

Protest at Bush's ranch gathers momentum—mother of fallen soldier continues to demand meeting with president

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The protest in Crawford, Texas, by Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a fallen soldier in Iraq, has gained strength and momentum since she arrived last Saturday and set up camp down the road from George W. Bush's ranch.

Sheehan, 48, whose 24-year-old son Casey was killed in April 2004, five days after he arrived in Iraq, has vowed to stay in her makeshift camp until Bush speaks to her, she is arrested or the president winds up his five-week "working" vacation at the end of August.

Outraged at comments by the president that her son and other US troops died for a "noble cause," she has demanded that Bush meet with her personally and answer the questions: "Why did you kill my son? What did my son die for?" She is calling for all US troops to be brought home before another mother suffers a tragedy like hers.

Ms. Sheehan's weeklong protest has galvanized support among other military families whose loved ones have been killed in the war, are presently in Iraq or are set to be deployed. More than 100 people had joined her as of Friday, and more supporters are continually arriving. Their stand has focused a spotlight on opposition to the Bush administration's war policy among growing sections of the American population.

Largely due to the publicity surrounding Cindy Sheehan's cause—and mounting support for it—Bush was forced to refer to her by name at a press conference outside his ranch on Thursday. "I sympathize with Mrs. Sheehan," he said. "She feels strongly about her position. She has every right in the world to say what she believes. This is America." Bush's sympathy, however, has not moved him to grant her a meeting.

Bush also made clear that he has no intention of

bringing the troops home. "Pulling the troops out would send a terrible signal to the enemy," he said. While not mentioning him by name, Bush's statements contradicted those of Gen. George Casey, the top commander in Iraq, who has said that "fairly substantial" reductions could be expected after elections scheduled for December, if the insurgency did not expand and the training of Iraqi security forces proceeded as planned.

The president avoided as well addressing one of Ms. Sheehan's central contentions—and one she would undoubtedly demand an explanation for in a face-to-face meeting—that the war in Iraq was launched on the basis of lies.

The president's contempt for Sheehan and her supporters was emphasized Friday afternoon when his motorcade rode past them without stopping on the way to a political fundraiser near his ranch. Law enforcement required the protesters to stand behind a yellow tape as Bush's caravan passed. Ms. Sheehan held up a sign reading, "Why do you make time for donors and not for me?"

Bush and about 230 others were attending a barbeque fundraiser at the nearby 478-acre Broken Spoke Ranch, and the event was expected to raise at least \$2 million for the Republican National Committee. All of the well-heeled guests have contributed at least \$25,000 to the RNC, with some—dubbed "pioneers"—having raised \$100,000 or more.

This circle of wealthy Republican Party insiders stands in stark contrast to the families of the young men and women who are being sent to fight and die in Iraq, the overwhelming majority of whom come from poor and working class neighborhoods across America,

having joined up to earn money for college, learn a trade or simply find a paying job.

To date, 1,846 men and women have been killed since the US invaded Iraq in March 2003. The death toll has been growing for National Guard and Reserve troops in particular, with 100 killed since May 1. The month of August has been the bloodiest yet, with more guardsmen and reservists killed in combat in the first 10 days of the month—at least 32—than in any full month of the entire war.

These deaths included six Marine reservists who were killed by small arms fire near the town of Haditha, in western Iraq, on August 1. Two days later, 14 Marine Reserve troops from Ohio were killed in a roadside bomb that destroyed their amphibious assault vehicle.

Also on August 3, three members of a National Guard unit from Georgia were killed in Baghdad when a suicide bomber blew up a vehicle near an armored troop carrier. On August 9, five members of the Pennsylvania National Guard—four of them from Philadelphia—were killed.

These deaths—in some cases devastating entire communities—are a central factor in the mounting hostility to the war. Also fueling this opposition are reports of horrific conditions confronting the Iraqi population in their daily lives, and the disrepair and devastation of the country's infrastructure.

Commenting on the training of the Iraqi security forces at his press conference on Thursday, Bush described their progress as improving from “raw recruit” to “plenty capable.” He said, “I know it's hard for some Americans to see that progress.” Indeed it is, with daily reports that obviously prove this claim to be a lie.

An August 10 press release by Gold Star Families for Peace and Military Families Speak Out reports on some of the people who are protesting with Cindy Sheehan. It puts a face on the growing ranks of opponents of the Bush administration's war policy—parents, grandparents and children from cities and towns across the country.

A partial list of those who are either already in Crawford or on their way includes:

- * Jean Prewitt of Birmingham, Alabama, whose son Private Kelly Prewitt was killed in action on April 6, 2003.

- * Linda and Phil Waste of Hinesville, Georgia, who

have three sons and two grandchildren (a grandson and a granddaughter) on active duty in the military. Together, the five have already spent a total of more than 57 months on tours of duty in Iraq. Several of these children/grandchildren are currently serving in Iraq, and have served extended and multiple deployments.

- * Barbara Porchia of Camden, Arkansas, whose son, Army Reservist Private 1st Class Jonathan Cheatham, was killed in action in Baghdad on July 26, 2003.

- * Sue Niederer of Pennington, New Jersey, is a co-founder of Gold Star Families for Peace. Her son, 1st Lieutenant Seth Dvorin, was killed in action near Iskandariyah, Iraq, on February 3, 2004.

- * Mimi Evans of Hyannis, Massachusetts, plans to arrive in Crawford next week. Mimi's son serves in the Marines and will be deployed to Fallujah in the next two weeks.

- * Bill Mitchell of Atascadero, California, has already arrived in Crawford. Bill's son, Sgt. Michael Mitchell, was killed in action in Sadr City on April 4, 2004, along with Cindy Sheehan's son Casey. Bill is a co-founder of Gold Star Families for Peace.



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