

No One Wants to Talk to Cindy Sheehan on Inauguration Day (Or Any Other)

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The Spectacle

By STAN GOFF

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Back in Raleigh now, and I can't shake the feeling that I've spent the last two days in a dream.

Arrive in DC on the morning of the 19th, and we are hit with horizontal snow and a Siberian wind chill, worse because we are standing in LBJ park taking cover on the leeward sides of the big oaks while our Gold Star families talk to the press. Military Families Speak Out has gathered ten family members - widows, sisters, dads, aunts, grandmothers of those killed in Iraq. One was killed a year later when he pulled his own trigger at the end of a post-traumatic spiral. His sister said he couldn't quit talking about a fellow troop who slit the throat of an Iraqi girl. Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed in an ambush last April, seems positively normal until she is asked to relive the moment she first saw the military sedan in front of her house

with the three men in uniform. Then her breath is taken away again by that moment of terrible recognition, and she sobs.

Across the foot bridge is the North parking lot of the Pentagon. The Gold Star families have written the Secretary of Defense time and again requesting a meeting. They want to ask him to explain why their loved ones had to die. No reply, of course.

So today they - with a few others of us who still have living family members in the service - will walk across that foot bridge and keep going toward Rumsfeld's office until we are stopped.

We are halfway across the bridge before we can see through the driving snow that there is a phalanx of black clad, armed and body-armored police waiting for us, the blue lights whipping around on top of their cruisers. Someone has monitored our emails. When the treacherous dads and grandmothers approach and attempt to negotiate entry, the burly African American police spokesperson seems embarrassed and discomfited by the little drama. He's been sent out here to the far reaches of a giant, empty parking lot in a snow storm to handle a situation that is pregnant with "political sensitivity," and he's been given not an ounce of useful guidance. At one point, he apologetically dissembles, saying that they didn't even know we were coming. Our delegation can't suppress a little sardonic laughter over that one.

The bereaved finally leave a stack of 8 x 10 color photos of the dead boys - taken while they were alive, posed in uniform - and ask the cop to try and ensure the delivery of the snow-wet portraits to the Office of the Secretary of Defense of the United States of America.

Later, at St. Aloysius Church, as we shake the snow off our outer garments and the blood rushes back into our frozen peripheries and we settle into chairs with hot coffee, a kind of sleepy thaw-torpor comes over us.

The next day - inauguration day - I give a brief speech at Malcolm X Park. My comment that war-supporting John Kerry can go straight to hell with this administration hits two nerves, and a grumble harmonizes with the wild shrieks of approval, the former coming from David Cobb and his entourage of feint-hearted Greens. The "go to hell, John" crowd is far and away the majority, and the best sign I see all day is there: "I voted for Kerry, and now I'm carrying this fucking sign." The DC Anti-War Network (DAWN), who organized the rally, is almost three thousand strong when they march away. At the end of the march they carry dozens of flag-draped coffins.

I begin working my way back to a checkpoint at D Street and 7th, where I will try to join the "Turn Your Back on Bush" contingent of military families and vets who have staked out a

position along the parade route near Mellon Memorial Fountain.

On the way, I drop into Harry's Hotel to grab coffee and a sandwich at the bar. The place is infested with expensively clad white people, and brown people are waiting on them. Today is a good day for both. The white people have their leader to celebrate, and the brown people are making out on tips. On the television above the bar, though, CNN plays. CNN was almost in the direct employ of Donald Rumsfeld in the past, and is trying today to pretend that this inauguration is some momentous event. Still they still get a report from Christiana Amanpour in Iraq, in which the British-Iranian airline heiress and CNN war-zone correspondent uses two D-words to describe the situation there - disaster and debacle.

The crowd in the restaurant-bar become momentarily still. It's like someone farted. When the smiling reporters reappear on the big screen to cover the coronation again, everyone relaxes, and they go back to their five-dollar bottles of exotic beer and their coffee and their Pinot Noir.

I leave having caught bits and pieces from the TV of the whole weird spectacle. Encrypted in the speeches is a state of general war on all who fail to obey. Caligula.

There is to be an Uncle Tom Gala featuring Armstrong Williams, where the Party of White Supremacy can take a moment to fawn over beaming black reactionaries and trump the brain-dead "cherish diversity" liberals of "the opposition." "Massa loves my ass" confronts the cherish-diversity liberals with a stark fact of history; the planter aristocracy cherished the fuck out of diversity. It was the plantation demographic.

In the street, a smug triumphalism emanates from the wind-bitten Anglo-Saxon cheeks of Republican patriarchs in their thousand dollar coats. Clutching their arms to balance on spiked heels are their chinchilla and mink clad mates - the Prozac and anticipation of the days events have given them a slightly crazed and euphoric look. I remember that look from my youth when my siblings and I would hide in the woods to watch Pentecostal tent revivals. But the country women at the tent revivals had no minks, and they couldn't match the hair products that are in evidence here today. I'm thinking that the hair of Republican women could stop a nine-millimeter round. Maybe it's an additional security measure.

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science fiction. They see the capital dome in the distance, but they don't see the freezing beggars they bypass or the sleeping homeless bodies buried under mounds of cast-off clothing in the alcoves.

There is no way I'm getting through the checkpoint. There are thousands waiting at the little bottleneck, many with inauguration tickets that won't magic-carpet them through the team of over-worked cops who are checking every jacket, every bag, every pair of shoes. This has forced the exultant Republicans to mingle with legions of protesters. Outside the cordon, the numbers of protesters almost match that of the Buffoon-worshippers.

Ever so often, something about being logjammed together with the protesters inexplicably penetrates and disrupts the happy-happy force-field, and one of them will snap. Then their eyes flash with the strange breathless rage that only an assault on illusion engenders. A blue-haired matron seems suddenly overcome with it when she marches straight up to a 30-ish woman standing in an unobstructed and unobstructing spot with a sign that says, "Bush Lied." The old woman's eyes are alight with frustration (and fear!) when she scolds the younger woman for "violating my right to see my president." The younger woman says she isn't stopping anyone from doing anything - that the police are - but the invisible armor comes back up and the blue-hair suddenly can't hear anything but marching bands again as she stalks away. Perhaps she had eaten earlier at

Harry's and is still seething about Amanpour's less than glowing description of her Idiot Prince's liberty-bearing crusade in Mesopotamia.

I've seen enough. I have another speech to give to a collection of lefties tonight, where I will ask them to come to Fayetteville on the 19th of March. But I've hit the wall in some sense, watching that unstable little old woman and these insufferably ignorant and arrogant white men in their thousand dollar coats, and the dead chinchilla parade, and the whole spectacle that now unaccountably calls up the image in my head of fat growing around someone's heart.

Everyone hates a party-pooper.

No one wants to talk to Cindy Sheehan. No one wants to see her weep. No one wants to smell the bodies under the rubble in Fallujah. No one wants to know about the furious masses around the world that will make a mockery of this whole futile exhibition.

That's our job now, I'm thinking. To make them see what they don't want to see.

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