The media and Cindy Sheehan

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18 August 2005

It is both fascinating and instructive to observe the manner in which the American media seeks to handle the phenomenon of Cindy Sheehan, the 48-year-old woman from Vacaville, California, who has become a focus of anti-war sentiment in the US.

Sheehan, whose 24-year-old son, Casey, was killed in April 2004 while serving in Iraq, set up camp on August 6 down the road from Bush's ranch outside of Crawford, Texas, and vowed not to leave until the president took time out from his five-week vacation to meet with her and explain, in her words, "Why you killed my son."

Sheehan quite openly and articulately presents her action as a catalyst for developing a nationwide movement to demand the immediate withdrawal of all American troops from Iraq. She describes the war as illegal and makes no bones about calling Bush and his fellow war-makers, Rumsfeld, Cheney, Rice, etc., liars.

To her credit, she has pulled back the curtain of deceit crafted by the media to conceal the miserable moral and intellectual stature of the president, describing his behavior at a meeting last year with her and other family members of fallen soldiers as insulting and insensitive. He acted, she says, as though "he were at a party."

Sheehan has been joined at her encampment by other family members of soldiers killed in Iraq, and has won the sympathy of many millions of Americans who are opposed to the ongoing slaughter in Iraq. Earlier this week, a veteran who owns an acre of land near Bush's ranch invited Sheehan and her supporters to move their tents and cars onto his property, after right-wing Bush supporters in the area threatened the protesters. One fired a shot in the air and another drove his truck over hundreds of small wooden crosses bearing the names of dead soldiers that the group had set up on the side of the road leading to Bush's ranch. Other residents had lobbied the county authorities to force the anti-war encampment to move miles away.

"I just think people should have a right to protest," said Fred Mattlage, an Army veteran. "And I'm against the war. I don't think it's a war we need to be in."

Sheehan's simple but bold protest obviously took both the Bush administration and the media by surprise. The instinctive and immediate reaction of the establishment press and TV networks to such an event could only be negative, if not downright hostile. This goes not only for the far-right gutter press, such as the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*, but also for so-called "liberal" newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. After all, they all have promoted the endless lies given out to justify the war and continue to support the occupation of Iraq.

Under conditions of a worsening military and political situation for the US on the ground in Iraq, and an unbroken string of opinion polls registering rising popular opposition to the war and plummeting support for Bush, Sheehan's initiative was a most unwelcome and disturbing development.

The fallback position for the American media when such things occur is simply to ignore them. More often than not, events that contradict the pro-war agenda of the corporate-controlled media never appear on the network evening news reports, or, if they do, they are noted and then discretely dropped. As for the press, let us recall that the *New York Times*, whose official motto is "All the News That's Fit to Print," did not see fit to report prominently the world-wide anti-war protests that occurred on February 15, 2003—the largest international anti-war demonstrations ever held.

The Sheehan case, however, made the usual silent treatment an unsustainable option. In the first place, she ensconced herself within a few miles of the entire White House press corps, which had made the trek to rural Texas to cover the presidential beat. She set up camp along the dirt road leading to the Bush compound, where the reporters, cameramen, etc., could not help but see her.

More importantly, she presented a political difficulty. Given the media's ceaseless and cynical efforts to identify the legitimacy of the war with support for "our men and women in uniform" and whip up patriotic and pro-war sentiment by invoking those who made "the ultimate sacrifice" and the families they left behind—implying that those who opposed the war were betraying their countrymen on the field of battle—the networks and newspapers were obliged to tread carefully.

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The task—at least for the mainstream and "liberal" media—was to treat Sheehan with a show of respect, while blunting her indictment of the war and the Bush administration and ultimately finding a way to discredit her anti-war views.

To the extent that the media has treated Sheehan sympathetically, it has focused on her personal tragedy and downplayed her strong political views. It has largely ignored the fact that she characterizes the war as a criminal enterprise and supports Bush's impeachment.

At the same time, a well-established division of labor is operating to discredit Sheehan. The openly right-wing media swamp—Murdoch's Fox News and *New York Post*, the dregs of the Internet, such as the Drudge Report, and the legion of fascist-minded radio and TV talk show hosts—serve up the dirt, and the "respectable" media organs spread their gossip and smears, in the form of "allegations" and "questions."

Thus Fox News talk show host Bill O'Reilly wrote Tuesday in an online column, "It's obvious Cindy Sheehan has become a political player, whose primary concern is embarrassing the president. She is no longer just a protester."

The *New York Post* editorialized the same day under the headline "Cindy Sheehan's Agenda": "Like any other American, she is entitled to a personal agenda. Sadly, the one she's developed is ugly.

"Cindy Sheehan is a fully-fledged member of the Michael Moore wing of the Democratic Party. She rails about how terrorism could be ended if only Israel would 'get out' of Palestine—and compares Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to 'Hitler and Stalin.'...

"Her activities are being coordinated by Democratic political strategists—which helps explain why her statements parrot Democratic talking points, such as how 'the Downing Street Memo proves' that 'Bush lied to the American people.'...

"[H]er vigil has degenerated into high-profile political theater—if, indeed, that wasn't the point in the first place."

What is the charge here? Cindy Sheehan is not simply the mother of a solider killed in Iraq. She is a woman with definite political views, for which she fights. And those views—opposition to the war, opposition to Bush, opposition to the subversion of democratic rights by war conspirators who lied to the people—are extremist and illegitimate.

The claim that Sheehan is acting as a stalking horse for the Democratic Party is at once hysterical and far-fetched. She is no doubt working with various groups linked to the Democratic Party, such as MoveOn.org, True Majority, Democracy for America and United for Peace and Justice, but her actions have cut across the consensus policy of the Democratic Party leadership, which is to fully support the imperialist project in Iraq and criticize Bush for failing to prosecute the war with sufficient ruthlessness and competence. For the most part, leading Democrats are calling for more troops in Iraq, and not one prominent figure in that party supports the withdrawal of US troops.

The *New York Post*'s reference to Sheehan's sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians is by no means a casual one. It has now become a standard tactic of the media to implicitly or explicitly portray those who oppose the Iraq war as anti-Semites. Last June, for example, the *Washington Post* published a derisory column on a hearing held by Michigan Congressman John Conyers on the Downing Street Memos, in which the author, Dana Milbank, cited the presence of critics of Israel to suggest that the entire proceedings were infected with anti-Semitism.

The notorious gossip monger and political provocateur Matt Drudge has reported on his Internet site that Cindy Sheehan had said her son died to defend Israel.

Such smears are repackaged, with a somewhat more objective tone, by the "moderate" TV networks and "liberal" press. The *Washington Post*, for example, has taken to publishing reports on Sheehan that balance news of her growing support with echoes of the right-wing complaint that she has a political agenda and is working with various political and anti-war groups.

On Tuesday, CNN's Anderson Cooper interviewed Sheehan and confronted her with her alleged statement on Israel. She denied ever having made it.

What the media fears in Cindy Sheehan is the broad and deep-going anger and potentially explosive social opposition that she represents. Her firm and courageous stand, notwithstanding the limitations of her political outlook, suggests that a new quality is coming onto the scene—one that threatens to break the grip of political reaction and open the way for the entry of new forces, from among the working masses, into political life.

That is a nightmare for the American ruling elite that must be prevented. The media operation on Cindy Sheehan is only now moving into high gear. Stay tuned for more efforts to manipulate, insinuate and slander.

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