

Cindy Sheehan's Exit

I have to admit that I was quite surprised when I read that Cindy Sheehan is leaving the peace movement. After reading her explanation for the move, I was less surprised, but still a bit disappointed. After reading the piece, it is clear that Sheehan has discovered that politics can be an ugly affair. When one is the focus of a political movement like Ms. Sheehan became, they become even uglier.



Cindy Sheehan

Her departure will leave a hole, but it should not leave a vacuum. After all, there are thousands of US residents that have been hurt by the loss of a loved one in Iraq or Afghanistan, unfortunately. In addition, there are millions around the world that are just plain fed up and pissed off about these wars and the death and destruction they are causing.

Ms. Sheehan is planning to go home and raise her remaining children. That's a good thing. Her screed makes it clear that she is burned out from her past two years of anti-war activism and doing something real like caring for children will surely put her back in touch with the better side of humanity.

This move is similar to the retreat from politics and the streets that much of an entire generation underwent in the years

following the government murders at Kent State and Jackson State in 1970 during antiwar protests. Another side of this retreat was the turn away from politics and towards culture and religion.

Unlike caring for one's children, the latter two were mere escapism and somewhat solipsistic. One could argue that these phenomena destroyed the potential for radical change in the United States, but a more appropriate analysis would merely claim that here in the US we had (and have) the luxury to stop fighting against the war because we do not live where the bombs

are exploding and the assault weapons firing.

Ms. Sheehan makes it clear that she still opposes these wars and the power mongers who insist on continuing it.

Indeed, she saves her harshest words of her farewell message for these men and women who "move them (US soldiers) around like pawns on a chessboard of destruction" and are "worried more about elections than people."

Naturally, this includes the Democrats as well as the Republicans. And that, is the crux of Sheehan's despair. She honestly thought that the Democrats were different.

Now that they have proved they are not, she is ready to give it all up and, by doing so, hand the forces of war and reaction a victory that they will surely relish. Yet, there will probably be some tentative cries from various Democrats telling Cindy that their party is not a war party and that she needs to hang in there.

In another section of her letter, Sheehan directs her anger and frustration at the so-called leadership of the antiwar movement.

Pointing a well-deserved finger at the movement and its divisions, she writes: "I

have also tried to work within a peace movement that often puts personal egos above peace and human life. This group won't work with that group; he won't attend an event if she is going to be there.... It is hard to work for peace when the very movement that is named after it has so many divisions."

What else can one say except, once again Ms. Sheehan has drawn an incorrect conclusion. As many others have written when addressing this issue, who cares about the pettiness of egos and power players in the movement? If one opposes the war, one gets in the streets and opposes it. Screw the fools jockeying for a future or a media spot.

The war will be ended by the mass protest of the people who oppose it, not by getting a director's job with MoveOn, UFPJ, or some other antiwar organization.

The most poignant paragraph in Sheehan's statement begins with her sad acknowledgment that her son died for absolutely nothing. One can only imagine the emotions that come from this realization.

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Strength in Numbers

Europe today presents a contradictory picture. It is a land of peace, democracy, and the rule of law. It is also a land of prosperity; its economy is competitive, its currency strong, inflation is low, and its standards of living are among the highest in the world.

Europeans benefit from very high levels of social protection, inexpensive, high-quality education, strict environmental standards, and excellent infrastructure. In addition, Europe has unmatched cultural diversity and great natural beauty. It all sounds like a utopian dream.

With its 500 million people and the world's largest single market, Europe, even if not seen by the world as a real union, is still an economic giant. But politically it is a dwarf—and shrinking.

Ours is a century of large states, and the further rise of China, India, and the United States, and Japan will soon make the largest European powers look puny.

Even today the three largest EU members barely manage to offset Europe's loss of political weight, much less to stem the tide.

With a strong EU, this development will only intensify.

The world outside Europe is changing rapidly, and it won't wait for Europeans mired in an agonising process of self-discovery. The alternatives are clear: keep up or be left behind.

In America, despite the current obsession with Iraq, a strategic view is taking hold that defines the 21st century mainly in terms of the triad of China, India, and the US. Japan's role as an American ally is viewed as a given.

The relationship with Russia is placed somewhere between partnership and renewed rivalry, but Russia is not really seen as a strategic challenge. And, in strategic terms, the rest is silence—which applies also to Europe.

The bottom line for America is that while Europe no longer creates problems, for the foreseeable future, Europe, due to its lack of unity, will not be willing or able to contribute to solving the world's problems.

Europe's involvement in Nato's efforts to stabilise Afghanistan only emphasises this

ambiguity.

On the one hand, Europe's role in Afghanistan is appreciated by the US, but on the other, it also exposes the Europeans' weakness and the Alliance's limited capabilities.

While the US political elite has not written off Nato, expectations about its crisis-solving competence are fast being scaled down. This view of Europe as a negligible political entity is fully shared in Beijing, Moscow, and New Delhi.

Within just a few weeks, this trio will be called on to make a vital decision on the future of the EU.

That decision concerns the constitutional treaty and its prospects. What the new foundational document is called in the end is a minor point, what is essential for Europe's future is that constitutional reform is revived and gives Europe a strong foundation.

The question, then, is whether the new leaders, as early as next month, succeed in a new effort to adopt the vital institutional reforms that the enlarged union requires.

The stakes are thus very high for Europe in the coming weeks. If the substance of the constitutional treaty is saved, Europe will increasingly develop into a global player.

Only then will the transatlantic alliance also have a future. To be sure, this process will take time, and there will be other setbacks.

But the fundamental direction will be correct, and there will be real cause for optimism.

If, on the other hand, this attempt, too, should fail, or end in a lazy, useless compromise, Europe's decline will accelerate and transatlantic relations will become increasingly turbulent.

It is now up to Merkel, Sarkozy, and Brown to prove—despite all the differences that may exist between them—that they understand the challenges that globalisation poses for Europe: the EU member states will be able to defend their interests in the world of the 21st century only to the extent that the EU itself is strong.

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Lee Should Avoid Yasukuni

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has tacitly approved a proposed visit to Yasukuni Shrine by Taiwan's former President Lee Teng-hui, who arrived in Japan on May 30. If Lee does go to Yasukuni, it will be a provocation aimed as much at the United States as at China.

Lee, 84, says he wants to pay respects to his elder brother, who is enshrined at Yasukuni. Because Taiwanese no longer need visas to visit Japan, the Japanese government can plausibly deny any responsibility for what Lee does while in Japan.

Indeed, Abe has already, in effect, condoned talk about a Lee visit to Yasukuni by saying that Lee has a right to religious freedom. But there is more

to it than that.

Lee, whose Japanese name is Masao Iwasato, is the son of a Taiwanese who became a minor police official during Japan's occupation of Taiwan from 1895 to 1945.

A graduate of Kyoto Imperial University, Lee has missed few opportunities to poke China in the eye. He once said he preferred Japanese to Chinese culture, and in 2005 legislative elections in Taiwan even dressed up as a samurai and hurled threats across the Taiwan Strait.

A Presbyterian, Lee has called himself a Moses who intends to lead the people of Taiwan to a "promised land"—de jure independence from China.

The U.S. opposes China's use of force or its threat to

bring Taiwan to heel. But America has no interest in seeing Japan help independence advocates on Taiwan provoke a war with China, a nuclear-armed great power.

If such a war were to occur, Japan might offer to do no more than hold Uncle Sam's coat.

Lee's elder brother is enshrined in Yasukuni because he was a sailor drafted by the Imperial Japanese Navy and killed in the Battle of Manila early in February 1945.

While not as well known as the Nanjing Massacre, the Rape of Manila was an orgy of violence against hapless Filipino civilians perpetrated by Japanese sailors as U.S. forces closed in.

Congressman Henry

Hyde, an Illinois Republican, then chairman of the House International Relations Committee, wrote to then House Speaker Dennis Hastert when Hyde learned that Koizumi wanted to address a joint sitting of Congress.

Hyde said if that happened, "Mr. Koizumi would dishonor the place where President Franklin Roosevelt made his 'Day of Infamy' speech after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor."

But Koizumi was more a maverick than a rightist. He did not visit Yasukuni before becoming prime minister, and did so in office mainly because the Chinese kept insisting that he stay away and he did not wish to kowtow to Beijing.

Abe is something else. A

regular visitor to Yasukuni before he became prime minister, he gives every impression that he shares the sentiments of his maternal grandfather, former Prime Minister and unindicted war criminal Nobusuke Kishi—that the only thing to be regretted about World War II is that Japan lost.

Abe has stayed away from Yasukuni since becoming prime minister, but only as a tactical move.

His tacit approval of a possible visit there by Lee is a clear indication of what he really thinks.

No doubt, the Japanese Foreign Ministry and others are still hoping to see Lee from going to Yasukuni, citing, for example, concerns about his safety.

More broadly, the U.S. has



Lee Teng-hui

a big job on its hands in trying to bring a "rising" China peacefully into the global system. America's task will be even harder if Japan becomes a wild card.

If Lee does go to Yasukuni, he will do so with Abe's connivance. That will be a further indication that Japan may be becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

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Too Much Guided Democracy

As Southeast Asia prepares to mark 10 years since the collapse of the Thai currency and the onset of the Asian financial crisis, it would be comforting to look back and reflect on a decade of reform and lessons learned.

But while many changes have indeed been introduced with the aim of preventing another currency crisis that leads to sharp economic recessions, the major political reforms some thought would stem from the crisis have happened only fitfully.

So even if the currency speculators have been seen off, the region continues to endure social and economic inequality that stunts growth and sustains political risk.

Before July 1997, the paucity of broadly representative and accountable democratic government in the region was lamentable, but often excused in the face of soaring economic growth figures.

Afterward, as foreign investment dried up and poverty rates increased, political change was deemed necessary for future stability and growth. Poverty levels in Indonesia, for example, fell from 40% in 1976 to just under 12% in 1996, but climbed back up to 26% in 1998 and today hover around 18%.

After the fall of the authoritarian president Suharto in 1998, Indonesia entered a long and agonizing era of reform during which one government after another promised to tackle corruption and cement in place the foundations of truly representative democratic government.

Looking back over this often frustrating decade, Indonesia has no doubt made real progress.

Democracy is firmly in place, the media are free, and government is much more accountable as a result. Administration has been decentralized and Indonesia's far-flung regions enjoy a real measure of autonomy that has started to unlock untapped or previously mismanaged economic potential.

District officers once drawn from the ranks of the military are now directly elected. Less progress has been made tackling corruption, though unlike in many other parts of Southeast Asia, the current government is at least trying.

Elsewhere in the region, old habits and traditions die hard. Thailand, the epicenter of the financial crisis, spent the initial post-crisis period in a period of frantic International Monetary Fund-guided reform.

But this quickly grew tired of austerity; the urban middle classes clamored for the "easy come" prosperity of the go-go 1990s, forgetting all about the "easy go" that ensued.

In Malaysia and Singapore, the mantra of reform soon gave way to the impulse to protect and preserve state-owned assets from the wave of foreign ownership that swept other parts of Southeast Asia post-1997.

The financial crisis was expected to make a dent in Malaysia's rigorously enforced preferential assistance for ethnic Malays, known as the New Economic Policy, and open up Singapore's state sector to foreign investment.

Instead, both countries relaxed rules so that foreign banks and other firms could operate more freely, but core assets have stayed off-limits to foreign buyers.

This was reform at half-speed, and the result was a fairly unchanged landscape.

Given all this, there have been several periods since 1997 when economists and commentators speculated that the region might slip again into crisis. Governments continue to manipulate their currencies to maintain lower exchange rates that attract investment and beat labor costs down, but which also undermine the value of ordinary people's savings and drive up the costs of imported goods and services.

Ten years on, Thailand is still imposing capital controls and the inequalities enforced by Malaysia's New Economic Policy persist.

The real problem here isn't economic reform, but rather a stubborn reluctance to allow untrammelled political change. For decades, democracy has been only half-embraced in Southeast Asia—allowed just enough freedom and representation to keep people off the streets and prevent them demanding more of a say in how they are governed, yet imposing enough limits on freedom to preserve the elite political and economic status quo.

As far as Southeast Asia's current generation of leaders are concerned, the beauty of this more defined and constrained democracy is that it prevents the undermining of long-established ties of patronage at the apex of society. These ties promote the stability that businesses crave; they also perpetuate the wealth of a few by stifling competition and limiting broad-based economic growth.

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Macavity's Moment

It is hard to know what Gordon Brown thinks about many things, except prudence and stability (in favour) and child poverty (against). Like T.S. Eliot's elusive ginger cat, Mr Brown has perfected the art of being absent at critical moments, particularly when tough decisions needed to be made on subjects not accommodated even within his remarkably elastic definition of the Treasury port-

folio.

Foreign policy, crime and justice, the functioning of the constitution: all are subjects on which his views are much guessed but little known. On the last of these, though, kites have been flown and a broad promise made that the incoming prime minister will restore some authority to parliament to correct the tilt of power towards the executive.

Such a move would be welcome, if surprising,

from a politician who is drawn towards centralised power like a cat to catnip.

So much the better if a separation and rebalancing of power between the arms of government is coupled with a reversal of the regrettable drift towards the state exercising more authority over the individual.

Ten years of sofa government under Tony Blair have comprehensively exploded the myth that

there is a trade-off between efficiency and accountability in government.

Mr Blair's barristerial style may have produced flurries of decisions, or at least announcements, but they frequently fell apart when properly examined.

Earlier and more comprehensive scrutiny by cabinet and parliament may mean decisions take longer, but it also reduces the likelihood they will later have to be expen-

sively and messily reversed.

Restoring authority to parliament will mean restraining the party whips' desire to control select committees, allowing the chairmanship of a big committee to be a proper job in itself, not a step towards a big ministerial post nor a compensation for failing to get one.

It will mean giving committees more resources and teeth to conduct

investigations into the effects of past decisions, and stop trying to control the outcome through manipulating tame members of parliament on those committees.

And it will mean letting parliament hear big policy changes first from their prime minister rather than seeing them trailed in pliant newspapers.

To show he is serious about treating parliament and the people like grown-ups, there are three

things Mr Brown can do right now: ditch the expensive, invasive and futile identity card scheme; throw his weight behind a reversal of the absurd decision to exempt MPs from freedom of information laws, and follow through his plan that the prerogative to declare

war should be removed from the executive and given to parliament.

Only concrete actions will give credibility to Mr Brown's words. Macavity must not just show himself consistently in speech but also promise to heed his laws.

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