

Farewell to the anti-war movement's imperfect heroine



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This year on Memorial Day, Gold Star mother and activist Cindy Sheehan resigned from the peace movement.

In an open letter to the anti-war community and to the public at large, Sheehan said, "I am going to take whatever I have left and go home. I am going to go home and be a mother to my surviving children and try to regain some of what I have lost."

What she has lost and cannot regain, first and foremost, is her son Casey who was killed in Iraq in 2004 and whose memory sent Sheehan on a mission to end the war. During the ensuing three years, she also saw the end of her 29-year marriage, her mother had a stroke and Sheehan herself became seriously ill. Her finances are apparently in ruin as well.

I'm torn about seeing her go. On one hand, I confess to being

impressed by some of her actions. On the other, I admit I sometimes cringed at what she did and said.

Sheehan began her ascendancy into the public spotlight when Casey died on April 4, 2004. By the following summer, Sheehan inspired me by camping out in Crawford, Texas, trying to get George Bush to leave his extended vacation long enough to answer for the death of her son and all the other lives lost in Iraq.

I gave serious thought to answering her call for people to join her at Camp Casey, the peace encampment she set up there. Thousands did and the world watched. A groundswell of international attention and support earned Sheehan two now well-worn handles, as the face of the anti-war movement and the darling of the left.

But as time went on, I often wished she were the beneficiary of good advice from someone adept at handling the pressures of being on the world stage. But who? No one seems to be able to consistently handle it well, no matter how honorable and dignified, no matter how well-prepared.

It's no wonder that an unsuspecting regular person, catapulted quite by accident to the lead spot on the evening

news night after night, was not able to always conduct herself the way we on the sidelines might have wished.

I remember her being interviewed on National Public Radio. If ever there was an opportunity to address an audience that would give her a fair hearing, that was it. But on the air she argued with the interviewer and didn't seem to understand that behind the reporter lay millions of people and her opportunity to persuade and motivate them.

At some point, Sheehan started dishing out harsh words for people besides George Bush, eventually including a number of Democrats. Already eviscerated by the right, she lost support from the left as she targeted some of its own.

Late last month, resigning from it all, Sheehan said, "I have tried to work within a peace movement that often puts personal egos above peace and human life. This group won't work with that group . . . It's hard to work for peace when the very movement that is named after it has so many divisions."

She's right. The very nature of the left, that everyone is welcome and that free speech is paramount, can make for messy politics.

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Cindy Sheehan was courageous, she was propelled by her heart - for good and for ill - and she spoke truth to power. She highlighted the plight of grieving families who have lost their young people to this war and in doing so expanded the nation's - the world's - conversation about the war.

She didn't do it perfectly, but she did it. I honor her attempt and her sacrifice. I wish her a restorative, peaceful rest out of the public eye.

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