

An interview with antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan

David Walsh
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Cindy Sheehan suffered a devastating blow when she lost her 24-year-old son Casey in the Iraq war in April 2004. A little over a year after this tragedy, in August 2005, Sheehan came to prominence when she set up an antiwar camp outside George W. Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas. The month-long protest focused the attention of large numbers of people, in the US and around the world, on the human cost of the neocolonial invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Sheehan's protest both helped shift US public opinion and obliged the media to acknowledge what they had taken great efforts to conceal: the existence of widespread opposition to the Iraq war within the American population.

As she has explained, Sheehan became the "darling" of the liberal left and sections of the Democratic Party as long as she attacked and embarrassed only the Bush administration. Once the Democrats regained majorities in both houses of Congress in the November 2006 election, however, the situation changed.

Brought to power largely as the result of opposition to the Iraq war, the Democrats, led by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, made clear from the outset that they would neither cut off funding for the war nor pursue impeachment proceedings against Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.

When the Democrats in Congress, after months of playacting, finally capitulated to Bush in May 2007 and facilitated the authorization of an additional \$100 billion to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Sheehan was outraged. In an open letter May 26 to the congressional Democrats announcing her departure from that party, 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."

Sheehan's announcement of her break with the Democrats was greeted with silence or hostility in liberal left circles. The Nation magazine attempted to ignore it, while others, like the Daily Kos and Democratic Underground, attacked her comments.

In July, Sheehan helped organize a "Caravan for Humanity," a cross-country protest against the war and congressional complicity with Bush. She made it known that if Speaker of the House Pelosi had not put impeachment "back on the table" by the time the protest reached Washington DC on July 23, she would announce her candidacy as an independent in Pelosi's San Francisco district.

On July 23, Sheehan and others visited Rep. John Conyers at his office and again urged the issue of impeachment. When the Michigan Democrat refused to consider the matter, Sheehan and her colleagues staged a sit-in; Conyers promptly called the police. (See "Iraq war opponent Cindy Sheehan arrested at Democratic Congressman's office")

Sheehan officially announced her candidacy against Pelosi August 9 in San Francisco. Two days later, Katha Pollitt in the Nation attacked Sheehan (See "The Nation urges Cindy Sheehan not to run for Congress against Nancy Pelosi"), deriding her effort as "futile." She

condescendingly suggested Sheehan should remain an "activist." A second piece in the Nation, by Gary Younge, also took Sheehan to task for challenging Pelosi.

In a letter to the magazine's editor, Katrina vanden Heuvel, Sheehan noted that the magazine had once feted her, but now was "supporting a 'pro-war' Speaker of the House [Pelosi], who says she is against the occupation with her mouth but gives George more money to wage the war with her actions."

Most recently, on August 30, Katha Pollitt returned to the subject in the Nation, posting a venomous piece, accusing Sheehan of writing an "outraged and self-righteous response to my mild and polite posts." Pollitt, continuing in her patronizing fashion, wonders out loud "how she [Sheehan] will withstand the rigors of political campaigning."

David Walsh spoke to Cindy Sheehan on August 31.

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DW: What had been your political experience, if any, before the Iraq war began and the death of your son in 2004?

Cindy Sheehan: I just voted. It was my son's death that got me started. Even though I disagreed with the war, I didn't do any activism or anything until Casey died.

DW: What was your attitude toward the war when it began?

CS: We disagreed with it, my entire family did, even Casey. But I wasn't plugged in to any kind of mechanism for protesting or whatever, because my whole life revolved around my children and my job. I didn't protest it until Casey died. Of course I regret that.

DW: What was your job at the time?



Cindy Sheehan at recent antiwar protest

CS: When Casey died, I had just gotten a job working for the county of Napa [California] doing eligibility for Medicare. My main job after we moved to Vacaville [50 miles northeast of San Francisco] in 1993 was to be a youth minister, so I was a coordinator of youth ministry at St. Mary's Church for eight years. It's a Catholic Church.

DW: Can you speak about your experiences over the past three years, with the Democratic Party, the antiwar movement and the Left?

CS: I was involved in the antiwar movement about a year before I went to Crawford, Texas. In the 2004 campaign I campaigned against George W. Bush—I never campaigned for John Kerry, but I did campaign against George Bush. Then, after the elections, I founded Gold Star Families for Peace and just started being very busy going around the country, speaking. I started writing around that time.

On June 16, 2005, I was involved in the hearings that [Michigan Democratic Rep.] John Conyers held in the basement of the Capitol, hearings on the Downing Street minutes [minutes of the July 23, 2002 meeting of the UK Labour government, which discussed the build-up to war and suggested that “the intelligence and facts were being fixed” to justify a US invasion and the removal of Saddam Hussein].

[Ambassador] Joe Wilson testified about the yellow cake uranium [the alleged attempt, exposed as a fraud, by the Hussein regime to purchase yellow cake uranium from Niger]. [Former CIA analyst] Ray McGovern testified about the cooked intelligence part of it. I testified about the human cost of the lies and what happened. John Bonifaz testified about the Constitutional issues, he’s a Constitutional lawyer.

Shortly after that, about six weeks after that, I went to Crawford. Even though a lot of people in the activist community knew who I was, had read my writings and corresponded with me—I was very busy, three weeks out of the month I was speaking somewhere—on August 6 when I went to the Bush ranch, that was when I became internationally and nationally known for my work.

Before Camp Casey in Crawford, I was working in Congress, I was working with members of Congress like John Conyers, Dennis Kucinich, Lynn Woolsey, Maxine Waters, Barbara Lee, Jim McGovern and Jim McDermott, so I had already been working with the progressive members of Congress, I already had a good relationship with Ron Paul from Texas. I had some experience on the Hill.

But after Camp Casey, that’s when it seemed the Congressional Progressive Caucus, including John Conyers, people like Charlie Rangel, they wanted me at their events, to promote their events, to get their pictures taken with me. I was very supportive of John Conyers when he introduced his articles of impeachment last year, when the Democrats were still in the minority. In his book, *The Constitution in Crisis*, he even talks about me.

So when the Democrats became the majority ... I knew we were still going to have to work really hard with Congress and in opposition to Congress, but I had hoped that we would be a little farther along than we were with the Republican Congress, so obviously that was very ... I don’t want to say ‘naïve,’ because I knew that things wouldn’t change just because the Democrats came to power, but I was hopeful.

I had three meetings with John Conyers before July 23, when we had the sit-in at his office about impeachment. And when Nancy Pelosi took impeachment off the table before they were even elected in November of ’06 I was really disheartened; when they voted to give George Bush more money for the war I was very disheartened. That’s when I decided to challenge Nancy Pelosi.

It was after I had retired in May and came back in July after George Bush commuted Scooter Libby’s sentence, and decided to support my friend Rev. Lennox Yearwood [an Air Force reservist] because he was going to be charged by the Air Force with being a threat to national security because of his antiwar activities, particularly related to working with me.

So I just had an idea during our cross-country Caravan for Humanity that if Nancy Pelosi didn’t put impeachment back on the table by the time I got to DC on the 23rd I would run against her. That’s where we are right now.

DW: Since your campaign began several years ago, what kind of response have you gotten from military families, or from soldiers who have returned from Iraq or who are still in Iraq?

CS: I’ve been very supportive of Iraq Veterans Against the War, and they have been supportive of me. It’s still probably running five to one when I hear from a vet or an active-duty soldier in support of me. They don’t want to be there. They understand that they’re being abused and used by their commander in chief.

Many of them, like my son, joined before George Bush was president or joined before 9/11, as a commitment and a service to their country and feel like their commitment is being exploited. I have a lot of support from veterans, from the Iraq war, the Vietnam war, every war back to World War II.

DW: What about the argument that you now hear from all segments of the political establishment, that the US can’t withdraw from Iraq because there would be a bloodbath?

CS: I guess I’m unusual because I’ve been to Jordan twice now to talk to Iraqis specifically about that, parliamentarians, intellectuals, doctors, leading citizens, regular citizens, and they all want the US to leave because they think the violence will be alleviated when the US leaves. I don’t think it matters what Americans think, it’s what the people of Iraq want. The last poll I saw said 80 percent of Iraqis want the US to withdraw, they want the occupation to end.

DW: After your comments toward the end of May about the Democratic Party, what has been your experience?

CS: I found that people who had previously supported me were very vocal in opposition to leaving the Democratic Party. People like the *Daily Kos*, people like Democratic Underground. And then when I decided to run against Nancy Pelosi, the Progressive Democrats of America, whose board I’m on, said they couldn’t support me, and Democrats.com. It just seems really weird, because I’m the same person saying the exact same things as I was before I became unaffiliated with any party. I’m the same person with the same goals, doing the same things and saying the same things.

The *Nation* magazine has been supportive of me since March 2005. I think they exploited me and my popularity several times along the way. Now I think the editorials they’ve published are undermining my candidacy. That angers me. I feel like asking: do you care about the Democrats or do you care about democracy? These people who only care about the Democrats, I don’t think they care about democracy.

DW: What sort of response have you received since you announced your candidacy?

CS: There are two different aspects to that. One, nationally, the response has been running very positively. I’ve just had a few people personally contact me who said that they thought it was a bad idea what I was doing.

In San Francisco, it’s been almost overwhelmingly positive. I’ve only gotten two emails from people who support Nancy Pelosi. She’s very vulnerable in the 8th District in California. It’s not too well known nationally how vulnerable she is there. Two-thirds of the people there want George Bush and Dick Cheney impeached. Three-quarters, maybe even more, want the troops to come home. And she’s done some very shady things such as the privatizing of the Presidio and some real estate deals that her family is involved in, that has made her very vulnerable in that district.

San Francisco has a very sophisticated and intelligent electorate that understands the deep issues, that understands that, yes, we have to impeach George Bush and Dick Cheney, and, yes, we have to bring our troops home, but we have to take on the underlying problems also, of US imperialism, corporatism, the special interests that seem to run our political system in the US, and not the people.

DW: How have your own views about politics and society evolved over these several years, and what are they now?

CS: I was a history major at UCLA. Even when you’re in advanced history classes, you don’t get the true history of America. What we’ve done to people. I always thought that America was ... I never thought

America was the greatest country on earth, but it was a good country, and I thought that mostly our government did good, and tried to do good. But since my son died I've gone on this campaign not only raising awareness in America about the Iraq war, but about the reasons that we have war, and about our military-industrial complex.

I thought there was a distinct difference between Democrats and Republicans, now I know that if there is a difference it's very slim, it's a very small difference. We have really courageous Democrats, but for the most part, we have a one-party system. Gore Vidal calls it the bankers' party, I call it the war party.

I think the 'corporatocracy' is what runs our country, and not democracy. Because I believe that the politicians, they do what the special interests want to happen, and not what the people want to happen. If the politicians did what the people wanted, we would be already be in the middle of impeachment proceedings, or maybe even finished with them by now.

I have gone on a steep learning curve, about US imperialism, militarism and subjects like that. I truly believe in the people of America. If we are educated correctly and well-informed, we do make the right decisions. We've seen a sea change in this country from 80 percent of the population supporting the war to almost three-quarters of the people opposing the war.

We see now in America where the middle class has the highest debt ever, the middle class is disappearing. All our good jobs, our union jobs, our manufacturing jobs, mostly have gone overseas. People have to work just to keep their heads above water.

Before Casey was killed, before I got the job at the county, I had three jobs, so we could have health insurance. I think if we are well-informed, we do make the right decisions.

DW: There are two Americas. There's the America of George Bush and Dick Cheney, the bankers and generals, and there's the America of ordinary people who have no interest in making war.

CS: There's the established elite, and there's us.

We have so many factors, the media, the consumerism that the media fosters keeps us in debt, keeps us working and not able to go out to the protests, and not able to change things, to make a fundamental change. Not just superficial changes. I think many people in America understand about the superficial changes that need to be made, but they're not quite sophisticated enough about the fundamental changes that need to be made.

The media has played a big part in the dumbing down of America, the corporate media, that are run by the same people that profit off the war. It's very insidious. This has been going on especially for the last two or three decades, since Reagan in particular, and we wake up, and we have George Bush.

I've often said George Bush isn't the problem. I've called him the boil on the ass of democracy. We lance the boil, and what's going to happen? Another boil's going to pop up. We have to cure the condition that causes the boil. A fundamental condition, this sick cancer we have ... Some people think, all we have to do is elect Hillary Clinton and our problems will be solved. They really don't understand.

DW: You've spoken about the two-party system and the need to have some kind of change, what kind of party or movement do you envisage as an alternative?

CS: Since Camp Casey in August of '05 I've been able to travel the world and meet with parliamentarians, meet with presidents, vice presidents, ministers of different countries all over the world, to become acquainted with their systems. I really like the parliamentary system where you can belong to a party that represents your beliefs, your core values and your interests. You can belong to Green parties, labor parties, socialist parties, communist parties, and it makes everybody feels like they have a part in the government and they have a say, and that they're enfranchised.

The two-party system disenfranchises everybody, even people who vote. They only represent the special interests and not the people. I don't identify with the Democratic Party, I don't identify with the Republican Party, I don't identify with the Green Party, so where does that leave me. Voting for lesser of two evils? No, I like the coalition governments. I wish the people of America would have the courage to really explore having different parties. I think having a lot of parties in this country would be a good thing.

I would like to have a party that I could identify with. Like a people's peace party, or something like that, which could really have some kind of say in the political dialogue, in the political discourse, in the decisions, that would be awesome.

DW: What is your attitude toward the *Nation* and its attitude toward you at this point?

CS: It's really interesting. I was listening to a progressive radio station in San Francisco the other day. A man was on who had written an article that the *Nation* had commissioned about how [US Senator] Diane Feinstein and her husband are profiting off the war. The *Nation* commissioned that, and then they wouldn't run it.

Their excuse was 'Diane Feinstein is going to win in California no matter what, and we don't want to lose any influence on her.' Right after the elections, Katrina vanden Heuvel wrote an editorial praising Feinstein and saying what a wonderful female leader she was in the Senate. Clearly, this guy was saying, vanden Heuvel is rich, she's part of the establishment and she has a stake in keeping the status quo going. So I thought that was very similar to the situation I was in, with the *Nation*.

Katrina vanden Heuvel in her letter to me said, 'this was a debate,' blah, blah, blah. I think that what they've done with those two articles is really undermine my candidacy, without explicitly saying 'we endorse Pelosi.'

DW: Now the Bush administration is intent on launching a new war with Iran.

CS: That really distresses me. The last funding bill the Democrats tried to attach a proviso saying if we give you this funding, you'll have to come back to Congress to get authorization to invade Iran, and George Bush said, 'No,' so the Democrats just took it out.

Over the last seven years that George Bush has been president, Congress has been very busy invalidating itself, and that's one of the things I thought that when the Democrats regained both houses of Congress would change. I thought they would be more courageous and more strident in opposing George Bush. That's what I hoped for, and we've seen that this hasn't been the case.



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