

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

Part one

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This is the first of a three-part article.

On June 2, the *World Socialist Web Site* took note of the fact that a number of US left protest groups and publications were suppressing Cindy Sheehan's May 26 announcement that she was withdrawing from the Democratic Party and her appeal for others to do the same. (See "US antiwar protest groups silent on Cindy Sheehan's resignation from Democratic Party")

The WSWS article referred to the *Nation*, the left-liberal publication, and its Washington correspondent, John Nichols. A number of weeks have now passed and the magazine's leading lights, including Nichols, have still not chosen to discuss Sheehan's rupture with the Democrats.

The mother of a 24-year-old soldier who died in Baghdad in 2004, Sheehan has been a presence in American political life since she took her protest to George Bush's Crawford, Texas ranch in August 2005.

Her May 26 open letter to the Democrats in Congress, following the approval of a further \$100 billion in war funding, was forceful. She wrote: "You think giving him [Bush] more money is politically expedient, but it is a moral abomination and every second the occupation of Iraq endures, you all have more blood on your hands."

In her statement, Sheehan denounced the Democrats' "complicity" and predicted that come autumn, when a progress report on the "surge" in Iraq is due, "Let's face it ... you will give him [Bush] more money after some more theatrics, which you think are fooling the antiwar faction of your party." By that time, she reminded Sen. Harry Reid, Rep. Nancy Pelosi and the others in the Democratic leadership, hundreds more American soldiers will have died, "more lives wasted for your political greed."

Sheehan continued: "How can you even go to sleep at night or look at yourselves in a mirror? How do you put behind you the screaming mothers on both sides of the conflict? How does the agony you have created escape you?... It used to be George Bush's war. You could have ended it honorably. Now it is yours..."

These were strong words.

In an interview May 30 on Amy Goodman's "Democracy Now!" radio program, Sheehan commented, "And if we don't get a viable third party—or some people say second party; you know, the Democrats and Republicans are so similar, and their pockets are lined by the same people ... our representative republic is doomed, where George Bush has assumed all the powers to himself and Congress has given him those powers. And we really need an opposition party in this country."

The silence of the left liberals about Sheehan's statements indicates a crisis. She can say what is, honestly, openly; they cannot.

The response in these quarters has been largely to ignore Sheehan's repudiation of the Democratic Party, while offering her condescending

praise. Nichols has led the way in this effort. He has posted two pieces on the *Nation's* web site: "Cindy Sheehan Calls It Quits" (posted May 29) and "Cindy Sheehan's Farewell" (posted May 31 and published in the June 17 edition of the magazine). Both pieces refer to and cite *only* Sheehan's May 28 statement, "Good Riddance, Attention Whore," in which she expressed weariness and some bitterness over her experiences in the antiwar movement and declared that she was stepping back from her activities.

Isn't it, by any objective standard, politically dishonest of Nichols not to make mention of Sheehan's explicit repudiation of the Democratic Party? Why is it that the *Nation's* correspondent cannot bring himself to discuss her desire to break irrevocably with the Democrats?

Obviously, in the first place, because he doesn't share her view. Nichols makes oblique references to those disagreements in his "Cindy Sheehan's Farewell" piece. He calls her "an honest player who spoke her mind—sometimes intemperately, often imperfectly, always sincerely—and backed up her words with actions."

Nichols carries on in the same patronizing vein, labeling Sheehan a "Jeffersonian Democrat in the best sense of that term" (Nichols should tell us what he considers himself), and adding, "It is reasonable to argue with Sheehan about her read of politics and assessment of politicians. She's the first to admit she's no expert on campaign strategy or legislative tactics."

Nichols may hope that Sheehan's "intemperate" and "imperfect" comments about resigning from the Democratic Party will be forgotten and she will come back into the fold. Whatever the calculations may be, his inability to defend support for the Democrats demonstrates an extraordinary lack of political self-confidence. It is, however, understandable. The willingness of the congressional Democrats, after months of playing games over the issue, to provide Bush with the funds necessary to carry on the criminal conflict in Iraq was a watershed. Sheehan drew certain conclusions, and she was not alone.

The *Nation's* specialty and Nichols's role

It is a specialty of the *Nation* to offer 'left' criticism of Democratic leaders, urge them to do better, and warn them about the consequences of their right-wing course. One of those consequences, however, will never be the magazine's dropping its support for this big business party.

Nichols's particular field of operations is the packaging of various Democratic figures, regardless of their track records, as 'reinvented' and

'remade' men and women. His *modus operandi* involves discovering progressive traits in this or that hack politician.

Most characteristic perhaps was the role he played in 2004 in regard to the candidacy and campaign of John Kerry. After the scuttling of Howard Dean's bid for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, which had been associated with antiwar sentiments, Nichols took it upon himself to present Kerry in the best possible light. His March 22, 2004 article in the *Nation*, "Kerry's Challenge," was a high point of that effort.

Nichols argued in that piece that the Kerry, who began the campaign a "tiresome noncontender," had undergone an "extreme makeover" which had transformed him into a "credible alternative to George W. Bush." Nichols went on to describe "how radical the remake has been" on trade, the war in Iraq and other questions. Referring to the use-of-force resolution on Iraq and the Patriot Act, the *Nation* columnist explained that Kerry, who voted for both reactionary measures, had "learned to savage those initiatives on the campaign trail."

In fact, Kerry's assuring himself the Democratic nomination in early March 2004 meant, as far as the somewhat relieved political and media establishment was concerned, that the war in Iraq had been effectively excluded from the presidential election campaign, as two carefully vetted, pro-war candidates now faced one another.

Nichols's public relations work for Kerry continued throughout 2004. Following the Democrats' national convention in July, the most patriotic and pro-militarist in modern times, Nichols entitled his comment, "Combative Kerry," and asserted that the nominee had "ended things with an appropriately aggressive pummeling of the president." In fact, Kerry's entire campaign, organically incapable of arousing the population, was largely an act of solidarity with the Republicans' right-wing agenda.

Politics is not a game, and what people say and do has consequences. The *Nation* has thousands of readers, presumably looking for political guidance of a generally left-wing character. In his efforts for the Kerry campaign, Nichols was chloroforming public opinion.

On the eve of the 2006 mid-term election, Nichols—"Mr. Before and After"—adopted the same approach. He criticized the Democrats for having "tried very hard to avoid tough issues" during the election campaign, but looked to a brighter future.

"I am excited about a change in the character of the opposition party," he told an interviewer. "And if that happens, we're going to have a very different Congress, a much more interesting Congress. There are some folks who have a very good chance of getting elected and who have promised their constituents that they are going to Washington to do something about this war. If that happens, I think it's going to be a much noisier Congress and a Congress that in many senses will return to what the founders of the republic intended, and that is an institution that checks and balances the executive branch in a way that this Congress has not done."

What a blind and obtuse comment! The circles in and around the *Nation*, comfortably situated professionals with something of a social conscience, pride themselves on their "non-sectarianism." They are the "practical people," "the political realists." In fact, speaking as they do from *within* one section of the establishment, their statements reveal how remote they are from the moods of the population.

Nichols takes Sheehan to task for "her read of politics and assessment of politicians," but what about his own prognoses? How has this potentially "much more interesting congress" turned out?

On June 7 of this year, he was obliged to admit that the American population was showing signs of disgust with both parties. "Unfortunately for Democrats, the voters appear to be in the process of losing confidence in the opposition party to do much better than Bush," he wrote. In fact, only 23 percent of the public approves of the performance of Congress, according to one recent poll.

And that abysmal approval rating is not simply the product of the past

few months. Great numbers of people in November 2006 held their noses and voted for the Democrats, out of hatred for Bush and the war, with a great deal of mistrust and skepticism. Their worst fears have been borne out.

To the extent that Nichols and company believe what they write, they suffer from their own brand of "liberal sectarianism," so distant are they from American social reality.

Nichols moderates for the Democrats

Nichols is no mere outsider looking in. It is worth noting that only a few weeks after the Democrats reassumed control of Congress in 2007, he served as moderator for an event co-hosted in early February by the so-called Congressional Progressive Caucus, the *Nation* and the Institute for Policy Studies. Katrina vanden Heuvel, the magazine's editor and publisher, noted that under Republican rule the liberal Democratic faction, with 69 members "the largest caucus in Congress," had been forced to meet in the Capitol basement, but now had moved its gatherings to the Rayburn House Office Building. Indeed, things are looking up.

In attendance at the Nichols-moderated event were Democratic Party stalwarts such as Reps. Charles Rangel, Barney Frank, Maxine Waters, John Conyers, Dennis Kucinich and others. A great deal of posturing went on at the gathering.

Vanden Heuvel observed, "The room was filled with energy and idealism [!], and it reflected the Caucus' understanding that the Democratic Party's finest hours have come when it has worked alongside popular movements ... that democracy works when citizens are inspired to claim it as their own. One of the caucus members set the tone for the gathering, saying we should all have smiles on our faces—we are kindred spirits who helped to change the course of our country and win the last election. It's a new day for a new way."

The precise proportions of wishful thinking, self-delusion and conscious deception in this comment are not easy to calculate.

The indefatigable Nichols is already at work in advance of the 2008 primary season, offering advice to certain Democratic presidential hopefuls (Barack Obama, Bill Richardson) and shoring up or refurbishing where necessary the images of others.

Nichols seems most supportive of former Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, although clearly he is keeping his options open. (The *Nation* staff is generally cold to New York Senator Hillary Clinton, although it will jump on her bandwagon if she wins the nomination.)

In his familiar manner, Nichols, in a recent piece, chided Edwards for his "lousy plan for addressing hard times in rural America" during the 2004 campaign, but praised the former Democratic vice-presidential candidate for his new approach. "This year, Edwards has done better," the *Nation* columnist tells his readers. Edwards's new plan "lines up the candidate for the 2008 Democratic nomination with working farmers, rather than the big agribusiness interests that his 2003 plan would have aided.... The candidate and his aides have learned a lot since 2003."

And so it goes.

To be continued



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