

Why the Nation remains silent on Cindy Sheehan's departure from the Democratic Party

Part two

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This is the second part of a three-part article. Part one was posted June 18.

The *Nation's* lead writers—as John Nichols's “nimble, historically astute and diplomatic” moderating (editor Katrina vanden Heuvel's words) of the Congressional Progressive Caucus event demonstrates—are integrated into the existing political structures.

The magazine's claims of political independence (its advertisements assert “Nobody owns the *Nation*” and “We are a wholly owned subsidiary of our own conscience”) are false. The weekly represents the left flank of the American establishment.

Such people oppose the worst excesses of the existing system, but this opposition has definite and unbreachable limits. In the final analysis, their myriad ties to the establishment, and, specifically, the Democrats, are far stronger than their hostility to war, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights.

With a certain degree of honesty, former editor and publisher Victor Navasky told an interviewer in 1995 that at the *Nation* “the space is between the Naderites and the center of the Democratic party.”

Current editor and publisher vanden Heuvel is a product of the US elite. Her maternal grandfather was Jules Stein, founder of the entertainment conglomerate MCA. Her father, William vanden Heuvel, served as executive assistant to William Donovan, who played a leading role in the creation of the CIA, when Donovan was ambassador to Thailand. William vanden Heuvel became a member of the board of the Fairfield Foundation, a philanthropic foundation that served as a vehicle for the CIA's covert funding of various cultural groups and individuals during the Cold War. He was later a special assistant to New York Governor Averill Harriman and subsequently US Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

Katrina vanden Heuvel sits on the Board of Governors of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute (FERI), a group her father co-chairs. Other members of the FERI Board of Governors include former Maryland senator Paul Sarbanes, former Democratic vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro and John Brademas, former president of New York University and board member of the National Endowment for Democracy, another CIA conduit.

Individuals may revolt against their upbringing and come to quite radical conclusions. There is no indication that the *Nation's* vanden Heuvel has undergone any such internal revolution. She has been and remains a figure of the liberal establishment.

The *Nation's* connections upward into the financial and political elite are extensive. A few examples may help paint a picture.

The Nation Institute, the magazine's non-profit sister organization, is chaired by Hamilton Fish V, the liberal scion of a famous and hitherto

conservative political family (and unsuccessful candidate for Congress). Fish is a political adviser to billionaire George Soros, whose Open Society Institute provided the Nation Institute with \$50,000 in grant money in 1999. Soros's stated aim has been to create a parallel political infrastructure to that operated by the Republican right. He has spent hundreds of millions of dollars in this pursuit. Many organizations on the liberal left have been benefactors of his largesse.

Soros played the decisive role in setting up the Center for American Progress (CAP), a think tank headed by former Clinton White House Chief of Staff John Podesta. Eric Alterman, one of the *Nation's* most strident defenders of the Democrats and a vehement anti-communist, is a senior fellow of the CAP. A great many ambitious individuals feed at the trough of such foundations and institutes.

Renewed Democratic Party prominence in Washington following the 2006 election, as vanden Heuvel's reference to the liberal Democratic caucus' rise from the Capitol basement to the Rayburn House Office Building symbolically suggests, means far wider opportunities for the liberal left. Not only do hundreds, perhaps thousands, of generously paid government positions in Washington become available with a change in fortunes of the two major parties, the general economic climate for the supporters of the ascendant party becomes far more favorable. Why should the respectable left restrain itself from riding the Democratic gravy train?

This layer of the population has already enriched itself and turned generally to the right along with a considerable portion of the American upper middle class. To illustrate the point, a *New York Observer* piece in 2003 provided some insight into the aforementioned Alterman's personality and lifestyle.

The *Nation* writer, the article began, “was standing in the middle of Michael's restaurant, the liberal media hangout on West 55th Street in Manhattan ... Mr. Alterman reeked of success. Forty-three years old. Four books under his belt, with bold titles like *Who Speaks for America?* Media columnist for the *Nation* magazine. A Web blogger who is paid by MSNBC.com to write whatever the heck is on his mind every morning. [Alterman parted company with MSNBC in 2006. Vanden Heuvel is a regular on the cable channel's “Hardball with Chris Matthews.”] Degrees from Cornell, Yale and Stanford. Best man at his wedding? George Stephanopoulos [currently ABC News's chief Washington correspondent and formerly Bill Clinton's communications director].”

The *Observer* went on, Alterman “ordered foie gras, the Kobe beef and a glass of pinot noir. Earlier, he'd said he liked his lunches ‘expensive.’ ... That evening Justin Smith, publisher of the magazine the *Week*, was throwing him a dinner party, which would be attended by liberal pals like

Mark Green [former candidate for mayor of New York City], writer Calvin Trillin, the *Nation's* Victor Navasky and even three ex-models." (A hamburger at Michael's, incidentally, according to its current online menu, costs \$33).

The portrait of self-satisfaction and egoism is not an attractive one, but it could be extended, give or take, to wide layers of this little social world. There are many, many 'greater' or 'lesser' Altermans on Manhattan's Upper West Side, in other parts of New York and in equivalent portions of Chicago, Boston, the Bay Area, Los Angeles, Seattle and elsewhere.

These are individuals with well-compensated and well-entrenched positions in the media, academia (Alterman is also a senior fellow at Media Matters for America and the World Policy Institute at the New School, and he teaches at Brooklyn College), think tanks and the trade unions. They are well-connected, they are safely "in the door."

These social circles have done very well for themselves. They have benefited from the boom in the stock market, based in part on the ability of the ruling elite to suppress wages and slash benefits, as well as from the Bush tax cuts. This has markedly eroded their own opposition to these anti-working class policies. A vast intergenerational transfer of wealth has also been taking place, amounting to trillions of dollars, as the parents of the "baby boom" generation die and dispose of their assets.

In his book *American Sucker*, David Denby, film critic for the *New Yorker* magazine, recounted his own midlife crisis and (disastrous) foray into the stock market. He writes about the impact of the market, real estate and profit boom of the 1990s on his social milieu.

"The change was not just financial, it was cultural. Liberals like me had watched with surprise as their residual distaste for capitalism slipped away, turning to grudging tolerance, and then, by degrees, to outright admiration ... If capitalism was 'creative destruction,' in Joseph Schumpeter's famous phrase, destruction, in the age of conglomerate control, had the upper hand in movies. Still, anyone with sense now knew that our economic system was far better than any other. It was certainly making some of us prosperous."

Denby speaks candidly for thousands of former liberals and radicals. For all its limitations, this layer of the population had once held wealth and money-grubbing in contempt. "Business" and "profit" and "speculation" were dirty words for them. Not rich themselves, they had even had connections to the working class.

Now, as gentrification physically drove working class families out of Manhattan and other areas, and the incomes of these complacent liberals soared, their only link to the "labor movement" would be to the trade union bureaucracy, which had undergone a similar social process, enriching and detaching itself from union members and other workers.

David Sirota, a regular contributor to the *Nation*, brings together a number of these strands. A former spokesman for Democrats on the House Appropriations Committee, former press secretary for Vermont's Rep. Bernie Sanders, former fellow at the Center for American Progress, a self-described "Democratic campaign strategist," Sirota is the founding co-chairperson of the Progressive States Network. The latter was set up in 2005 by George Soros's Open Society Institute, Podesta's CAP, the AFL-CIO, the Service Employees International Union, AFSCME and the United Steelworkers to lobby state legislatures on behalf of the union bureaucracy's agenda.

Marc Cooper, a contributing editor at the *Nation*, is another individual with ties to the trade union officialdom. One of the chief red-baiters at the magazine, along with Washington DC editor David Corn (see "'Left' apologists for US imperialism red-bait the antiwar movement"), Cooper has recently written puff pieces about the various Democratic presidential hopefuls speaking before union audiences.

In March, Cooper devoted his efforts to an appearance by Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Bill Richardson before several thousand unionized hotel workers in Las Vegas. In "Clinton and Obama Talk

Union" for the *Nation*, Cooper praised the Democrats for their speeches.

He saved his most fawning comments for his personal web site. A sample: "Obama snagged the clean-up position [at the Las Vegas rally] on the rostrum, and without having a doggie in this race, I have to say he soaked it into the parking lot. This guy is a real natural, so marvelously at ease on the stage, he oozes charisma. I dare say, having now seen him up close, he's even better than Mister Clinton (who was pretty damn good). Obama dedicated his entire speech to celebrating the power of unions."

What could possibly awe Cooper and others about the insignificant likes of a Bill Clinton or a Barack Obama? Since there is no sincerity or serious content to the politicians' words, it must be their power and success, or ability to manipulate, that strikes such a meaningful chord.

In "Laboring for Edwards," a piece for the *Nation* in May, Cooper describes in equally rapturous tones an appearance by John Edwards at a town hall meeting organized by the AFL-CIO in Seattle. Cooper notes that the "wildly enthusiastic crowd of 800 unionists" gave Edwards five standing ovations and adds that the former North Carolina senator "has spent the past two years quietly but meticulously laying the groundwork for becoming labor's candidate, hoping to ride that rail straight to the nomination. He's been walking picket lines, supporting organizing drives and speaking out on union issues."

This is all entirely predictable and pre-scripted. Edwards's name could be removed (and very well may be) and the name of another wealthy Democratic Party politician choosing to play the 'populist' card for opportunist reasons filled in and nothing would change, certainly not in the conditions of wide layers of the population.

Cooper, Nichols, vanden Heuvel and the others are dishonest with themselves and their readers because their function as the journalistic representatives of the well-endowed think tanks, universities, media outlets, trade unions and consulting firms prevents them from dealing objectively and forthrightly with social relationships in America; they can't call things by their proper names.

This better-off section of the middle class is unhappy with the current state of affairs, but long ago lost interest or hope, if it ever had any, in effecting a deep change in American society. These individuals apply pressure on the political process, in the end, to make life more comfortable for themselves and those around them.

In some cases, they have been transformed from radical youths into something quite different; their 'old selves' would be shocked by their 'new selves.' Whatever residual radicalism and opposition they may feel is trumped many times over by their social connections and obligations, which are much more deeply felt than anything else.

Even as radical youth during the New Left era, however, the members of this social layer lacked theoretical depth, indulged in anti-intellectualism and pursued a generally pragmatic and crude political course. Now their efforts contain a large element of *real politik* cynicism. They will accustom themselves, with varying degrees of discomfort, to justifying increasingly swinish acts and individuals.

As their deafening silence over Sheehan's evolution indicates, the *Nation's* writers are most sensitive and hostile to the emergence of a mass movement to the left of the Democrats. What role will they play under those circumstances? David Corn has already pointed the way. In November 2002 on the Fox News Channel, he fingered what host and right-winger Bill O'Reilly termed "a hardcore communist organization" as playing a major role in organizing antiwar rallies. The *Nation's* writers will be vigilant; they will identify any serious left-wing opposition to the powers that be.

To be continued



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