

AUGUST 10

Rage against the killing of the light

Mid-August 2005 may be remembered as a moment in U.S. history when the president could no longer get away with the media trick of solemnly patting death on its head.

Unreality is a hallmark of media coverage for war. Yet – most of all – war is about death and suffering. War makers thrive on abstractions. Their media successes depend on evasion.

President Bush has tried to keep the loved ones of America's war dead at middle distance, bathed in soft fuzzy light: close enough to exploit for media purposes, distant enough to insulate the commander in chief's persona from the intrusion of wartime mourning in America.

What's going on this week, outside the perimeter of the ranch-style White House in Crawford, is some reclamation of reality in public life. Cindy Sheehan has disrupted the media-scripted shadow play of falsity. And some other relatives of the ultimately sacrificed have been en route to the vigil in the dry hot Texas ditches now being subjected to enormous media attention a few miles from the vacationing president's accommodations.

At this point, Bush's spinners are desperate to divert the media spotlight from Sheehan. But other bereft mothers arriving in Crawford will hardly be more compatible with war-making myths.

Consider the perspective of Celeste Zappala, whose oldest son Sherwood Baker was a sergeant in the Pennsylvania National Guard when he died 16 months ago in Baghdad. She is a co-founder of Gold Star Families for Peace, and what she has to say is gut-wrenching and infuriating: "George Bush talks about caring about the troops who get killed in Iraq. Sherwood was killed protecting the people looking for weapons of mass destruction on April 26, 2004. This was one month after Bush was joking [at the Radio and Television Correspondents Dinner, on March 24] about looking for weapons of mass destruction. And then my Sherwood is dead trying to protect people looking for them because Bush said it was so important to the safety of our country."

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Disregarding the tacit conventions of jingoistic newspeak, Zappala adds: "I don't want anyone else to go through this, not an American, not an Iraqi, no one. As a person of faith, I firmly believe we have the ability to provide better answers on how to resolve conflict than what Bush is offering us. I've tried to meet with Rumsfeld at the Pentagon, I was turned away by armed guards. It's incumbent upon everybody to take responsibility about what is happening in our country. I have no recourse but to go to Crawford to do what I can to change the disastrous course we are currently on and to bear witness to the true costs of this war."

The true costs. Not the lies of omission.

War PR and war grief have collided at the Crawford crossroads at a time when the Bush administration is in the midst of launching its scam about supposed plans to begin withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq. On Tuesday, the Associated Press reported that a spokesman for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld "said he did not know how many extra troops might be needed during the referendum and election period" through the end of this year. The AP dispatch added: "Other officials have said that once the election period has passed and the troop total recedes to the 138,000 level, a further reduction in the range of 20,000 to 30,000 is possible next spring and summer. That could change, however, if the insurgency intensifies or an insufficient number of U.S.-trained Iraqi security forces prove themselves battle-ready."

When a mass killer is at the helm of the ship of state, taking a bow now and again while "Hail to the Chief" booms from big brass bands, a significant portion of the country's population feels revulsion. And often a sense of powerlessness – a triumph for media manipulation. Passivity is the health of the manipulative media state.

Cindy Sheehan and Celeste Zappala have joined with others in Crawford to insist that death is not a message for more death – that we can understand death as a profound reality check, imploring us to affirm and defend life.

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light," Dylan Thomas wrote. The unavoidable dying of life is bad enough. The killing is unacceptable.

Norman Solomon is author of the new book

"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."

Excerpts are posted at: www.WarMadeEasy.com