

Casualties of War: Camp Casey and New Orleans

Sept. 4, 2005

By Starhawk

When Katrina hit, I was at Camp Casey in Crawford, Texas, where I had gone to support Cindy Sheehan, the Gold Star mother who encamped outside of Bush's ranch to demand a meeting so she could ask him one simple question, "What noble cause did my son die for?" Cindy is a formidable woman, a fearless woman because she has already lost what she most loved.

Loss and grief are powerful forces. Camp Casey was full of those who had suffered the real losses of the Bush administrations' war on Iraq, the families of soldiers, returning veterans, Gold Star Mothers who had lost a child in Iraq.' Along the roadside stood a vast field of crosses to represent the dead. Across the road, a small encampment of pro-war counter-demonstrators would gather each day. They didn't stay overnight. On our side, we camped in a ditch, in the hundred and five degree heat, itching from sweat and chigger bites. The counter-protestors shouted slogans and drove up and down the road in cars decorated with signs proclaiming their love for Bush, honking. David, my partner, a veteran of the civil rights movement and a draft resistor in Vietnam, thought they needed some lessons in taunting. He's been taunted by better in his time-the outfront racists, the fanatic anti-communists. The worst our counter demonstrators mustered was a sign saying, "The Sixties are over-why don't you go home!" "Someone on our side countered with a sign reading, "The Fifties are over-why don't YOU go home?"

Bush and his allies are experts at manufacturing emotion, whipping up fear, exploiting the dead. But here the air was permeated by real and personal loss. "You have to understand," the woman said to me. "My mother does not go out. She doesn't leave the house." Her mother, standing next to her, nodded in agreement. We were outside the big tent where the rally was being held, at Camp Casey Two, up the road from our campsite. "But I told her, you have to come. You have to see this."

The woman was blond, late thirties, conservatively dressed, in a big sunhat . She spoke with a Texas accent, and she and her mother looked like archetypal Republicans.

"Nothing looks prettier than a young man in a uniform," she said, smiling sadly "but when you look at what's underneath, it's not so pretty." Her brother had come back from the first Gulf War, mentally and emotionally shattered, and had never recovered.

And that's what drew her mother out, to gather with others who had also lost real children, real lives.

I told her about Billy, the son of my best friend from junior high school. Mary and I played with paper dolls and screamed for the Beatles and went wild together in the

Sixties. She was the first of my friends to get pregnant, when we were nineteen, and I helped her through the stress of telling her ultraconservative family, her hasty marriage and messy divorce. Then we lost touch for many years. I remember Billy as a sweet two-year-old with angelic curls. He grew up to be the second soldier across the line in the first Gulf War. I reconnected with Mary shortly after he took a gun to the beach and shot himself, one of the thousands of uncounted casualties, suicides, chronically ill, lefovers from that adventure.

The homeless shelters and the cold streets are still filled with men of my own generation, the living ghosts of Vietnam. Meanwhile veterans' services are being cut back, hospitals closed. My aunt and uncle from the communist side of the family worked all their lives for the VA, proudly, because as my aunt said it was the closest thing to socialism in this country. They enjoyed providing free treatment for people. Perhaps that is why the same warmongers, so eager to create new casualties, refuse to adequately fund their ongoing care.

The people at Camp Casey talked about 'being on someone else's mission,' about 'chains of command' and 'getting orders from above', which they agreeably followed. "This place is run like the military," one of my friends remarked. "We are the military," was the answer. They were indeed the military, the people in this country most directly affected by the reality of war, Gold Star Mothers who had lost a child in Iraq, returning veterans, Veterans for Peace, military families. They wore cowboy hats and spoke in real Texas accents: Bush's natural base, in rebellion not at the concept of authority but at his misuse and abuse of the authority entrusted to him.

Most people there were from Texas, many of them surprised and delighted to meet other Texans who opposed the war. A whole contingent was from Louisiana, and New Orleans.

And so on Sunday night when the news reports were tracking Katrina's progress and predicting the disaster of New Orleans, the mood at the camp was grim. I was over at Camp Casey Two, where a big tent was set up for meetings and rallies. I was trying to be helpful by making a list of all the stuff needed for the caravans which would be setting out when the camp closed on a speaking tour, mobilizing people for the September 24 march on Washington. On the screen a video was playing detailing the effects of depleted uranium, showing pictures of the deformed babies born in Iraq, cyclops babies with only one eye in the center of the forehead, babies with heads like tumors, babies that are nothing but undifferentiated lumps of flesh. And at my feet, a man from New Orleans was crying and raging. The bridges were closed, and no one could get out any longer. The news was predicting that thousands might die.

The petrochemical industry and the developers have long ruled in the Gulf, with free reign to destroy the wetlands that are nature's buffer against storms. A huge proportion of the Louisiana National Guard, which is supposed to take charge during natural disasters, was in Iraq. The rest were apparently in Florida, moving military equipment out of the path of the storm. The funds for flood control and reinforcing the levees had been systematically cut by the Bush administration in order to fund our attacks on Baghdad and Fallujah.

Hurricanes are fueled by the warmth of the ocean, and the Gulf is abnormally hot due to global warming, which Bush and his allies will not admit is happening. Global warming may not have caused Hurricane Katrina, but it undoubtedly amplified its power and fury.

New Orleans, like Casey Sheehan, is a casualty of war.

And I imagine Cindy joined in her vigil by a mother from New Orleans, perhaps one whose baby died in her arms of dehydration at the Superdome, to ask, "Why did my child die?"

And Bush, if he were honest would have to say to her, "Your child died of incompetence and callousness justified by a set of false assumptions: "

That the current economy and technology, fueled by cheap oil and gas, can and should continue in its current form.

That the profits of those who benefit from the current system are of paramount importance, and should be protected at all costs.

That war is good for business.

That environmental impacts don't need to be counted as part of the cost of doing business and so don't count.

That technology has transcended nature.

That global warming has no real consequences.

That government owes nothing in the way of care and support to its citizens.

That the lives of the poor aren't worth much, anyway, especially if they happen to be black.

That the way to respond to uncomfortable questions is to sneer at and smear the questioner.

That a good media spin can redefine and outweigh reality.

But reality has a way of being, well, real, and catching up with you. Real loss, real grief are the real results of the Bush administration's policies. His neocon friends maintain their power by manufacturing fear, exploiting the dead. But now the real dead are coming back to haunt them.

And so I imagine Cindy and the mother from New Orleans joined by a legion of mothers from Iraq. I envision the roads of Crawford lined with the corpses of Baghdad and Fallujah, with the one-eyed monstrous stillbirths, the children blown to pieces, caked with flesh, soaked with blood. I hear a chorus of voices asking, "Why? What noble cause? What great gift are you bringing us? What is this democracy that abandons the poor to drown?"

I see them laying the bodies at the gates of power. I see us joining them, turn the stormwind to a wind of justice, a wind of change. Hurricane season has just begun.

Some places to send aid:

Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children are doing intense work among the shelters and prisons with displaced youth, mostly African American. Believe me, the Red Cross and the Christian charities won't be pouring out relief to this group!

They can also use some volunteers (especially African American) and many gifts in kind. Send a check to the "FFLIC Hurricane Relief Fund" to:
920 Platt Street, Sulphur, Louisiana, 70663.

Info:

awakenprogress@yahoo.com

kd.higgs@yahoo.com

The Veterans for Peace bus that was at Camp Casey in Crawford, TX has now gone down to Covington, Louisiana to do relief work. They also need donations of money and computer equipment.

Make a donation to Veterans For Peace Chapter 116

www.vfproadtrips.org

Tax deductible cash donations can be send to:

Veterans For Peace Chapter 116

28500 Sherwood Rd

Willits CA 95490

pjtate@sonic.net

Cell PH: 707-536-3001

Food Not Bombs will be providing food for refugees. They can use volunteers to prepare and serve food, and, of course, donations.

Web: www.foodnotbombs.net.

You can make a financial donation on line or mail checks to:

Food Not Bombs, P.O. Box 744, Tucson, AZ 85702.

Please call (1-800-884-1136) or email katrina@foodnotbombs.net if you can join them on the bus or help with gas money.