing Bush's war policy dishonored the fallen soldiers, she commented, “How are we honoring them by throwing another 1,800 lives on the pile? Honor them by resolving this war.”

As Cindy Sheehan remains camped out down the road from the Bush ranch, she speaks for the growing numbers of families whose loved ones have been killed in Iraq. Last Saturday, Sheehan told reporters she was outraged by the president's comments the week before that US troops killed in the war had died for a noble cause and that the mission must be completed. “I want to ask the president,” she said, “Why did you kill my son? What did my son die for?”

On Saturday afternoon, two senior officials—Stephen J. Hadley, the national security adviser, and Joe Hagin, a deputy White House chief of staff—were sent out to meet with Ms. Sheehan and several other protesters. After the meeting, Sheehan said, “They [the advisers] said we are in Iraq because they believed Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, that the world's a better

place with Saddam gone and that we're making the world a safer place with what we're doing over there."

She added, "I told them Iraq was not a threat to the United States and that now people are dead for nothing. I told them I wouldn't leave until I talked to George Bush."

The treatment Cindy Sheehan has received from the Bush administration since she lost her son is characteristic of the disrespect his administration has shown to the thousands of families whose sons, daughters, mothers and fathers, have been killed and maimed in the war. Bush has refused to meet publicly with the bereaved family members, or attend the funerals of the soldiers killed. He has instead held private meetings with the families, closed to the press.

As described by Ms. Sheehan, Bush's conduct at one such meeting with her and her family in June 2004 at Fort Lewis in Washington State was a study in rudeness and disinterest. He did not know her son Casey's name and referred to her as "Mom" throughout the meeting. Sheehan said Bush acted like he was at a party, not a meeting with a mother who had lost a young son.

According to the *New York Times*, "By Ms. Sheehan's account, Mr. Bush said to her that he could not imagine losing a loved one like an aunt or uncle or cousin. Ms. Sheehan said she broke in and told Mr. Bush that Casey was her son, and that he could imagine what it would be like since he has two daughters and that he should think about what it would be like sending them off to war."

"I said, 'Trust me, you don't want to go there,' " she told the *Times*, "He said, 'You're right, I don't.' I said, 'Well, thanks for putting me there.' "

Cindy Sheehan is to be commended for having the guts and backbone to reject the media's sanitizing effort in regard to George W. Bush. She refuses to be awed by the office of the presidency, exposing him instead as the cowardly and morally stunted person he is.

Denouncing efforts to vilify her for standing up to Bush, she commented in her "Report from Crawford," posted online, "Why do the right-wing media so assiduously scrutinize the words of a grief-filled mother and ignore the words of a lying president?" She has called for a thorough investigation into the implications of the Downing Street Memos and attempts to cover up the real motivations behind the Iraq war.

The apparatus of lies, conspiracy and cover-up personified by Bush—and condemned by Ms. Sheehan—has extended to government attempts to conceal from the American people the carnage taking place in Iraq. This reality includes the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis

and the killing and maiming of young Americans sent there to fight.

Since the first Gulf War, the government has tightened restrictions on the release of photographs of the flag-draped coffins of US troops returning home, fearful of the reaction such images might provoke among the American population. Only recently, in response to a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, the Pentagon has been forced to release a limited number of photos of coffins carrying the bodies of soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Despite the best efforts of the government and media to counter it, however, opposition to the Bush administration's war policy is mounting. A USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll published Tuesday found 56 percent of respondents feel the war is going badly, and only 43 percent feel it is going well. Another new poll conducted by AP-Ipsos shows that only 38 percent of Americans approve of Bush's handling of the war, down from the mid-40s earlier in the year.

Bush's overall approval rating stands at only 42 percent, with a strong majority—55 percent—disapproving. Another telling statistic in the AP-Ipsos poll shows that 56 percent of people interpret Bush's "confidence" as arrogance—a sentiment that would not be lost on Cindy Sheehan.

The frankness and courage displayed by Sheehan in her public challenge to the Bush administration stands in sharp contrast to the doubletalk and cowardice of the Democratic Party leadership. While making some criticism of Bush's military policy, they advocate tougher policies to "win the war" in Iraq and have called for building up troop numbers.

Senator Evan Bayh (Indiana), a likely contender for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, complained last week that his party lacks credibility on national security and needs to convince voters that the Democrats are willing to use force.

Senator Joseph Biden (Delaware), who is seeking the nomination, told "Fox News" on Sunday, "We don't have enough troops. We haven't had it from two years ago, a year ago, six months ago."



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