

“This anti-Russian campaign is horrible”: An interview with antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan

David Walsh

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On October 19, WSWs journalist David Walsh spoke to Cindy Sheehan, the antiwar activist whose 24-year-old son, Casey, was killed during the Iraq War in early April 2004.

A little over a year after this tragedy, in August 2005, Sheehan came to prominence when she set up an antiwar camp, Camp Casey, outside George W. Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas. The month-long protest focused the attention of large numbers of people, in the US and around the world, on the human cost of the neocolonial invasion and occupation of Iraq.

When, in May 2007, the Democrats in Congress facilitated the authorization of an additional \$100 billion to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Sheehan was outraged. In an open letter May 26 to the congressional Democrats announcing her departure from that party, she wrote, “You think giving him [Bush] more money is politically expedient, but it is a moral abomination and every second the occupation of Iraq endures, you all have more blood on your hands.”

Recently on her blog, Sheehan denounced actor/director Rob Reiner and actor Morgan Freeman for their video, announcing the formation of the “Committee to Investigate Russia.” This organization, which includes extreme right-wingers and assorted warmongers, was formed, according to the foul video, to help “Americans understand the gravity of Russia's continuing attacks on democracy.” Freeman intones, “We have been attacked. We are... at war,” and proceeds from there.

In her comment, Sheehan recounted her experience with Reiner and his wife, Michele, who approached her in 2005 and attempted to bring her into the Hillary Clinton for president camp. As she noted on her blog and below, when she rejected that attempt, they ultimately reneged on their promises of assistance.

Sheehan concluded her piece, “Reiner et al, are enemies of truth; they are enemies of peace; they are enemies of true democracy; they should be exposed and shamed.”

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David Walsh: Could you explain for the benefit of our readers your experience with Rob and Michele Reiner in 2005?

Cindy Sheehan: In August 2005 when I was in Crawford, Texas, Rob Reiner sent his wife Michele and a couple of people from his production team to Camp Casey to film a television commercial. It had me speaking about my son Casey, the war and how Bush lied. I demanded that Bush speak with me.

Of course, I thought it was because the Reiners cared about the wars. But it was actually because they wanted to further their anti-George Bush agenda, to benefit the Democrats. I didn't know that at that time. They also filmed a couple of other Gold Star families and then the commercial was aired.

After Camp Casey was over, I was invited to Rob and Michele Reiner's house. I had never met Rob before, I'd only met Michele. So we went, and Stephen Bing was also there. I didn't know him. He is a movie producer, a businessman and a multi-, multi-millionaire—and a big funder

of the Democratic Party. The meeting wasn't so much about the Iraq War; it was about how I should support Hillary Clinton for president in 2008.

DW: Because you had a considerable following ...

CS: I said, “I can't support Hillary Clinton, she's *pro-war*. I've given my promise that I'm not going to support any more pro-war politicians.” She not only voted for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, she was actually one of the chief promoters of the wars. She provided Democratic Party cover and credibility, so to speak, for the lies justifying the wars. But they were lies no matter who told them.

Bing then looked at me and said, “Cindy, she's our only hope.” I said, “I don't know who you're talking about when you say, she's *our* only hope, but I cannot support her, and if she's the only hope, we're in very serious trouble. So are people all over the world.” He said to me, “She's really against the wars, and she's going to come out against them when it's politically expedient.”

At that point, I started to cry. I said, “I can't believe you just said that to me. She thought it was politically expedient to support the wars in 2001, 2002, 2003, and now my son has been killed. You're saying that political expediency is more important than human life.”

We ended the meeting at the Reiners more or less like that. They were still supportive of me and my organization at the time, Gold Star Families for Peace. Our main office was in Los Angeles. My sister, Dede, was working there and she worked with Reiner and his team. They were helping us get our 501c3, our nonprofit status, they were paying for it, they were doing the legal work.

I was in Brooklyn to give a speech not too long after that, which of course was part of Clinton's constituency, because she was one of the senators from New York. I told an anti-war rally what Bing had told me. He didn't say it was a secret. And if he had, I probably would have reported it anyway. I said, we have to pressure her, because she's not going to come out against the wars until it's expedient. I knew my audience, I knew they didn't like her.

Then, shortly afterward, I took part in a meeting with Hillary Clinton. She was really cold and callous. I was with another Gold Star mother, and my sister. The three of us poured our hearts out, we were crying. After the meeting, Clinton spoke to a reporter from the *Village Voice* and said, “Yes, I heard what they had to say, but I met with other Gold Star families before they came, and they want us to continue the mission to make sure that their loved ones' sacrifices are honored.” She added, “I agree with them, the other families.”

In November 2005, there was a fundraiser for Hillary Clinton in Los Angeles, and I was going to go down and protest at it. Michele Reiner called me that morning, and said, “Cindy, please don't go and protest.” I had planned to get on a plane and go down there, from Northern California. Michele begged me not to go. I said, “Out of respect for the help you've given Gold Star Families for Peace, I won't go.”

However, my sister and other antiwar activists still went. Rob and Michele Reiner saw them and actually gave them a middle finger. That

was a Saturday. On Monday, Reiner's assistant called my sister and told her, "We're not supporting Gold Star Families for Peace anymore."

DW: They pulled the funding, and the support?

CS: Yes. We were right in the middle of getting our 501c3. After Rob and Michele treated my sister and my comrades so rudely, I wrote an article about how the antiwar movement shouldn't support Hillary Clinton. It was posted at the *Huffington Post*. That's the last contact I've had with the Reiners or Bing.

That was one of my early eye-opening experiences.

When my son was killed, I wasn't an activist, a political person. I didn't know who were true opponents of the war and who were just against the Republicans, or simply against Bush. Because it doesn't seem as though many of these people are against the wars now that Trump is president. Or they're not protesting, in any case.

I didn't know. I thought that if people came to help, they were there because they had the same goals we did, and that would be ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of those people were just there to end Republican rule.

DW: Basically, they packed up the antiwar movement in 2006 when the Democrats retook Congress. There hasn't been a major demonstration since that time. And the election of Barack Obama completed the process.

CS: Exactly. Of course, I was told by all the Democrats in 2005, Nancy Pelosi included, that if the antiwar movement helped them get back in power, in the elections of '06, they would help us end the wars. Then, in '07, they were sworn in and it wasn't even on their agenda. They had their top 10 items they were going to work on, and ending the wars wasn't there at all. Howard Dean told me, "Cindy, the wars are so hard." Screw you. My son is dead, and so are many others.

In 2008, on the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, several "antiwar" organizations said that we shouldn't have any protests in D.C. because it would embarrass the Democrats. One of them, United for Peace and Justice, was significantly supported by the Communist Party, and we know they have long been in the back pocket of the Democratic Party. I would normally say, up the butts of the Democrats, but I'll try and be a little more dignified in this interview. The so-called left ... !

This anti-Russian campaign is horrible. Would you really rather have a nuclear war than admit that your candidate, Clinton, lost because she's a terrible person and ran a terrible campaign, and many people hate her?

DW: Let's talk about the anti-Russian campaign. In our view, it's both a matter of divisions over foreign policy within the ruling elite, and an effort to channel social anger in a reactionary direction. The Democrats have not challenged Trump on his extreme right-wing program, but primarily accused him of being "soft" on Russia, or a Russian puppet.

CS: Right. They can't attack for him continuing the wars either, because the Democrats are part and parcel of that. To me, it's just so patently bullshit, the propaganda about Russia. People just want to cling onto it.

In the "Committee to Investigate Russia" video, Morgan Freeman said, "For 241 years, our democracy has been a shining example of what we can all aspire to." Really? You're a black man, how can you even say that? A descendant of slaves. What about the genocide of the indigenous population? An example of democracy to whom?

Freeman suggests some gravitas. Whether he actually has it or not, he can act like he has. People see that and say, he was the president of the United States, in a movie, so I believe him when he says that Russia and Trump are destroying American democracy. Blah, blah, blah ...

DW: The propaganda campaign has reached the most preposterous levels. They're now arguing that basically every sign of discontent in the United States has been instigated by Russian agents. I don't frankly think most people believe it.

CS: I hope not. That would make me very sad. I'm very active on social media, and there are a lot of people who are buying this. Rachel Maddow is another pusher of this.

DW: That's the whole pseudo-left and miserable liberal-left, all of these people have gone over to or become the pro-war camp.

CS: There are hundreds of people thanking her ...

DW: Don't be too impressed. There are empty-headed types and loudmouths, or people who don't see things yet. It's a big country. But the social conditions in America are devastating. I don't think that many people believe that anger in America is Russian-made! They know where the anger comes from and what it's about.

CS: Well, they're trying their hardest to confuse people.

DW: Of course. Now, your "friend" Clinton has accused WikiLeaks of being a tool of Russian intelligence. They're all demanding that the Internet be censored. The great "fake news" story they don't want people to receive or hear is that American capitalism is a disaster.

You made another point in your article: "The [Reiner-Freeman] video obviously was made to sink us back into the lowest depths of the McCarthy witch hunts and HUAC hysteria and as a Cold War Kid, 'I don't find this stuff amusing anymore,' (Paul Simon, *Graceland*)." Could you talk about that a bit, about being a "Cold War Kid"?

CS: I think post-9/11 America might be even more propagandized and intimidated by the government and the corporate media than during the Cold War. But, oh, my goodness, from the time I was in the first grade until I was in the sixth grade every Friday we had those nuclear bomb drills where a siren would blow and we had to climb under our desks. We were told how evil and violent the Soviet Union was, along with "Red China." You couldn't say "China," you had to say, "Red China."

When I was in the second grade, my teacher asked us—mind you, we were 7- and 8-year-old kids—what would we do if a "red Communist" came up to us and told us not to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and if we did it anyway, he would blow our heads off? I raised my hand, she called on me, and I said, I wouldn't say it! That was not the answer she was looking for.

DW: Better dead than red.

CS: She dragged me to the corner, and she was calling me a traitor and anti-American. I was standing in the corner, and thinking, I don't care what you say, I still don't want to get my head blown off. It was child abuse the way we were terrorized.

After my son was killed, I went to Venezuela and other places, I talked to people who had been harmed by the US government and its policies, and I had been digging into what this country does. But when I went to Cuba in January of '07, I was still a little bit trepidatious because of all the propaganda we had been taught about Cuba. If you live one way for 45 years, you have it pounded into your head how evil Castro and the Cuban revolution are, it's kind of hard to break free of that.

DW: You also mention that this is the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution and that you're studying it. I'm curious what books you're reading or what studying you're doing.

CS: I just finished *The Emancipation of Women* by Lenin. I've read pamphlets by Lenin. And works by other people.

DW: You should read Trotsky's *The History of the Russian Revolution*.

CS: I have read some Trotsky. I love your analysis on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

I've been trying to dig into the background and the heroism of the Bolshevik Revolution, because I have been so propagandized my whole life about the Soviet Union. I was taught about how America saved the world from fascism, but it was mainly the sacrifices made by the Soviet population that defeated Hitler.

DW: So you read the WWSW?

CS: Oh, all the time. I share it on my Facebook page a lot too. I have learned a lot from the analysis.

DW: Glad to hear it.

Let me ask you one more, and difficult, question. It's been 13 years since your son died. This is not something you ever get over. How has that

pain changed over the years, if it has?

CS: I've been thinking about it a lot, because my sister passed away in January. That was another huge blow to our family.

Recently, some US special forces were killed in Niger, in West Africa. There's a big controversy because the family said that Trump upset them. Trump said something like, he [the dead soldier] knew what he was signing up for.

It's really hard because Casey and millions of others should still be alive. The liberals are mad at Trump for upsetting the family, but they're not asking, what are US Special Forces doing in Niger? There's been so much death and destruction, and so my pain has become global instead of just local.

As far as Casey's death is concerned, you learn how to live with it, but we still get assaulted all the time, by current events, and the news, and the lies. As an activist, it's just something that's constant. Sometimes I have to pull back, "I'm going to binge on Netflix for the rest of the day, watch something funny." I have to remove myself from it occasionally, because it never stops.

I also have to mention my five grandchildren, from nine years old down to two. They helped me go through my sister's terrible situation. I was her caregiver for two years. They just live life. So they've given me back a lot of my joy in living. Then I feel bad, because I ask myself, what kind of world are we giving them? A pretty shitty one.

DW: We'll change it.

CS: Well, we're trying.



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