

The Nation urges Cindy Sheehan not to run for Congress against Nancy Pelosi

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The *Nation* magazine, a leading voice of left-liberalism, has come out in opposition to antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan's decision to run for Congress as an independent against Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi.

Sheehan, whose son Casey was killed in 2004 in Iraq and who set up a protest camp outside George W. Bush's Crawford, Texas ranch in 2005, announced earlier this month that she would contest Pelosi's seat in San Francisco's 8th Congressional District.

In a piece headlined "Dear Cindy: Please Don't Run," posted August 11 on the *Nation's* web site, columnist Katha Pollitt advises Sheehan not to contest the seat on three spurious grounds.

First, Pollitt implies that Sheehan's only complaint against Pelosi is that the latter has failed to push for Bush's removal from office, and asks, "should impeachment really be a litmus test?"

The failure of the Democratic leadership in Congress to press the issue of impeachment may have triggered Sheehan's decision to oppose Pelosi, but it is by no means the only reason for her break with the Democrats, and Pollitt knows this perfectly well. As early as Sheehan's May 26, 2007 open letter to the Democrats in Congress, she explained she was leaving the Democratic Party because of its capitulation over the Bush administration's request for an additional \$100 billion to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is worth recalling that the *Nation*, along with most of the "left" and the mass media, kept silent about Sheehan's letter explaining her rupture with the Democrats. In two comments about Sheehan at the time, the *Nation's* John Nichols referred *only* to her May 28 statement in which she expressed weariness and some bitterness over her experiences in the antiwar movement, and declared that she was temporarily stepping back from her activities.

Pollitt maintains this policy. She refers to Sheehan's "somewhat murky" blog post she wrote in May, announcing her resignation from the antiwar movement, but says nothing about Sheehan's more important letter of resignation from the Democrats.

In a statement officially announcing her candidacy, made at a press conference in San Francisco August 9, Sheehan referred to impeachment only once. Her criticisms of the Democratic Party were of a more general character.

Arguing that the American electorate had placed the Democrats in the majority in Congress out of disgust with the Bush administration, Sheehan declared that Congress, "under the speakership of Ms. Pelosi has done nothing but protect the status quo of the corporate elite and, in fact, since she has been the Speaker, the situation in the Middle East has grown far worse."

Sheehan asserted that "the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer and the middle class is rapidly disappearing along with the 'American dream' of home ownership." She went on: "The PATRIOT Act and Military Commissions Act need to be repealed and habeas corpus needs to be restored. These things can only happen with fearless

leadership, not fearful capitulation to a lying President."

She explained that she was running out of opposition to the "corporate controlled 'two' party system."

Sheehan is raising a critical political issue, however limited her program and perspective may be: that both the Republicans and Democrats speak for the wealthy elite. Since the *Nation* is dedicated to propagating the myth that the Democrats represent something different, a 'progressive,' 'people's' party, Pollitt prefers to make life easier for herself by simply ignoring the contents of Sheehan's arguments.

In any event, Pollitt's attitude toward impeachment is entirely light-minded. She tells her readers, "Sure, it would be emotionally satisfying to haul the president before the Senate—look how much fun the Republicans had with Clinton. I understand why some of my *Nation* colleagues are so keen on it."

The Democrats' failure to pursue impeachment demonstrates their congenital cowardice and their complicity in the crimes of the Bush administration. That the Democrats reject the removal of a president who has systematically violated the US Constitution and numerous laws, launched a war on the basis of lies, arrogated to himself quasi-dictatorial powers and overseen the establishment of the legal and institutional apparatus for a police state exposes their unwillingness and inability to defend basic democratic rights.

In fact, however, the decay of the democratic processes cannot be halted by means of impeachment, which would merely alter the leading personnel of a political system that answers exclusively to the demands of a financial oligarchy.

Pollitt's second argument against Sheehan is equally worthless. She claims that "Sheehan's run is futile." Since, according to Pollitt, Sheehan "has no chance of defeating" Pelosi, she shouldn't bother running. What is one to make of such reasoning?

In the first place, as Sheehan has pointed out, "A great majority of citizens in California's 8th Congressional district want the Bush regime impeached and want our troops home from the Middle East." In November 2004, some 64 percent of San Francisco's voters supported a local ballot measure to withdraw US troops from Iraq. Two years later, 59.4 percent of the city's voters supported a measure calling for the impeachment of Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. Pelosi has defied both votes, facilitating the passage of funding for the Iraq war and refusing to call for Bush's removal.

However, whether Sheehan has a serious prospect of winning the election or not is a secondary matter. What type of political figure supports a candidate only when he or she stands a good chance of success? The type that makes up the editorial staff of the *Nation*: well-heeled, complacent, opportunist. Matters of principle mean little or nothing to such people, and fighting against the stream is unthinkable.

Pollitt speaks about the contest for the 8th Congressional district as if her and the *Nation's* own role do not come into play. The magazine, after all, is a link in the chain of causation. If the *Nation* were to throw its

support behind Sheehan, that would have a certain impact, particularly in a city like San Francisco.

In fact, Pollitt and the magazine's staff as a whole are supporting Pelosi against Sheehan, although they don't care to say this explicitly. Pollitt writes, "Pelosi has been a cautious—too cautious—leader, and if a lefter candidate could take her seat, fine." But it's clearly not "fine," because Pollitt is advising Sheehan, someone who enjoys considerable popular support, to desist from opposing the House speaker.

It is a favorite line of the *Nation* that Pelosi and company have been overly 'cautious' in their opposition to Bush. As John Nichols commented delicately, "Pelosi is a war critic, but she has never gone to the mat on the issue."

The reality is otherwise. The Democrats in Congress were politically complicit in the preparations for war in Iraq and the March 2003 invasion itself, and they remain complicit in the ongoing neo-colonial occupation.

As Sheehan has noted, the escalation of the war has taken place *since* the Democrats regained a majority in Congress and was only made possible by their collaboration. They are critical of the Bush administration's tactics, particularly since the results have been so obviously disastrous, but they have no disagreement with the "global war on terror," a phrase that conceals the American ruling elite's drive for world domination. They propose shifting the main battlefield to Afghanistan or elsewhere, while maintaining tens of thousands of US troops in Iraq to safeguard American control over its oil supplies.

The reverence evidenced by left-liberal circles for Pelosi is a sign of their right-wing orientation. 'A Democratic speaker of the House, and the first woman in the job!' The fact that Pelosi is a multi-millionaire supporter of American imperialism and militarism, who voted for the Patriot Act and supported Bush's program of warrantless wire-tapping, doesn't faze Pollitt or her colleagues terribly much.

The *Nation's* immediate task is to sanitize whichever one of the right-wing candidates gains the Democratic Party 2008 presidential nomination and present him or her to its readership in "left" colors. The editorial staff's distaste for Hillary Clinton—or, more precisely, fears about her lack of credibility due to her reactionary track record—will not prevent them from climbing on board Clinton's campaign band-wagon should she be the chosen nominee.

Pollitt's third argument against Sheehan's candidacy, if examined carefully, highlights some of the class issues involved in the conflict between the *Nation* and Sheehan. In the patronizing fashion that is the wont of the upper-middle-class snobs who publish the magazine, Pollitt writes: "Most important, Sheehan already has a crucial role in our politics: as an activist. More than any other single person, she changed the discourse about the war. She put a middle American face on the antiwar movement at a time when it was widely caricatured as a ragtag collection of hippies, Stalinists, and movie stars."

Pollitt continues: "No matter that she sometimes seemed to be conducting her political education in public. She was a mother wrenched out of her ordinary life by tragedy—that is a very powerful and inspiring symbolic role. ... Still, the place for symbolic protest is in protest movements. Elections are about something else and are played by different rules. There, symbolic figures are mostly wasting their time, and tend to emerge smaller than they went in."

In other words, Sheehan should leave politics to her betters. The condescension, still polite in tone at this point, contains an immense amount of hostility. From now on, Sheehan is someone, as far as the *Nation* is concerned, with a target on her back. Her candidacy, far from being "futile" and "symbolic," threatens to put a spotlight on the bankruptcy of the two-party system and might encourage a dangerous breach in the present set-up. Pollitt's intervention is something of a preemptive strike.

The *Nation* and its writers speak for a privileged layer of American

society, which views the ascension of the Democrats as desirable for the advancement of its own interests. Sheehan reflects something different, the growth of antiwar and left-wing sentiment within the working population, and an increasing alienation from the two-party system.

After coming in for criticism for her comments from some readers, Pollitt returned to the Sheehan question on the *Nation's* web site August 20. Flippant in the face of a war that has produced the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the columnist now says about Sheehan's decision, "Really, what's the harm?" But she doesn't mean this either, as the piece goes on to demonstrate.

About campaigns such as Sheehan is undertaking, she observes, "But beyond generating (maybe) a few headlines and offering likeminded voters a chance to raise a fist in the air, what is achieved? Is an organization built? Is the ground prepared for a more powerful bid next time? Are ideas put into the political discourse that weren't there before? Is the winner pushed to the left? Too often, in fact almost always, the answer to these questions is no."

In the first place, if an antiwar candidate runs in California's 8th District, someone who denounces the corporate control of both parties, against a leading Democrat, then, yes, this might at the very least put ideas "into the political discourse that weren't there before." It is to Sheehan's credit that she has chosen to run as an independent against Pelosi.

The notion that the only purpose of an independent political campaign would be to push one of the existing parties or politicians "to the left" simply lays bare Pollitt's politics: utter prostration before the two-party system. The *Nation* staff is unable to conceive of the world without the Democratic Party. This is not merely an ideological problem, or the result of a lack of political imagination. This layer is tied to the Democrats by a thousand social and financial threads.

As part of its campaign against Sheehan's candidacy, the *Nation* is operating an online poll of its readers, asking "Should Cindy Sheehan be challenging Nancy Pelosi in the '08 race?" But the reader is not offered the choice of answering Yes or No to this question. Instead he or she is only permitted to select one of these options: "Absolutely. Someone needs to hold Pelosi accountable for taking impeachment off the table," "Sure. The whole process is a circus anyway; we might as well add another sideshow," "No way. Sheehan already has a crucial role to play as an activist," "I'm sick of Sheehan. Didn't she retire from politics?"

The questions reek of cynicism and unseriousness, and an unquestioning acceptance of the existing political set-up.



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