

SHEEHAN'S INFALLIBILITY WAS CONFERRED BY THE RIGHT

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The minions of the political right have vilified en masse those who criticize the Bush administration and its conduct of the war in Iraq. An essential rhetorical ploy that they have used is the establishment of a halo of sacrosanctity around the troops, calling every soldier who is simply performing his or her duty a hero. Since recent decades have seen a general debasement of the word "hero," this ploy has been so effective that it has coopted even those who oppose the war. Thus, the statement "I support the troops" has become de rigueur in speeches about the war, even if it is followed by the word "but."

This blind adoration of the troops has been accompanied by a celebration of their families who are lionized for their—allegedly willing—sacrifice of their loved ones on the altar of duty.

Therefore, when any of these family members fails to play his or her assigned role in this fantasy scenario, the reaction of the right is especially vindictive and vitriolic.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the reactions to Cindy Sheehan.

Sheehan, whose son Casey was a soldier killed in Iraq in April 2004, is a co-founder of Gold Star Families for Peace, an anti-war coalition of those who have lost family members to the war.

Although Sheehan had reservations about the war from the beginning, she did not become energized into activism until her son's death and her subsequent meeting in June 2004, with other families of fallen soldiers, which prompted her rally against what she later described as an out of touch and unfeeling President Bush.

She began participating in anti-war demonstrations in the fall of 2004, but it was not until she testified before Michigan representative John Conyers's renegade Judiciary Committee hearing on the "Downing Street memo" in June 2005 and organized a vigil outside the president's Crawford ranch in August of that same year that she was catapulted emphatically into national prominence.

Then the right waded in furiously: G. Gordon Liddy called her anti-Semitic; Rush Limbaugh questioned the legitimacy of her son's death; and Ann Coulter ultimately complained about her aura of testimonial infallibility (an infallibility, by the way, which initially had been conferred on her and others like her by the right itself).

Thus, Sheehan's anti-war activism has cost her not only her marriage but also her immunity from the mindless assaults of the right-wing attack dogs.

Consequently, her every gesture is now scrutinized for evidence to discredit her. Hence, when she was seen on primary election night socializing with Georgia representative Cynthia McKinney, with whom she has become friendly through their shared anti-war activities, she was criticized, heaven forbid, for smiling. The smile was construed as amnesia regarding the tragedy of her son's death instead of as a sign that she has adopted the healthy coping mechanism of devoting herself to a cause that honors the death more deeply than what Hamlet calls "the trappings and suits of woe."

In addition, in the reactions to Sheehan, there is more than a little misogyny and anti-feminism. After all, Nancy Reagan is not scorned for smiling when she campaigns for medical research: she is too iconically the good wife and woman.

Whether one agrees with Sheehan or not, one should applaud her resilience and dedication. Otherwise, we will expect all bereaved persons to emulate Hawthorne's the Reverend Mr. Hooper in his adoption for life of the affectation of a black veil.