

The Fire Sermon: The emblem of Bush's Military Crusade for "Freedom"

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In his inaugural speech last January, President George W. Bush repeatedly invoked images of unbridled, ravaging destruction as the emblem of his crusade for "freedom." Fire was his symbol, his word of power, his incantation of holy war. Mirroring the rhetoric of his fundamentalist enemies, Bush moved the conflict from the political to the spiritual, from the outer world to the inner soul, claiming that he had lit "a fire in the minds of men."

But words are recalcitrant things; they have their own magic, and they will often find their own meanings, outside the intentions of those who use them. Bush has indeed inflamed the minds of men — and women — with his military crusade. But it is not the "untamed fire of freedom" that scorches them: It is the fire of grief and outrage at the lies that have consumed the bodies of their loved ones. This bitter flame burns in the rubble of blasted houses in Iraq and in the quiet, leafy suburbs of America, where the dead are mourned and the mutilated are left as the enduring legacy of Bush's cruel, wilful and unnecessary war.

This "fire in the mind" has now found its own symbol in the unlikely figure of Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a slain American soldier. Here again, Bush's war-rousing words have gotten away from him. Sheehan's campaign — which began as a lonely vigil outside Bush's vacation ranch and has now spread across the country — centers on a single, simple request: that Bush explain to her what he means when he describes the war as "a noble cause."

Sheehan is no professional activist, no savvy insider or political junkie. She's an ordinary citizen whose unadorned speech has none of the sweep and grandeur of Bush's expensively tailored rhetoric. But she has one thing that his professional scripters can never put in the presidential mouth: truth.

They must labor in the service of a lie, but Sheehan has read the Downing Street memos, the Duelfer WMD report, the September 2000 manifesto of a group led by Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld calling for the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the top-level revelations by Richard Clarke, Paul O'Neill, Seymour Hersh and many others. She knows the mountain of freely available, credible evidence that shows unequivocally that Bush and his minions sought this war of aggression from their first day in power; that they openly longed for "a new Pearl Harbor" to use as justification for their plans; that they deliberately manipulated, "stove-piped" and fabricated intelligence to concoct a false case for war; that they used UN diplomacy as a cynical sham to mask their military intentions and then invaded before the weapons inspection process, which they themselves had insisted upon, was even halfway complete.

Every housewife and truck driver, every Wal-Mart clerk and office worker in the United States has access to this information, these established facts. The death of her son drove Sheehan to throw off the torpor that has afflicted so many of her compatriots for so many years and look reality in the face. There she has seen Iraqi civilians and American soldiers being shredded, gutted and burned alive by the fire of Bush's death-dealing lies. As New York Times columnist Frank Rich notes, she and other war survivors have watched Bush turn the search for WMD — the ostensible reason for the sacrifice of their children — into a comedy routine, a filmed skit for sycophantic journalists, showing the president of the United States goofily searching under desks and behind curtains, then shrugging with a dullard's grin: "No weapons here!"

Bush's audience, the highly paid cream of the national media, roared with laughter at the Leader's barbaric wit. Now these same blind guides are struggling to comprehend the fire of dissent that Cindy Sheehan has lit with her vigil in the Crawford scrublands. Many of them have mocked and vilified her, trumpeting the lies that the Bush machine began pumping out like bilgewater the moment her campaign found resonance with the wider public. Others have dismissed it as a flash in the pan, a copy-filler for the August doldrums, a minor blip soon to be swept away by the president's proven mastery of the national agenda.

Perhaps they're right. Perhaps this too shall pass, just as every other scandal and tourbillion that has momentarily shaken the Bush regime — from Enron to Abu Ghraib and beyond — has fallen by the wayside. It's true that the polls show that Bush is now deeply unpopular, mistrusted by more than half the electorate, who say, as Sheehan says, that he misled the nation into a pointless war. But by hook and crook, with fear and lies, he and his faction have gathered all the reins of power into their hands. With a complaisant media, a feckless opposition, unprecedented control over the nation's electoral machinery — and the full backing of the corporate oligarchy they have enriched beyond all measuring — the Bush elitists are not much concerned with the "consent of the governed" anymore. They will wade on through the swamp of blood they have created, generating more terrorism, sacrificing more sons and daughters, engendering more hatred, anguish and death.

But what if the form that Sheehan has somehow given to the nation's growing sense of betrayal does not simply fade at summer's end? What if that spark takes hold in the Texas scrub and sets off "an untamed fire of freedom" from the murderous lies that have led America into crime and disgrace? We might yet see Bush undone by his own incantation — and truth become the new word of power.

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