

Growing support for Cindy Sheehan protest against Iraq war

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The ranks of protesters who have converged on Crawford, Texas to support Cindy Sheehan have swelled to some 300 since the 48-year-old mother of a fallen soldier in Iraq set up camp August 6 down the road from George W. Bush's ranch, where the president is vacationing until the end of August.

Ms. Sheehan's son Casey was killed on April 4, 2004, only five days after arriving in Iraq. She has vowed to stay in her makeshift camp until Bush speaks to her or she is arrested.

Bush has so far refused to meet with her, telling the press on Saturday that he thinks it is important for him to "to go on with my life, to keep a balanced life." The closest the president came to Ms. Sheehan was when his motorcade passed by the protesters last Friday on his way to a \$2 million fundraiser for the Republican National Committee at a nearby ranch.

In an article written for the Progressive Media Project and published in the August 15 San Jose *Mercury News*, Cindy Sheehan reiterated what is motivating her struggle. "I want to let the president know," she wrote, "that I feel he recklessly endangered the life of my son by sending our troops to attack and occupy a country that was no imminent threat to the United States.

"And I want to let him know that millions of Americans believe that the best thing we can do—for our own security, for our soldiers and for the Iraqi people—is to bring the US troops home from Iraq now."

Sheehan explained that in the immediate aftermath of her son's death she was stricken with grief and shock, but that "now I've got a lot of anger along with my grief." She continued: "I'm angry because every reason the Bush administration gave for the invasion of Iraq has been shown to be false. The Sept. 11 commission report concluded there was no link between Iraq and the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks."

She added that the weapons inspectors have given up

searching for weapons of mass destruction and that the Downing Street Memos have shown that "the Bush administration 'fixed' intelligence to justify the Iraq invasion."

Sheehan's antiwar stand has struck a chord among military families whose loved ones have been killed in Iraq, or are currently serving in the military. These families comprise a large section of the hundreds of protesters who have made their way to Crawford. She also articulates the sentiments of a majority of Americans—54 percent in the latest Gallup Poll—who now say the US made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq.

Her highly visible struggle has put a public face on the contempt felt by millions for the Bush administration, puncturing a hole in the official media portrayal of George W. Bush as an enormously popular war president.

Sheehan's courageous stance has also provoked a reaction among supporters of Bush and the war. As about 60 of her supporters held a religious service on the road leading to the Bush ranch on Sunday, one of Bush's neighbors on a nearby ranch fired a shotgun into the air. Sheriff's deputies and Secret Service agents rushed to the home of Larry Mattlage, but made no arrests.

Questioned afterward by the press, Mattlage claimed to be preparing for dove-hunting season, but when asked if he had another motive, commented, "Figure it out for yourself." Commenting on the incident, Sheehan said she has cautioned her supporters that "this could get physical, even though we are peaceful ... I'm surprised we haven't had more of that since we're in Bush country."

Sheehan has also been criticized for utilizing all the powers at her disposal to make her case. In an August 13, 2005 article in the *Washington Post*, Michael A. Fletcher wrote that her struggle "has quickly taken on the full trappings of a political campaign. Sheehan is working with a political consultant and a team of public relations professionals, and now she is featured in a television ad."

The *Post* suggested that her campaign was political opportunist, adding that “her cause has also been aided by political organizers who swiftly mobilized around her—recognizing an opportunity to cause acute discomfort for a vacationing president and put a powerful emotional frame around the antiwar movement.”

The war in Iraq—launched on the basis of lies—has been unconditionally supported by a compliant media, which has portrayed it as a legitimate struggle in defense of “freedom” and “democracy.” Countless millions of dollars have been spent by television networks to dispense this pro-war propaganda, and depict Bush as the “Teflon” president who remains popular no matter how badly the war goes or how many times he is exposed as a liar.

But a mother who has lost a son—and spends a mere \$15,000 to buy TV airtime to ask the question: “How many more of our loved ones need to die in this senseless war?”—is accused of utilizing her personal tragedy to advance a political agenda!

An article posted August 12 on the online edition of the right-wing magazine *American Spectator*, headlined “Crocodile Tears,” goes further, implying that Sheehan’s opposition to Bush makes her a pro-terrorist activist: “Despite what the headlines say, Sheehan, 48, is more anti-war protester than grieving mother. She is co-founder of Gold Star Families for Peace, an organization that seeks to impeach George W. Bush and apparently to convince the US government to surrender to Muslim terrorists.”

The fact of that matter is that Sheehan’s personal tragedy has propelled her into a political struggle which has given voice to the sentiments of millions of Americans who oppose the Bush administration’s war policy. It is precisely *because* she is a grieving mother who has lost a child in this criminal enterprise that her cause has been become identified with these growing antiwar sentiments.

There are increasing signs of opposition among the ranks of the military who are being asked to sacrifice their lives to prosecute this war. To date, 1,853 US troops have been killed. It is estimated that at least 200 active-duty soldiers in Iraq now post “blogs” on the Internet, which often depict the horrors of the war and its effects on both US troops and Iraqi civilians.

In April, Lt. Gen. John Vines, the top tactical commander in Iraq, published the first policy on blogs maintained by soldiers, requiring that all such web sites be registered. The order also barred bloggers from posting the names of killed or wounded soldiers before their

families are notified, describing classified information, or providing accounts of incidents still under investigation.

Arizona National Guard Spc. Leonard Clark was the first soldier found to have violated this policy. In July, he was fined \$1,640 and demoted to private first class for posting on his blog what the military said was classified material.

Clark wrote in his blog on April 11, “A growing number of men here are starting to wonder why we should continue to risk our lives for this whole mess when we know that the government will probably pull out of here.”

He also described his company’s captain as “a glory seeker” and the battalion sergeant as “an inhuman monster.” His site was subsequently shut down. Clark, who has sought political office in Arizona several times, is expected to run for US Senate in 2006.

Soldiers returning maimed and wounded from Iraq are also openly criticizing the war. Official government statistics put the number of injured at 13,877, although the number is undoubtedly higher, taking into account both physical injuries and severe psychological damage.

One such soldier, 21-year-old Terry Rodgers, from Gaithersburg, Maryland, was injured when the Humvee carrying him and fellow platoon members south of Baghdad was blown up by a bomb. He suffered a broken femur, broken jaw and broken cheekbone. His right calf was virtually blown away. Three members of his company died in the space of a couple of weeks.

After being flown to Baghdad and then Germany, Rodgers eventually arrived at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington DC. When a nurse told him one day that George W. Bush was visiting the hospital and asked if he’d like to meet him, Rodgers declined.

“I don’t want anything to do with him,” he told the *Washington Post*. “My belief is that his ego is getting people killed and mutilated for no reason—just his ego and his reputation. If we really wanted to, we could pull out of Iraq. Maybe not completely, but enough that we wouldn’t be losing people—at least not at this rate. So I think he himself is responsible for quite a few American deaths.”

Rodgers also turned down meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.



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