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There is Such a Thing as “Too Late”

by Ray McGovern

President Bush still refuses to meet with Cindy Sheehan, the Rosa Parks of Crawford, Texas, but there is some good news. While Crawford's Camp Casey (named after Cindy's son killed in Iraq on April 4, 2004) continues to be short on amenities, a sympathetic neighbor has given the hundred or so friends I left there on Wednesday a field in which they can pitch their tents. No longer will they have to try to sleep in the seven-foot wide ditch alongside the road, with local pick-up trucks and Secret Service SUVs whizzing by honking reveille at 5:00 AM. In addition, newly donated tarps are providing some protection from fire ants by night and the 105-degree sun by day.

A rumor ran through the camp that Karl Rove set loose the fire ants into the ditches in the same way he has loosed the rabid talk-show-dogs that have been barking at Cindy. But it turns out the ants are indigenous—like other local pests.

While at Camp Casey I had a daydream. I visualized turning Crawford into Selma. Think of it: 40 years later, thousands of us crossing a new Edmund Pettus Bridge—this time over Tonk Creek en route to the Texas White House. There is legal precedent. In 1965, Federal District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr. weighed the right of mobility against the right to march and ruled in favor of those marching from Selma to Montgomery. Judge Johnson ruled:

“The law is clear that the right to petition one's government for the redress of grievances may be exercised in large groups...and these rights may be exercised by marching, even along public highways.”

Folks ask me what I think Cindy Sheehan and her devoted supporters need most at Camp Casey. In my view, the answer is simple: They have built it; will you come? Your bodies are

needed on site to help petition our government for redress of the grievance of reckless endangerment of the bodies and the souls of the young men and women sent off to wage an unnecessary war.

Can We Do Something Else to Help?

Two years after the march from Selma to Montgomery Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. took the pulpit at Riverside Church in New York City and gave a speech titled "[*Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*](#)." Today we can substitute "Iraq" for "Vietnam." Dr. King spoke clearly:

"Now, it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam."

Ignore. That's what the vast majority of Germans did in the 1930s as Hitler curtailed civil liberties and launched aggressive wars. I was born in August 1939, a week before Hitler sent German tanks into Poland to start World War II. I have studied that crucial time in some detail. And during the five years I served in Germany I had occasion to ask all manner of people how it could possibly be that, highly educated and cultured as they were, the Germans for the most part could simply ignore. Why was it that the institutional churches, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran, could not find their voice? Why was it that so few spoke out?

A few did...and they provide good example for us today. Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke out, plotted against Hitler, and was executed. Also executed was a more obscure but equally courageous professor from the University of Berlin, Albrecht Haushofer.

Like Bonhoeffer, Haushofer was arrested for speaking out. The SS prison guards were required to extract a confession from prisoners before they were hanged or shot, but Haushofer refused. When they removed his body, though, a paper fell out of his pocket. It was his admission of guilt written in the form of a sonnet:

Schuld

*...schuldig bin ich Anders als Ihr denkt.
Ich musste früher meine Pflicht erkennen;
Ich musste schärfer Unheil Unheil nennen;
Mein Urteil habe ich zu lang gelenkt...
Ich habe gewarnt,
Aber nicht genug, und klar;*

Und heute weiß ich, was ich schuldig war.

Guilt

*I am guilty,
But not in the way you think.
I should have earlier recognized my duty;
I should have more sharply called evil evil;
I reined in my judgment too long.
I did warn,
But not enough, and clear;
And today I know what I was guilty of.*

At Riverside Church 22 years later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began by quoting a statement by Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam: "A time comes when silence is betrayal." Dr. King added, "That time has come for us in relation to Vietnam."

And that time has come for us in relation to Iraq. But where are the Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Iraq? Where are the successors to Dr. King, to Bonhoeffer, to Professor Haushofer? "There is only us," says Annie Dillard, and she is right of course. We are the ones we've been waiting for.

Dr. King was typically direct: "We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak....there is such a thing as being too late....Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with lost opportunity....Over the bleached bones of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: "Too late."

An Example to Follow

I believe Cindy Sheehan provides prophetic example for us all. She let herself be guided by the spirit within. President George W. Bush had said that the sacrifice of our dead soldiers, including Casey, was "worth it." And earlier this month he added that it was all in a "noble cause." Cindy, while giving a talk at a conference in Dallas, spontaneously asked if someone would come with her to Crawford, because she needed to ask the president what it was that he was describing as a "noble cause." You know the first chapter of the rest of the story. The point I would make here is simply that she was open to the spirit within, decided to follow its prompting, and did not hesitate to claim the help she needed. Cindy used her conference speech to speak out clearly, as she has been doing for these past several months, and then she acted.

Is it not time for us—each of us—to be open to such prompting. Is it not time for us, amid the carnage in Iraq, amid

a presidentially promulgated policy permitting torture “consistent with military necessity,” amid growing signs of an attack by Israel and/or the U.S. on Iran—is it not high time for us to speak...and to act. How, in God’s name, can we not act?

Creative Protest

Dr. King enjoined his listeners at Riverside Church to “seek out every creative means of protest possible,” in matching actions with our words.

Not all of us can join the march to Selma...I mean Crawford. So let’s be creative.

I wear a t-shirt with a representation of Arlington West on the front. At 7:30 AM every Sunday, Veterans for Peace in the area of Los Angeles bring white crosses, stars of David, and crescents, down to Santa Monica beach as a poignant reminder of those troops killed in Iraq. The crosses, stars, and crescents are arrayed respectfully in lines as hauntingly straight as those here in our own Arlington Cemetery.

When a few months ago I had the privilege of helping my veteran colleagues set up Arlington West, there were 1,600 crosses, stars, crescents, and it took three hours to set them in place. We are fast approaching 1,900; I don’t know how long it takes to emplace them now. When the veterans of Arlington West heard of Cindy Sheehan’s courageous witness in Crawford, they packed up 800 and drove all night to ensure that a large slice of Arlington West could be emplaced in newly created Arlington Crawford at Camp Casey.

That’s creative, no? Here we already have “Arlington East” to honor the dead. But what about the thousands and thousands of wounded? Can we be imaginative enough to discern visually creative ways to witness to and honor our wounded? And what about all the Iraqi civilians—“collateral damage,” in military parlance—who, absent the war, would be alive today? The number of civilian dead was put as high as 100,000 a year ago. Our government does not consider Iraqi casualties worth counting. Is this a way of saying that, in our country’s view, Iraqis don’t count? Have we become so callous as to ignore, and thus acquiesce in that?

These are some spontaneous thoughts...the only suggestions that occur to me this evening regarding things we might consider doing to walk the talk. No doubt, you will have more imaginative, more creative ideas. Don’t wait. Remember: there is such a thing as being too late.

The fire ants were not the only pests in Crawford. There were

a few unfriendly folks who kept telling us to go to hell. That brought to mind the dictum of the 18th century English statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of crisis, remain neutral."

Let's not oblige the pests; I understand that hell is even hotter than Crawford.

Ray McGovern works for Tell the Word, the publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, and is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. On Wednesday, he arrived home in Arlington, VA, after five days in Crawford, and shared these remarks with 300 neighbors at the close of a candlelight observance in honor of Cindy Sheehan.

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