

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

Part three

David Walsh
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This is the third part of a three-part article. Parts one and two appeared on June 18 and June 19.

The *Nation* magazine has a disreputable history. In the late 1930s, as the organ of a section of the American liberal "friends of the Soviet Union," it defended or remained "neutral" on the Moscow Trials and the systematic extermination of socialists conducted in the USSR by the Stalinist regime.

A few years before the purges began, the *Nation's* correspondent Louis Fischer had written: "Stalin...inspires the Party with his will power and calm. Individuals in contact with him admire his capacity to listen and his skill in improving on the suggestions and drafts of highly intelligent subordinates."

In an editorial in its August 22, 1936, issue—commenting on the imminent opening of the first show trial, the onset of a process that would lead over the next several years to the physical elimination of the generation of socialists that had inspired and led the October Revolution—the *Nation* declared: "It was to be expected that under the velvet glove of the new Soviet constitution there would still be the firm outlines of the iron hand. There can be no doubt that dictatorship in Russia is dying and that a new democracy is slowly being born."

"There can be no doubt...." One recent estimate puts at 950,000-1.2 million people the number of those executed in 1937-1938 alone in the USSR, generally after trials lasting 5 to 10 minutes.

Writing of the preposterous charges laid against the Old Bolsheviks on trial, the *Nation's* editors went on, "It is impossible at this time and from this distance to form any judgment of how much basis there is in the grave accusations against Zinoviev, Kamenev and the others who have been indicted."

Masters of the "on the one hand" and "on the other" approach to politics, the *Nation* suggested that "It is unthinkable that the Soviet government should proceed with an open trial unless it has proof of guilt and equally unthinkable that Leon Trotsky should have conspired with agents of fascist Germany to overthrow the Soviet regime." Giving the Stalinist regime and its GPU secret police the benefit of the doubt, in the end the magazine surmised that "there may have been members of the group loosely known as 'Trotskyites' who may have resorted to terrorism and conspiracy."

Fischer, in the same issue of the magazine, extolled the virtues of the new Soviet constitution. Remarkably, Fischer cited recent comments by A. Vyshinsky, the chief prosecutor of the USSR (a former Menshevik, opponent of the October Revolution and inveterate careerist), who was to declare at the end of the first trial of the Old Bolsheviks, "I demand that we shoot the mad dogs—every single one of them!"

Vyshinsky, the *Nation* correspondent wrote, "stated that the first

principles of Soviet court procedure must be public hearings, freedom of discussion, a guaranty of the rights of the accused, equality of all parties in the dispute (even if the state is one of them), and unhampered activity by the defendant's lawyers. The doctrine is new in the Soviet Union. It is part of the democracy which the constitution introduces." This was all cynical fiction.

Trotsky took the measure of the *Nation* and the social forces for which it spoke. Writing of the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, the "oracles of 'liberal' public opinion," he commented in 1938, "They have no ideas of their own." The Depression, he explained, had caught these forces unaware, and they clung to the Soviet Union "like a saving anchor." Trotsky continued, "They had absolutely no independent program of action for the United States; but for that, they were able to cover up their own muddleheadedness with an idealized image of the USSR." This led them to justify or cover up for the Stalinists' massive crimes.

No ideas of their own, no independent program of action, muddleheadedness.... Things continue today as before.

Reading the *Nation* or listening to its leading representatives, as much as anything else, one feels the unseriousness and hollowness of American left liberalism. There is no substance to its views, no serious intellectual grounding to its opposition to the status quo.

The judgments offered by the *Nation's* editorials and columns, although perfectly literate and polished, are intellectually impoverished. Nowhere does the journal attempt to explain the social forces and processes at work in American life, much less present a broader theoretical and historical analysis.

How does its staff explain the startling changes in the US over the past decade and a half? For example, the transformation of the Republican Party into a quasi-theocratic political instrument with a neo-fascist base, the continual lurch rightward (despite the pleas of the *Nation*) of the Democrats, the sustained attacks on constitutional rights, the launching of a drive—supported by both parties—to achieve US global hegemony through the use of America's military superiority?

It offers no serious analysis or explanation. Instead, the *Nation's* staff strives to lull its readers to sleep. On the eve of the 2006 election, the magazine editorialized: "If the Democrats do succeed in winning a majority in the House of Representatives and possibly even in the Senate, then the country has a chance to begin the fundamental task of restoring democracy and the constitutional order that Bush & Co. did so much to desecrate...."

"An off-year congressional election that seemed less than enthralling only a few months ago has morphed into potential opportunity. It might change the flow of politics in ways nobody anticipated. It could suddenly

open political space that has been closed for at least a decade. It could re-energize our imaginations and raise our expectations. This is a big deal. We hope.”

With the Democrats in power in Congress, the war has escalated, the feverish drive by the corporate elite to accumulate vast personal fortunes continues, decent jobs and benefits remain on the chopping block.... None of the *Nation's* wishful thinking has materialized. But the editors and writers are incapable of the sort of self-criticism that would be necessary to call themselves to account. Their socially comfortable position and complacent outlook do not impel them to uncover the most unpleasant or harshest truths.

Bush, the war, social inequality and all the rest are unpleasant, perhaps distressing, to the *Nation* staff—but still relatively minor inconveniences. Daily life is dominated by the ups and downs of electoral, Democratic Party politics; career moves and social status (book deals, academic positions, the availability of fellowships at certain think tanks, promotions or demotions at various journals); the state of the real estate or stock market; the incestuous relations and petty rivalries that such circles always find thrilling.

The *Nation's* writers oppose the war in Iraq, but what is the basis of that opposition? It is entirely subordinated to their relationships to the Democratic Party, the trade union bureaucracy and other institutions and, therefore, as impotent as the congressional Democrats' own.

The party of Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi represents one wing of the ruling elite, whose differences with the Republicans are tactical and secondary. The Democrats' miserable conduct cannot be explained in any other way. In the face of mass opposition to Bush and the war in Iraq, the Democratic Party in Congress has surrendered to or gone along with the administration all down the line.

Certain conclusions need to be drawn: the two parties *agree with one another* on the fundamental strategic questions facing American capitalism. Serious opposition to the war, opposition that goes to the root of the problem, and support for the Democratic Party are mutually exclusive. Cindy Sheehan, along with many others, has discovered this through painful experience.

In the end, the *Nation's* efforts are as narrow and empty as those of the mainstream US media. Like the latter, the left-liberal publication is incapable or unwilling to relate political positions to class issues, or at least the political positions of those individuals it supports or hopes to persuade.

Not that they are unaware of these issues. When muckraking is useful to the *Nation* staff, it can call on certain empirical facts—for example, a recent featured piece painting Hillary Clinton as beholden to powerful corporate interests (“Hillary Inc.,” June 4, 2007).

But no generalized inferences are to be drawn from this. The magazine proceeds from one disastrous episode involving the Democrats to another, skimming the surface, prey to the worst sort of journalistic impressionism. The Clinton piece, for example, concludes, lamely, “Courting elements of the Democratic base while signaling to the corporate right that she won't shake up the system is a tricky juggling act. Even the First Lady of triangulation may not be able to pull it off.”

The left liberals have no coherent or convincing theory of American society. Nichols criticizes the Democrats for their supposed lapses, but continues to support them as a party. What is Nichols's conception of social class in the US? What social tendencies, for example, did Cindy Sheehan represent?

Nichols says nothing about this, preferring banalities: “She was a mom thrust by an ugly circumstance and a lovely faith to the forefront of a movement that was struggling to find its voice.” Now that Sheehan threatens to cut across Nichols's more urgent political commitments, he discards her and hopes she'll be forgotten.

These liberal elements have no serious answers to the social crisis, and

the politics that result is appalling.

Sheehan, on the other hand, begins from the need to end the war, whatever the cost. She is honest, she represents something authentic and healthy, with whatever confusion, about the American working population. Her honesty conflicts with the opportunist agendas of those in and around the Democratic Party who are jockeying for position within the existing political set-up.

Sheehan has seen through some of this. She recognizes as “hilarious” (as she told an interviewer) the notion that MoveOn.org, the liberal Democratic policy outfit, represents the “antiwar left in America.” In her open letter to the Democrats in Congress, which Nichols chooses to ignore, she explains her intention “to try and figure a way out of this ‘two’ party system that is bought and paid for by the war machine which has a stranglehold on every aspect of our lives. As for myself, I am leaving the Democratic Party.”

Sheehan has made an important experience that foreshadows a *far broader* social experience, a decisive break by masses of people with the Democratic Party. Nervousness over this helps explain why the *Nation* is silent on her comments.

Writing in 1938, in his essay entitled “The Priests of Half-Truth,” Trotsky offered this critique of the *Nation* and its political environs: “Their philosophy reflects their own world. By their social nature they are intellectual semi-bourgeois. They feed upon half-thoughts and half-feelings. They wish to cure society by half-measures. Regarding the historical process as too unstable a phenomenon, they refuse to engage themselves more than fifty percent. Thus, these people, living by half-truths, that is to say, the worst sort of falsehood, have become a genuine brake upon truly progressive, i.e., revolutionary thought.

“A *New Masses* [a Stalinist publication] is simply a garbage can which puts people on their guard by its odor. The *Nation* and the *New Republic* are considerably more ‘decent’ and ‘nice’ and less...odorous. But they are all the more dangerous. The best part of the new generation of American intellectuals can proceed on the broad historical highway only on the condition of a complete break with the oracles of ‘democratic’ half-truth.”

If that was true nearly 70 years ago, considering the vast and socially unhealthy transformation the *Nation* and its milieu have undergone, what could one speak of today? One-quarter- or one-eighth-truths? Or less?

Concluded



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