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NEWS ANALYSIS

Politics of War Could Pivot on Mother's Vigil

Cindy Sheehan is filling a void for those opposed to Bush's Iraq policies. But he may benefit too.

By Ronald Brownstein, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — The high-profile vigil near President Bush's Texas ranch by Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq last year, could scramble the politics of the war as much for her allies as for the target of her protest.

An immediate effect may be to increase the pressure on liberal activist groups and Democrats — who have focused mostly this year on other issues — to challenge Bush more persistently and forcefully on the war.

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"It has gotten people back in the fight," said Eli Pariser, executive director of the political action committee associated with the liberal MoveOn.org. "What we're seeing is a lot of people ... recommitting themselves."

Antiwar activists, largely inactive since the 2004 election, are organizing around Sheehan's protest: Tonight, the MoveOn PAC and two other liberal groups plan to sponsor about 1,000 candlelight vigils around the country to support her.

For Bush, a reinvigorated protest movement presents obvious dangers as he struggles to bolster flagging public support for the mission in Iraq. But such a challenge could present opportunities for the White House.

If a revived antiwar movement promotes alternative policies that the public resists — such as the immediate withdrawal of all American troops, which Sheehan favors — Bush

could garner support for his course, some analysts say.

"If it's a message that he is able to portray ... as a fringe opposition group, I think he can use that as a foil," said Christopher Gelpi, a Duke University political scientist who studies public opinion during wartime. "On the other hand, if the movement's [message] is picked up by other politicians or prominent opinion leaders, that could be very damaging to him."

The neighbor who fired a shotgun over Sheehan's roadside camp Sunday and the pickup driver who Monday night barreled through wooden crosses that her supporters had erected underscored another risk for antiwar activists: the possibility of a backlash. As the Vietnam era demonstrated, protests even against an unpopular war can spark resentment and charges of undermining troops.

"From the antiwar standpoint, there is some danger that it could be counterproductive," said John Mueller, an Ohio State University political scientist who has written extensively on public opinion during war.

The attention Sheehan has attracted by camping near Bush's ranch in Crawford while seeking a meeting with him shows that politics does abhor a vacuum.

Amid relentless violence in Iraq, public support for the war has sagged in many surveys to the lowest levels since the invasion in March 2003. Eight times this year, the Gallup Organization has asked whether it was worth going to war; each time, at least half of those polled have said no. Polls now routinely show support for Bush's handling of the war about 40% or below.

Despite rising public concern, the amount of political debate has diminished since Bush and his allies challenged the Democrats' toughness on national defense during the 2004 presidential election.

Some liberal websites maintained a drumbeat of criticism, and a bipartisan group of House members — led by Republican Walter B. Jones of North Carolina and Democrat Neil Abercrombie of Hawaii — introduced legislation in June to require that Bush begin withdrawing troops from Iraq by October 2006.

But until now, no individual or institution had emerged as a rallying point for those disaffected by the war.

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Sheehan appears to be filling that void — providing the presence that many on the left have sought.

The powerful response she has evoked appears to have convinced leading antiwar groups that there is a constituency for a renewed protest effort. The surprisingly strong showing by Democrat Paul Hackett, an Iraq war veteran who criticized Bush's handling of the conflict, in an Ohio special congressional election this month supported the same conclusion.

"I think this is a turning point," said Tom Andrews, a former Maine congressman who is national director of the antiwar coalition Win Without War.

Andrews and Pariser say they expect opponents to renew their efforts against the war. An initial step will come tonight, with the nationwide gatherings to support Sheehan.

Over the longer term, Andrews and Pariser say, their groups will focus on lobbying for the resolution from Jones and Abercrombie, which has 45 co-sponsors — far from the 218 votes needed for passage.

That resolution would require Bush to develop a plan by year's end "for the withdrawal of all" American troops from Iraq; withdrawals would start by October 2006.

Andrews also said he expected "increasingly active and increasingly vocal" antiwar protests in the coming months. But plans for a late-September protest in Washington were uncertain amid disputes over the participation of far-left groups such as International ANSWER, according to sources involved.

These developments could pressure Democrats, especially those considering running for president in 2008, to criticize the war more sharply.

"Unless things dramatically improve in the next two or three weeks, I think this fall we'll see a couple of '08 candidates who will be vocally antiwar," said Marshall Wittmann, a senior fellow at the centrist Democratic Leadership Council.

The danger for Bush in this trend is that more Americans might support a change in direction on Iraq if they hear more about alternative approaches, such as the Jones-Abercrombie resolution for an exit plan.

The danger for critics is that pressure on Bush to change direction may diminish if the public considers their alternatives less attractive.

Though groups like MoveOn support the Jones-Abercrombie proposal for a gradual withdrawal, Sheehan told a conference call Tuesday that she considered that time frame "not soon enough." She is urging an immediate return of all U.S. troops — an idea that polls show most Americans oppose.

"We're not going to stop there, either," she said Tuesday. "We are going to join forces and we are going to just transform this country from a country that always supports war and killing to a country that is at peace."

One GOP strategist said that, given such views, the White House believed the attention around Sheehan was more likely to be an issue for Democrats than for the president.

"As time goes on, this becomes more and more a problem for Democrats because it gives visibility and salience and attention to the most extreme elements of the party," said the strategist, who asked for anonymity while discussing internal deliberations. "You may want [Sen. Joseph R.] Biden as your spokesman. You certainly don't want the radical left — and that's what they are getting."

All of these factors are likely to affect public opinion about the war far less than events in Iraq do, said Mueller, the Ohio State political scientist.

While Bush might benefit if he can portray his critics' ideas as unrealistic, Mueller said, "he is going to see continued erosion of support" unless conditions in Iraq significantly improve.

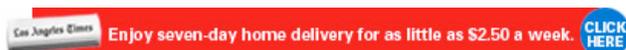


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