

AUGUST 17

Blaming the anti-war messengers

The surge of antiwar voices in U.S. media this month has coincided with new lows in public approval for what pollsters call President Bush's "handling" of the Iraq war. After more than two years of a military occupation that was supposed to be a breeze after a cakewalk into Baghdad, the war has become a clear PR loser. But an unpopular war can continue for a long time – and one big reason is that the military-industrial-media complex often finds ways to blunt the effectiveness of its most prominent opponents.

Right now, the pro-war propaganda arsenal of the world's only superpower is drawing a bead on Cindy Sheehan, who now symbolizes the USA's antiwar grief. She is a moving target, very difficult to hit. But right-wing media sharpshooters are sure to keep trying.

The Bush administration's top officials must be counting the days until the end of the presidential vacation brings to a close the Crawford standoff between Camp Casey and Camp Carnage. But media assaults on Cindy Sheehan are just in early stages.

While the president mouths respectful platitudes about the grieving mother, his henchmen are sharpening their media knives and starting to slash. Pro-Bush media hit squads are busily spreading the notions that Sheehan is a dupe of radicals, naive and/or nutty. But the most promising avenue of attack is likely to be the one sketched out by Fox News Channel eminence Bill O'Reilly on Aug. 9, when he declared that Cindy Sheehan bears some responsibility for "other American families who have lost sons and daughters in Iraq who feel that this kind of behavior borders on treasonous."

That sort of demagoguery is on tap for the duration of the war. Military families will be recruited for media appearances to dispute the patriotism of antiwar activists – especially those who speak as relatives of American soldiers and shatter media stereotypes by publicly urging withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

So far, during this war, President Bush is leaving the defamation chores to his surrogate media fighters. But loud noises coming from the right wing today are echoes of key themes that other presidents eagerly voiced.

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During the mid-1960s, as President Lyndon Johnson escalated the Vietnam War, he grew accustomed to trashing Americans who expressed opposition. They were prone to be shaky and irresolute, he explained – and might even betray the nation's servicemen. "There will be some Nervous Nellies," he predicted on May 17, 1966, "and some who will become frustrated and bothered and break ranks under the strain. And some will turn on their leaders and on their country and on our fighting men."

Delivering a speech in mid-March 1968, President Johnson contended that as long as the foe in Vietnam "feels that he can win something by propaganda in the country – that he can undermine the leadership – that he can bring down the government – that he can get something in the Capital that he can't get from our men out there – he is going to keep on trying."

LBJ's successor Richard Nixon was quick to brandish similar innuendos. "Let us be united for peace," Nixon said early in his presidency. "Let us be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that."

Martin Luther King Jr. found that former allies could become incensed when he went out of his way to challenge the war. In his "Beyond Vietnam" speech delivered at New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, King called the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." From Vietnam to South Africa to Latin America, he said, the U.S. was "on the wrong side of a world revolution." King asked why the U.S. was suppressing revolutions "of the shirtless and barefoot people" in the Third World, instead of supporting them.

That kind of talk drew barbs and denunciations from media quarters that had applauded his efforts to end racial segregation. Time magazine called the speech "demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi." The Washington Post warned that "King has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country, his people."

When the Gulf War began, snappy phrases like "blame America first" were a popular way to vilify dissenters. "What we cannot be proud of, Mr. Speaker, is the unshaven, shaggy-haired, drug culture, poor excuses for Americans, wearing their tiny, round wire-rim glasses, a protester's symbol of the blame-America-first crowd, out in front of the White House burning the American flag," Representative Gerald B. H. Solomon said on Jan. 17, 1991.

During a typical outburst in early 2003 before the Iraq invasion, Rush Limbaugh told his radio audience: "I want to say something about these antiwar demonstrators. No, let's not mince words, let's call them what they are – anti-American demonstrators." Weeks later, former Congressman Joe Scarborough, a Republican rising through the

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ranks of national TV hosts, said on MSNBC: "These leftist stooges for anti-American causes are always given a free pass. Isn't it time to make them stand up and be counted for their views, which could hurt American troop morale?"

Such poisonous sludge is now pouring out of some mass media – and we should expect plenty more in response to a growing antiwar movement.

This article is adapted from Norman Solomon's new book
"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."
For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com

