

## CINDY SHEEHAN AND THE RHETORIC OF MOTHERHOOD: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

by *Laura Knudson*

Through her peace work, Cindy Sheehan helped bolster the U.S. antiwar movement. Relying on her identity as the mother of a soldier who was slain during active duty in Iraq, Sheehan captured the media spotlight through increasingly outspoken and public ways that include the sit-ins she staged outside of President George W. Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, and the "Open Letter to George Bush" she published in November 2004. In this essay, I examine the rhetoric surrounding Sheehan's peace activism and attend to the ways in which the rhetoric hinges on conflicting views about war, motherhood, and activism. Maternal activism is certainly not a new phenomenon. However, media coverage of Sheehan provides ample evidence of the constantly shifting nature of definitions of "good" and "bad" mothering in early twenty-first-century America. Through an examination of Sheehan's own book, *Peace Mom*, and a book written to counter it, *American Mourning* by Catherine Moy and Melanie Morgan, I demonstrate the central role that discourses of motherhood play in Sheehan's ability to craft a maternal politics of peace.

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From the time that the Iraq war began on March 20, 2003, the media largely ignored the voices of the peacemongers and chose instead to operate as a propaganda arm of the Bush administration. While retired military officers functioned as "talking heads" on the evening news, spouting the pro-war rhetoric fed to them directly from the Pentagon, peace activists were largely ignored.<sup>1</sup> The decision to invade Iraq was based on shaky intelligence at best, and the country remains at war more than 5 years later. More than four thousand U.S. soldiers have died to date, and the death toll of Iraqis, civilian and otherwise, is unknown, although estimates range from the tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands. The media has been described as the "fourth estate" and as being vital to a successful democracy. Why, then, was it that so little

appeared in the media regarding the growing peace movement during the first 2 years of the war? Why did it take the mother (and specifically the mother, not the father, sister, brother, or wife) of a soldier killed in Iraq to wake the media to the other side of the story? Mothers have a long history of peace activism, and it would seem that a dead soldier's mother protesting on the President's driveway would hold an unassailable position of moral authority in the media. Cindy Sheehan discovered that this was not the case. Sheehan's motherhood was used simultaneously to demonize her as well as to promote her message. Coming to a better understanding of how Cindy Sheehan, motherhood, and mothering are treated in the media will help us as a society to better understand the answers to these questions.

This paper undertakes a textual analysis of the rhetoric of the media surrounding activist Cindy Sheehan's protests against the Iraq War. Sheehan's life was forever altered by the horrific loss of her eldest child, Casey, in the Iraq War. Soon after Casey's death, Sheehan found herself compelled to oppose the Iraq War in increasingly more outspoken ways. Her activism appeared in the mainstream media in August 2005 when she staged a sit-in during one of President George W. Bush's lengthy and frequent vacations. Sheehan sat in a ditch along with hundreds of other protestors during the slow news month of August, which brought media focus to the peace movement that had been largely ignored by the mainstream press for the life of the Iraq War. While many books have been published about and by Sheehan, I intend to focus on Sheehan's *Peace Mom* and *American Mourning* by Catherine Moy and Melanie Morgan. These two texts represent the binary and conflicting views U.S. culture holds regarding the war, the soldiers fighting in it, motherhood, and activism of both a pro- and an antiwar nature.

From her start as an activist, Sheehan has been portrayed in the media as the grieving mother of a dead soldier. This is exactly what she was then and remains now. Sheehan embraced this identity and used it skillfully to enhance the platform from which she spoke. The standpoint of nearly all her activism is that she is the mother of a soldier who was killed in Iraq and is seeking an end to the Iraq War. Her work as an activist did not begin with her month-long vigil outside the President's ranch, but instead as many activists begin—with letter writing and outreach to the media. Sheehan wrote an open letter to George W. Bush on the 7-month anniversary of her son's death, and in it she castigates Bush for Casey's death and the policies and decisions leading up to the war. Her anger and pain is palpable when she writes, "George, it has been

7 months today since your reckless and wanton foreign policies killed my son, my big boy, my hero, my best friend: Casey. It has been 7 months since your ignorant and arrogant lack of planning for the peace murdered my oldest child.”<sup>2</sup> Her letter to President Bush makes reference to Casey as her child no less than twenty times within three pages. Sheehan’s standpoint as the mother of a dead soldier was something she stressed during the early days of her activism. Perhaps she did this consciously to help make her call for peace more visceral to others. Perhaps she did this unconsciously, because the identity of grieving mother was so unknown and unimaginable to her, and this new identity consumed her.

While Sheehan’s open letter to Bush reached few readers, her early activism was not limited to the written word, and it focused on her identity as mother. Sheehan appeared in a MoveOn PAC advertisement addressed to President Bush in the fall of 2004, which was months before her publicized vigil in Crawford. In the television spot, she references not just Casey, but her other children as well. She begins by describing how Casey was killed and then continues on to say:

I imagined it would hurt if one of my kids was killed, but I never imagined it would hurt this bad, especially someone so honest and brave as Casey, my son, when you haven’t been honest with us, when you and your advisors rushed us into this war, how do you think we felt when we heard the Senate report that said there was no link between Iraq and 9/11?<sup>3</sup>

Sheehan chose to embrace the identity of grieving mother and put it to work for her and her cause rather than to stay home and mourn privately, as she did immediately after Casey’s death.

Sheehan’s public identity as mother of a soldier was foregrounded by the rhetoric surrounding motherhood. This rhetoric encourages the binary division of mothers into the category of “good mothers” or “bad mothers.” Good mothers are selfless, tireless, and perfect in all they do for their children. Good mothers practice “intensive mothering,” described by Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels in *The Mommy Myth* as a practice that requires mothers to use “every single bit of their emotional, mental, and psychic energy on their kids. We must learn to put on the masquerade of the doting, self-sacrificing mother and wear it at all times. With intensive mothering, everyone watches us, we watch ourselves and other mothers, and we watch ourselves watching ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> Stereotypical “good mothers” appear in

all forms of popular culture and media in the form of characters such as Miriam Cunningham, the clueless but loving stay-at-home mother from the television show “Happy Days,” to the hardworking and recently divorced single mother Ann Romano from “One Day at a Time.” Barbara Billingsley’s character, June Cleaver, represents probably the most iconic and stereotypical media portrayal of a “good mother” in television history. The ideals of “good mothering” are impossible to meet no matter how much money, familial support, or luck a woman might have. The expectation that a grieving mother, dealing with the violent death of her soldier-son, could live up to that ideal is even less plausible.

The identity of Sheehan-as-mother enabled her activism and stance on the war to be framed by rhetorics of motherhood on the part of both the political left and right. The rhetoric of the left used Sheehan’s motherhood to elevate and validate her activism, while on the right her mothering was questioned and problematized. Sheehan’s antiwar activism—conflated as it was with her motherhood—could thus be attacked and invalidated by attacking her mothering and thereby invalidating her status as a good mother.

The foregrounding of her identity as a mother served in conflicting ways. On the one hand, focus on Sheehan as a mother distracted from her logical arguments against the war. The rhetoric surrounding women (and thus, frequently, mothers) is that of emotion, which given the popular culture dichotomy between logic and emotion, canceled out the logic in favor of the emotion.

Mothers who step into the media spotlight frequently face harsh treatment. Focusing on Sheehan’s identity as a mother provided the opportunity for her detractors to subject her to this. With her motherhood positioned as her only legitimate claim as a peace activist, to delegitimize the claim that she was a good mother was to delegitimize the claim that she had a strong argument against the war.

On the surface, Sheehan appeared to be occupying an unassailable position from which to speak out against the war. Sheehan was the mother of a soldier who had died in the very conflict that Sheehan hoped to end. She and her husband had four children, and they all lived together in the home built by the Sheehans. She was the stereotypical “normal” mother: she was active in her church, stayed home while her children were small, and stated that her life revolved around her children. Sheehan wrote of her identity that she “went from being the mom whose life revolved around her children to the one who had a life separate from her children but remained intimately connected to them.”<sup>5</sup> Her

identity as a peace activist appeared to be a natural growth from her other identities, which would leave her safe from attack by those disagreeing with her positions.

Early portrayals of Cindy Sheehan focus less on any purported “bad mothering” she might have done and more on her role as a stereotypical mother. The role of mother is one frequently infantilized by the media. In the *Time* article of August 15, 2005, entitled “A Mother and the President,” she is described as speaking “in a high, almost childlike voice,” and that she “says like as often as any teenager, as in, ‘This thing was so freaking like spur of the moment.’”<sup>6</sup> The article further renders Sheehan a child by revealing that her nickname among friends is “Attila the Honey.”<sup>7</sup> Her “childish” lack of experience as an activist and her grieving receive focus in the article. Comparing these early and rather positive descriptions with later articles—much more negative in tone—reveals that the infantilizing of Sheehan ceases rather quickly. The tone changes to one presenting her as treasonous, ignorant of her son’s true beliefs, and attention-hungry. Christopher Hitchens, a columnist for *Vanity Fair* and well-known author, described Sheehan’s activism as “Cindy Sheehan’s Sinister Piffle.”<sup>8</sup> William Kristol, a Fox News Channel analyst and editor of *The Weekly Standard*, referred to her in his July 25, 2007 article “They Don’t Really Support the Troops” as “distraught and unstable” and wrote that those who believe as Sheehan does are “slander[ing] the troops” fighting in Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

How is it, then, that Sheehan’s activism and role as an activist, which began with so much promise and media attention, has lost the luster and shine with which it began? The obsession our culture has with making mothers hypervisible in the media, while also placing mothers (and women in general) into dichotomous and binary roles, played a large part in this. The focus on Sheehan’s motherhood opened up the door for those not supportive of her stance to chip away at her cause by criticizing her mothering. By problematizing Sheehan’s mothering, critics could distract the public from Sheehan’s message while simultaneously portraying that message as wrong due to the personal failings of the messenger. The public was able to avoid thinking about the war and its repercussions by turning the cameras onto Sheehan’s status as a mother and beginning to police her mothering capabilities. Sheehan’s mothering became highly visible, while the visibility of the Iraq War shrank. The dialectic of hypervisibility and invisibility continues to be played out in media coverage of Sheehan’s activism, the Iraq War itself, and mothers in the media eye.

Britney Spears is an excellent example of the hypervisibility of mothers in the media.<sup>10</sup> The recent frenzy of visibility surrounding the custody of Spears' children, as well as her own mental and marital issues, serves to highlight the dichotomy regarding mothers in the media. Spears began her career as a stereotypical "good girl," but ultimately rejected the impossibility of the Madonna/whore dichotomy that society expected her to embody. Instead, she became a mother who embraced her sexuality (Madonna and whore embodied, essentially) and soon thereafter her downfall in the press commenced. Spears began to exhibit increasingly unstable behavior and eventually lost custody of her two sons. She became representative of what a bad mother looks like in that the loss of custody of her children is the ultimate presentation of bad motherhood. Her custody loss resulted in sensational headlines in media outlets all over the world: "The Nudity, the Drugs ... and the Kids at Risk" from *The Mirror* (September 18, 2007) and "Party's Over for Britney as She Loses Kids to K-Fed" from *Daily News* (October 2, 2007). Spears' behavior is consistently presented in the media through the lens of the bad mother whose actions are harming her children. Her actions can as easily be seen as those of a mentally unstable woman reacting to an untenable situation. For instance, her private life, from her divorce all the way down to her choices at Starbucks, is constantly monitored by the press and public. Spears seems unable to avoid public excoriation in the media regardless of her reaction to the press. The coverage of Spears is constant; helicopters frequently circle her home, and paparazzi follow her car at all hours of the night. Her decisions and movements constitute "breaking news" on many television channels and receive immense scrutiny.

While the media coverage and visibility of Britney Spears is constant and unyielding, the media renders many important aspects of the Iraq War invisible. The media does not show the true cost in human suffering on the part of the Iraqi people and is forbidden to show the soldiers' flag-draped coffins returning home. The actuality of the Iraq War and occupation is shielded from the eyes of the public just as President Bush is shielded from viewing protestors during his public appearances. Likewise, the military mother, a soldier who is also a mother, is similarly invisible (or rarely visible). For instance, the story of Lori Piestewa was parenthetical to that of Jessica Lynch's capture and rescue.<sup>11</sup> Piestewa was the first Native American woman and mother to be killed in combat while serving in the military, and she received little attention in the media.

In place of the war, or mothers dying in the war, the media provides consumers with hypervisible “bad mothers” such as Britney Spears. Hypervisibility is not limited, however, to those women the media determines to be bad mothers. Judgment of Sheehan’s motherhood (whether good or bad) is also pressed into frequent rotation during the coverage of Sheehan’s activism as another method for judging her activism. Passing judgment on celebrity mothers is infinitely more interesting and palatable for public consumption than is the war in Iraq.

So how does one spot a “bad mother”? As Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky write in *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, it is a fairly simple task in that “bad mothers have moved noticeably toward center stage in American culture. The stereotypes are familiar: the welfare mother, the teen mother, the career woman who has no time for her kids, the drug addict who poisons her fetus, the pushy stage mother, the overprotective Jewish mother, and so on.”<sup>12</sup> These are merely the stereotypes of the bad mother, though, for the possibility for becoming a bad mother lurks within each decision a mother makes. Ladd-Taylor and Umansky explain the difficulty in negotiating any mothering task without exposing oneself to the “bad mother” label when they write,

Americans are divided on whether mothers should stay home with their children, and on whether a “good” parent would spank a child. We even disagree about what age a “good” mother should be. Most of us agree it’s bad to become a mother too young, but at what age does a new mother become too old?... Is it bad to breastfeed a toddler—or to give a newborn a bottle? The proliferation of consumer goods compounds the problem: advertisers make mothers feel bad if they don’t buy the right baby products, while advice givers say a sure sign of a “bad” mother is a woman who buys her child too much.<sup>13</sup>

One of the many ways Sheehan was portrayed as a bad mother was her perceived disregard for her surviving children. She describes in her essay entitled “Day Seventeen: Go Home and Take Care of Your Kids” the various attacks she received that focused on the fact that she was not at home with her children. Here, in response to these attacks, Sheehan brings focus to the sexist nature of this allegation. She wonders if anyone has ever written to a man in the public sphere exhorting him to return home to care for his children. She writes,

Would anyone think of e-mailing George Bush when he is out and about ... telling him to go and take care of his kids? Does anyone write to any man and tell him to go home and take care of his kids? I have news for all of these people: my children are adults, and their dad is home to take care of them if they need any taking care of.<sup>14</sup>

Sheehan brings focus to and rejects the specific ideal that society has regarding the proper upbringing of children—that it should be done by the mother in the home of a married heterosexual couple. All it took for Sheehan to fall into the sphere of the bad mother was for her to be absent from her grown children's lives for even a short time.

Given that it was this sort of criticism Sheehan faced, it is no wonder that she wrote *Peace Mom*. In *Peace Mom*, she describes her life as a mother up to the point of Casey's death as being normal, yet incredibly fulfilling and blissful. She writes of her stereotypically perfect life that she "went from being the mom who did everyone's laundry, packed lunches, kissed boo-boos, tucked in at night, cleaned up everyone's messes, to being someone who fights for all of humanity's children, not just her own."<sup>15</sup> The book reads as an attempt, at times, to convince others (and herself) that she was not a bad mother and that she did everything she could for her children. She writes, "One thing that was sacred to Pat and me was bath- and bed-time ... we would tuck [the kids] in and individually tell them stories or talk about their days with them before kissing them good night...."<sup>16</sup> She seems at other times to be convinced that Casey's death is her fault and closes a chapter in *Peace Mom* by writing, "One of my motivations for the odyssey that I set upon after Casey was killed was to seek contrition for my mistake of a lifetime. Mea culpa. Mea maxima culpa. I am sorry Casey. I am sorry world. I promise to do better."<sup>17</sup> Sheehan believes, as do many other women today, that she has failed in her most important job. Frequently we attempt to stave off criticism of our decisions by making a self-criticism first as if that might relieve us of some of the pain or the words of some of their sting.

Just as our culture equates peace activism with motherhood, it also equates patriotism and motherhood. Sheehan is a patriotic person and has said that she loves the United States, or at least the America that she envisioned. She expresses this love of country when she writes, "Good-bye America ... you are not the country that I love and I finally realized no matter how much I sacrifice, I can't make you be that country unless

you want it. It's up to you now."<sup>18</sup> Sheehan's motherhood fuses with other aspects of her life, which includes the part of her that is patriotic.

Sheehan prefers to use the term "matriotism" rather than the more common term "patriotism" to refer to her love for the United States. In *Peace Mom*, Sheehan states that a woman wrote her a letter and used the term in reference to Sheehan.<sup>19</sup> Matriotism comes from the commingling of two words: maternal and patriot. Militarism depends on patriotism to function. Without the concept of duty to country, love for country, and nationalism, there would be little encouragement for young men and women to enlist in the armed services. Patriotism can also help those who lose loved ones in military conflict by serving as a justification for their loss and by recreating the dead soldier as a larger than life hero. Patriotism can be a crutch or it can be a lifeline depending on one's point of view.

According to Sheehan, patriotism's mirror opposite is matriotism.<sup>20</sup> Where patriotism is encapsulated in the saying "my country, right or wrong" matriotism acknowledges that governments make mistakes and believes that just because an idea is presented under the banner of the United States of America, it is not automatically correct, honest, or superior. In *Peace Mom* Cindy Sheehan describes matriotism as "the opposite of patriotism ... not to destroy it, but to be a yin to its yang and to balance out the destructive militarism of patriotism."<sup>21</sup> According to Sheehan, a matriot is at heart a pacifist and would no more send her own children, or the children of others, into a war, be it just or unjust. Sheehan states that a matriot, if she felt that a war was "just," would herself fight, rather than risk sending her own children—or the children of others—into harm's way.<sup>22</sup> While Sheehan believes that men are capable of being matriots, at the core of the concept is the idea that mothers would neither send their children to fight, nor would they want other mothers to do so. The ability of men to behave as matriots depends on their ability to cherish life and understand the importance of it without limiting the importance to their own children. To be considered matriots, men must embrace the importance of all children, as Sheehan writes in *Peace Mom*: "Matriotism above all is a commitment to truth and a celebration of the dignity of all life. Not just the unborn life that so many males seem to define as important."<sup>23</sup> Matriotism is a concept directly connected to the love that mothers have for children—their own or someone else's. Matriotism depends on the concept of motherhood as inherently peaceful. For Cindy Sheehan the beauty of matriotism is that while not everyone is a mother, everyone has a

biological mother. Even if that mother is not present in the child's life, or is not a loving mother, everyone was born from a mother. Thus, Sheehan claims there is an argument to be made for the ability of anyone (but especially women) to become a matriot:

Not everyone is a mother, but there is one universal truth that no one can deny or dispute no matter how hard he tries (and believe me, some will try): Everyone has a mother! Mothers give life, and if the child is lucky, mothers nurture life. And if a man has had a nurturing mother, he will also already have a sound basis for matriotism.<sup>24</sup>

The concept of matriotism, as Sheehan explained it, is an important aspect of her activism. She turns the concept of patriotism on its head and creates something that grows from motherhood. She refutes all that is wrong in patriotism and replaces it with its opposite, the good and positive from the maternal. Matriotism is at the heart of a maternal politics of peace, as it involves embracing and caring for children other than one's own, which is the argument Sheehan makes throughout her activism.

Sheehan writes frequently throughout *Peace Mom* of her desire to save other mothers from the pain she feels as a result of the death of Casey. She believes that she bears some of the blame for his death, but she is not willing to bear all of it. Her willingness to be a matriot influences the decisions that she makes as an activist, and her identity as the mother of a soldier killed in action informs her activist work even more. How the media-consuming public interprets these roles and identities, and how the media presents these identities, is vital to the continuing energy of the peace movement.

*American Mourning*, by Catherine Moy and Melanie Morgan, was a response to Sheehan's *Peace Mom*, and it strove to identify Sheehan with the identity of the bad mother. While the rhetoric of the "good mother" can be used both to promote and denigrate Sheehan's cause, the rhetoric of "bad mother" can be used only in ways which are harmful to her activism. Interestingly, the authors of *American Mourning* utilized each of these strategies in their book, placing Sheehan's motherhood and grieving experience next to similar experiences of Sheehan's polar opposite, the pro-war mother. Even when readers are offered the possibility of viewing Sheehan's work as a mother through the "good mother" lens, the authors of *American Mourning* frequently portray Sheehan as falling just short of the mark.

There are three themes throughout *American Mourning*: first, that Cindy Sheehan chose the “incorrect” way to grieve; second, that Sheehan was a poor mother and wife, thus leading to her poor choice in grieving methods; third, that organized activists are only acceptable when they are not antiwar. The book tells the story of two families, the Sheehan family and the Johnson family, who both lost children to the war in Iraq. The families are described as being similar in many ways. Both have strong ties to their churches and community, and patriotic feelings about the United States—particularly after 9/11. Both families’ lost sons, Casey and Justin, were selfless. The son of Joe and Jan Johnson, Justin, who died shortly after Casey, was attached to the same unit as Casey, and allegedly was Casey’s friend. The authors imply that while all these similarities existed, one family chose the correct path, but the other family was pulled down by a selfish and greedy mother who allowed her grieving to erupt in ways that were simply wrong, thus tearing the family apart. Moy and Morgan argue that “their [the Sheehan children’s] mourning is a part of their lives, a kind of normal for a family whose firstborn died so suddenly. But it is a mourning that cannot heal, because Cindy will do nothing to allow her grief to progress toward healing or coping.”<sup>25</sup> They assert that if Cindy Sheehan had simply grieved quietly without acting on her anger, hurt, and beliefs, she would not be responsible for the terrible pain her remaining children continue to feel.

Cindy Sheehan’s anger at the President for Casey’s death has been a driving force in her activities, but this is not acceptable behavior for a mother, according to Moy and Morgan. The authors comment that Johnson grieves for her son, but she does not lash out at others. She grieves quietly, acceptably, and unobtrusively. According to them, she keeps her grief to herself, whereas Sheehan forces her grief onto the world. Johnson welcomes the help and support of others, and she supports others in her family who also grieve, such as her brother-in-law, who reacts badly to the news of his nephew’s death, while Jan remains relatively calm and peaceful. As the authors write,

When an Atlanta reporter sat with Jan as she talked about Justin, Joe’s brother came in and cussed President Bush. Somebody was going to get the blame, and it might as well be Justin’s commander-in-chief.

“He was ranting and raving,” Jan said, “then he saw that I wasn’t blaming the president, and he figured, ‘If she ain’t blaming him, and she’s the mom, then what am I doing?’ He stopped.”<sup>26</sup>

The authors portray Jan's refusal to blame the individual who gave the order to go to war and thus sealed both Justin's and Casey's fate as bathed in the glow of good, selfless motherhood. When compared with Cindy Sheehan's activism born from anger, Jan's form of motherhood certainly seems more peaceful (and thus "better" and more in line with essentialized motherhood) than the other.

Moy and Morgan embrace the spirit of binary "us against them" thought in their book. Cindy Sheehan is portrayed as a bad mother throughout *American Mourning*, wherein her motherhood and her choices are placed under a microscope and examined for any possible sign of incompetence. Escaping so complete an examination unscathed would be impossible for the best of mothers. Even so, many of the authors' descriptions of Sheehan and her mothering are so stereotypical it is almost comical.

In one example of the microscopic examination of Sheehan's choices, Moy and Morgan go to great lengths to describe the filth in the Sheehan home. This description takes place while ostensibly providing proof that Casey had spoken with others about his desire to enlist in the military. According to Moy and Morgan, during an inspection of the rental home occupied by the Sheehans in Vacaville, the home was found in such atrocious shape that the inspectors were "shocked."<sup>27</sup> As the authors establish the circumstances surrounding Casey's chance meeting with an Air Force veteran and their resulting discussion regarding military life, they do so across the backdrop of Cindy Sheehan's allegedly slovenly housekeeping:

Casey answered the door and didn't want to let the two men inside, but eventually he stepped aside. As they crossed the threshold, the stench of ammonia and burning candles almost knocked them over.

"It was like going into the SPCA," Bob said. "There wasn't one square-foot of the carpet that wasn't peed on."

Bob surveyed the house so he could report to the owner. The microwave was thick with filth, and the oven door was torn from its hinges. Blades from the overhead fan were missing and Casey said the kids had used them for a school project. The backyard was overgrown, the once-clean redwood deck was now painted blue, and the pool was destroyed. "It looked like somebody had skate-boarded in it," Bob said.

Some bedrooms upstairs had bare mattresses lying on the floor,  
Bob said. "They were the kids' rooms."<sup>28</sup>

The authors present the description as proof that Sheehan is a bad mother, but it could as easily have been used as an indictment of the property owner as a slumlord. Sheehan, not the property owner, was the person held responsible by the authors for the disrepair of the rental home. This extensive description of the home occupied by the Sheehans is offered in the context of a chance meeting with one of the home inspectors, Larry, who speaks with Casey regarding his decision to enlist. What purpose is served in describing at great lengths the alleged filth and disrepair of the Sheehan home if not to infer that Sheehan was a bad mother? She was such a bad mother, this passage suggests, that the home she created for her children was so foul that her eldest would be forced to enlist in the military to "escape" it.<sup>29</sup> There are many reasons young adults choose to enlist in the military, and a mother's housekeeping habits rarely factor very strongly in those choices. Furthermore, if the reader accepts as true the description of the home, then it begs the question as to what responsibilities the other family members had with regard to housekeeping chores. The cleanliness of the home, the authors suggest, was solely Sheehan's responsibility, as was the upkeep of the yard, the deck, and the pool. Sheehan's job duties have thus expanded from child rearing and maid to painter, repairman, yard maintainer, and finally pool boy. These duties all fall on the shoulders of the mother of the house, who also usually works outside the home as well.

The authors are taking Sheehan to task in this passage for her allegedly slovenly housekeeping, a hallmark of poverty in the minds of some. However, a subtext of this passage is the issue of class. Poor women are more likely to be placed in the category of the bad mother than are middle-class women. Annette R. Appell makes this point in her essay "On Fixing 'Bad' Mothers and Saving Their Children" when she writes that

these "bad" mothers become, and often remain, bad mothers because they have made bad choices, or, due to their poverty or other circumstances, did not have real choices. In either event, these are the mothers who were caught, failed to measure up, and lost their children as a result. These mothers tend to be poor and are disproportionately of color.<sup>30</sup>

Sheehan and her family were certainly not poverty-stricken, but neither were they truly well off. Sheehan never specifically states what her husband, Pat, did for a living. She does, however, describe a number of the jobs she herself held, for example, as a part-time bookkeeper for a restaurant and as youth pastor at a church. Sheehan's jobs alone could not have kept the family far above the poverty level.

Following the excessive portrayal of the rental home, the authors describe the chance meeting between Casey and one of the inspectors, who was a military veteran. The home inspector, Larry (as the voice of knowledge through his own military experience), counsels Casey regarding the various branches of service. Larry then states he believes that Casey used the military as a way to escape his family: "As far as I could determine, he looked at the military as a way to escape [the mess at home]." <sup>31</sup> The message in this passage is clear. If Cindy Sheehan had been a "good mother," stayed at home, kept a clean house, and done what she was "supposed to," then her son would not have had to escape her. The authors indicted Sheehan's mothering skills in the death of her son. They portrayed Sheehan's activism as something good mothers would not do, or would not have to do because their children would be happy to stay home. Moy and Morgan also provided the public with fodder for a discussion of Sheehan's mothering and dismissed the discussion she sought to begin. In so doing, they demonized her as a mother and thus invalidated her activism and sought to muzzle her message of peace.

Placing *Peace Mom* alongside *American Mourning* allows us to see the multiple ways in which binary thinking works in our discussions about the war, peace, politics, and motherhood. Where *Peace Mom* presents all aspects of Sheehan's motherhood as perfect and positive, *American Mourning* focuses on all the ways in which it is faulty. Common sense tells us that the truth likely falls somewhere in between these two concepts. Similarly, Sheehan's activism is presented in both a positive and negative light in *Peace Mom*, whereas *American Mourning* presents only one positive form of activism—that of the pro-war side.

The authors of *American Mourning* frame Sheehan's activism as unseemly for a grieving mother, as if her position makes the concept of successful activism impossible for someone who is truly grief-stricken. Throughout the course of the book, the authors stress the point of how organized and media-savvy Cindy Sheehan seems to be. To the authors, the most offensive and troubling aspect of Sheehan's activism is her skill in disseminating her message. Sheehan has always stated that it was

serendipity that helped her activism get started and that she did not go to Texas with the intent of doing all that she did. Moy and Morgan frame the situation in a more cunning and cynical light by writing that “in 2005, Cindy already had plans to be in Dallas for a speech at the Veterans for Peace convention. As soon as she sent the e-mail, people responded in droves. The media weren’t far behind, thanks to Team Cindy, which brought sophisticated communications equipment to Crawford, including satellites, to get her message out.”<sup>32</sup> According to Moy and Morgan, Sheehan was accompanied by “twelve media-savvy anti-Bush buddies” and that they were “better equipped than seasoned Boy Scouts.”<sup>33</sup>

Comparing the authors’ descriptions of Sheehan’s activism with descriptions of other activists who do not share Sheehan’s pro-peace stance reveals the extremes of Morgan and Moy’s text. The authors describe how Move America Forward (MAF) determined to fight back against Sheehan’s pro-peace activism. As an activist organization, MAF would face many of the same sorts of issues that Sheehan did: getting their message out to the mainstream public, raising money to continue their activism, and getting others involved in their cause. However, when MAF faced issues such as media coverage or raising money, the authors frame the discussion in the similar binary form: it is us against them, good versus bad, and Sheehan is the bad and MAF is the good. In describing one MAF supporter’s response to the media attention that their caravan to Texas was receiving, the authors quote Joe Wierzbicki, a caravan participant, as saying that when he saw the group had made CNN Headline News, “We’re now on the national radar and my adrenaline flows.”<sup>34</sup> Sheehan’s media exploits, however, were framed in such a way that if she expressed any sort of excitement over her exposure in the news (an understandable reaction for both Sheehan and Wierzbicki), then she would merely have succeeded in reinforcing the claim by pro-war circles that Sheehan was only pursuing attention, not justice.

Moy and Morgan’s comparisons of Camp Casey with the activities of MAF extended also to the amenities provided to the protestors. The authors describe Camp Casey protestors as enjoying “tables of gourmet food: sodas, sparkling water, platters of exquisitely catered focaccia bread sandwiches, delicious finger foods, and tasty pastas—all piled high on tables under the air-cooled tent.”<sup>35</sup> In opposition to this opulence is the description of the MAF site, where “local firefighters spent hours in the heat tending smoking barbecues, and the local ladies made baked beans. The firefighters did it for one of their own who had just returned

from Iraq.”<sup>36</sup> Moy and Morgan portray Sheehan in quite a few contradictory ways: grieving mother, good mother turned bad, greedy, narcissistic, and now excessive. Following the reading of the above passage, the reader can almost imagine Sheehan lounging in comfort and telling the news media that she is disinterested in the counter-protestors and to “let them eat cake.”

Cindy Sheehan received criticism for both her activism and her mothering, two activities that society has often believed to go hand in hand due to its overwhelming desire to view mothering as inherently peaceful. Sheehan’s critics used a mother’s most deeply held belief against her: no matter what she did, it was not good enough, whether in her mothering or her work. Sheehan’s belief that she failed as a mother can be seen playing out both in the critics’ discussions of her mothering as well as in their examples of Sheehan’s activism. Sheehan’s detractors criticize her for being attention-seeking (which is, ironically enough, an important aspect of successful activism). They state that she should instead devote more energy to praising and honoring her dead son. Sheehan addressed the frequency of this criticism when she entitled her letter “Good Riddance Attention Whore” announcing her retirement.<sup>37</sup> In an interesting exercise in circular reasoning, author Meghan Gibbons argues that it was Sheehan’s own activism that undermined her success as an activist. Gibbons writes in her article “On the Home Front: The Politics of Motherhood” that Sheehan’s

finger-pointing at unrelated issues like the administration’s response to the flooding in New Orleans and her preaching on issues on which she’s no expert, such as U.S.–Israeli relations, has fallen into the trap. Her pronouncements distract from her real qualification to speak out in public: being a mother who has lost a son in the war.<sup>38</sup>

Sheehan stated that she found her voice through activism. However, according to Gibbons, Sheehan is qualified only to speak out on the issue related to her motherhood, the death of her son in the Iraq War. Why should Sheehan be limited in her activism to only peace-related work? Her identity does not begin and end at the name “mother,” but it is within this small and confining box that U.S. culture seems to feel women who are mothers should remain.

Sheehan’s early activism centered on the war in Iraq and her desire to see it ended. She spoke out against the Bush administration as the

instigators and creators of the war; however, as Sheehan progressed through her mourning for Casey, she began to broaden the scope of her activism. Sheehan was angered that more was not being done by Congress for the military veterans and families, that the war in Iraq continued, and that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had declared impeachment of President Bush or Vice President Cheney to be “off the table.”<sup>39</sup> Her response to this anger was to declare her candidacy as an independent and to challenge Pelosi for her seat in Congress. After collecting the necessary 10,198 signatures needed to place her name on the ballot, Sheehan officially qualified for inclusion in the race on August 8, 2008. Sheehan’s activism through her political campaign focuses most strongly on ending the war in Iraq, but she also devotes time to workers’ rights, affordable healthcare and housing, and affordable education options.

Sheehan’s expanded social activism, while grounded in her peace work, is based in some ways on her relationship with her motherhood. Sheehan suggested that she betrayed her son and her country when she did not become more active in the peace movement before Casey’s death when she wrote, “... before I could blame George Bush, or the media, or Congress, or the American people, for Casey’s death, I had to realize that I also had quite a bit of my dear boy’s blood on my own hands.”<sup>40</sup> She believes that having lived through the experience of losing her son, it is her responsibility to ensure that others do not have to repeat her suffering, which is a concept quite similar to the parent imparting wisdom to her children and attempting to guide them away from mistakes she herself has made. Sheehan’s activism, including her run for public office, grows from her commitment to peace and her commitment to help others. As she wrote regarding her protest march from Atlanta, Georgia, to Washington, D.C., in July 2007, the intent was to “gather a people’s movement for humanity. The longer BushCo are in office the less chance we have of recovering the heart and soul of our nation, saving our soldiers and the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, and saving the planet from corporate and individual waste and pollution.”<sup>41</sup> While her strongest motive is one of peace, it has (as is frequently the case with activism) grown into something larger. Her identity as a mother continues to be pertinent in her activism, not because mothers have some biological claim to peacefulness, but instead because motherhood is such a vital and imperative concept in Sheehan’s own personal identity.

Critiques of Sheehan’s mothering choices have no place in the discussion of her activism. Whatever identity she might embrace, how Sheehan mothers has no bearing on whether or not she is correct about

the Iraq War. These critiques work to discredit Sheehan in public as well as to convince Sheehan to leave public life. Sheehan's ability and willingness to speak out worked to open the eyes and ears of the public to the atrocities being inflicted upon military families every day through the death of loved ones in a pointless war. Sheehan further offers us new ways to look at motherhood that are different from how we look at them stereotypically. Ultimately, what is accomplished by a critique of Sheehan's mothering as it relates to her peace activism is to distract from honest discussion on the merits of Sheehan's beliefs. Thus, the public discussion stays mired within a limited topic, which is one important to only two individuals: the mother and the mothered. The truly urgent discussions about the Iraq War go unspoken and the country comes no closer to healing. Meanwhile, Cindy Sheehan goes on suffering through the question all mothers ultimately ask themselves: what could she have done better?

#### NOTES

1. David Barstow, "Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand," *New York Times*, April 20, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/washington/20generals.html>.

2. Cindy Sheehan, "An Open Letter to George W. Bush," in *Not One More Mother's Child* (Kihei, HI: Koa, 2005), 3.

3. RealVoices.org, *Cindy Sheehan: A Mother's Tears*, 2004, [www.archive.org/details/sheehan](http://www.archive.org/details/sheehan) (August 9, 2008).

4. Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 6.

5. Cindy Sheehan, *Peace Mom: A Mother's Journey Through Heartache to Activism* (New York: Atria, 2006), 128.

6. Amanda Ripley, "A Mother and the President," *Time*, August 15, 2005, [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1093760,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1093760,00.html).

7. Ibid.

8. Christopher Hitchens, "Cindy Sheehan's Sinister Piffle," *Slate*, August 15, 2005, [www.slate.com/id/2124500/](http://www.slate.com/id/2124500/).

9. William Kristol, "They Don't Really Support the Troops," *The Weekly Standard*, July 30, 2007, [www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/013/901rhkhq.asp](http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/013/901rhkhq.asp).

10. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give the Brittney Spears phenomenon the attention it deserves; however, I bring focus to Spears in this

context because her treatment so succinctly demonstrates the concept of hyper-visibility of mothers in the media.

11. Jessica Lynch was a soldier who served in Iraq in 2003 and was injured and captured by Iraqi forces when the convoy she was riding with became lost. Lynch was rescued on April 1, 2003, by U.S. Special Forces soldiers, and the rescue was filmed and received substantial press coverage. Lynch and others have accused the U.S. government of using her capture and rescue for propaganda purposes to support the Iraq War.

12. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, eds., *"Bad Mothers": The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 2.

13. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

14. Cindy Sheehan, "Day Seventeen: Go Home and Take Care of Your Kids," in *Not One More Mother's Child* (Kihei, HI: Koa, 2005), 118–119.

15. Cindy Sheehan, *Peace Mom*, 127–128.

16. *Ibid.*, 10.

17. *Ibid.*, 36.

18. Cindy Sheehan, "Good Riddance."

19. Cindy Sheehan, *Peace Mom*, 212.

20. *Ibid.*, 213.

21. *Ibid.*, 213.

22. *Ibid.*, 214.

23. *Ibid.*, 216.

24. *Ibid.*, 214.

25. Catherine Moy and Melanie Morgan, *American Mourning: The Intimate Story of Two Families Joined by War, Torn by Beliefs* (Nashville, TN: WND Books, 2006), 201.

26. *Ibid.*, 45–46.

27. *Ibid.*, 62.

28. *Ibid.*, 63.

29. *Ibid.*, 63.

30. Annette R. Appell, "On Fixing 'Bad' Mothers and Saving Their Children," in Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (eds.), *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 356.

31. Catherine Moy and Melanie Morgan, *American Mourning*, 63.

32. *Ibid.*, 130.

33. *Ibid.*, 130.

34. *Ibid.*, 153.

35. *Ibid.*, 161.

36. Ibid., 161.

37. Cindy Sheehan, "Good Riddance Attention Whore," [www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2007/5/28/12530/1525/616/340089](http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2007/5/28/12530/1525/616/340089). Accessed August 9, 2008.

38. Meghan Gibbons, "On the Home Front: The Politics of Motherhood," *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2005, Final ed., sec. B.

39. Susan Ferrechio, "Pelosi: Bush Impeachment 'Off the Table,'" *New York Times*, November 8, 2006, [www.nytimes.com/cq/2006/11/08/cq\\_1916.html](http://www.nytimes.com/cq/2006/11/08/cq_1916.html). Accessed August 9, 2008.

40. Cindy Sheehan, *Peace Mom*, 130.

41. Cindy Sheehan, "Summer of Love '07: On a Journey for Humanity," [www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2007/7/5/14125/87102/616/354327](http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2007/7/5/14125/87102/616/354327). Accessed August 9, 2008.

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