

The mouth that roars

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Reaching for the national spotlight, conservative radio talk show host Melanie Morgan zeroes in on Cindy Sheehan

She still believes that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. She thinks that global warming is a liberal scare tactic. She has suggested that the editor of the New York Times be tried for treason. Now, she's on Cindy Sheehan's case.

Melanie Morgan If in your meanderings through assorted media you haven't yet encountered Melanie Morgan, hang in there, because you may soon. Morgan who plies her trade as co-host of the "Lee Rodgers and Melanie Morgan Program" broadcast out of the San Francisco studios of KSFO-AM (560 AM), is delivering the mother of all hit jobs on Cindy Sheehan in a new book called "American Mourning: The Intimate Story of Two Families Joined by War, Torn by Beliefs," co-authored by conservative columnist Catherine Moy.

Sheehan, whose son Casey was killed in Iraq in April 2004, helped revive a near-dormant anti-Iraq war movement, bringing the war in Iraq back into the media spotlight when she set up Camp Casey just down the road from President Bush's Crawford, Texas, ranch in the summer of 2005.

While Bush was cutting brush and bike-riding about the property, Sheehan had one request: a sit down with the president so that he could explain to her -and the American people - what we were doing in Iraq. As the days passed and Bush refused to meet with her, hundreds of Sheehan and anti-Iraq war supporters came to Texas to bear witness with her. Camp Casey caught, and sustained, the attention of the mainstream media. Not unexpectedly, Cindy Sheehan's vigil and the existence of Camp Casey drew the attention of a host of right wing pundits, columnists, and radio and television talk show hosts.

Enter Melanie Morgan.

In late-August 2005, Cybercast News Service, a daily news feed originally founded in July 1998 by L. Brent Bozell's Media Research Center as the Conservative News Service, featured a story headlined "Backlash Against Cindy Sheehan Gains Momentum." The piece reported that Move America Forward, the right wing group co-founded and headed by Morgan and which had led an underwhelming "Truth Tour" to Iraq, was set to launch a "You Don't Speak for Me, Cindy" tour to counter Sheehan's vigil at President Bush's Crawford, Texas ranch.

"For the past few weeks, this nation has heard from those voices in America who advocate surrender in the war against terrorism," Morgan told CNSNews.com. "Now, it's time to hear from the other side of this debate.

"We are going to rally Americans together to show the terrorists overseas that our nation has not lost its resolve nor its nerve to prevail in the fight against their violent, extremist agenda," Morgan added.

According to CNSNews.com, the group was going to air a 60-second television commercial promoting the 'Support Our Troops & Their Mission' rally in Crawford, Tex. The ad [prepared by the Sacramento, California-based public relations firms Russo Marsh & Rogers] is expected to air nationwide on cable news networks or can be seen at the group's website.

In June 2004, Russo Marsh & Rogers, a Sacramento, California-based Republican Party-affiliated public relations outfit, formed Move America Forward as a non-profit pro-Iraq war organization. According to its website, MAF is a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization committed to supporting America's efforts to defeat terrorism and supporting the brave men and women of our Armed Forces.

The organization's Board of Directors and Staff includes Howard Kaloogian, a Republican Member of the California State Assembly from 1994-2000 who was a principal in the Recall Davis movement and is listed as a founder of MAF; Morgan, the Chairman of the group; Lt. Col. Buzz Patterson, USAF (Ret.), is the host of a weekly radio program on RighTalk.com radio called "The Buzz Cut," a regular columnist for Human Events, a longtime weekly conservative publication, and the author of two New York Times best selling books, "Dereliction of Duty: The Eyewitness Account of How Bill Clinton Compromised

America's National Security and "Reckless Disregard: How Liberal Democrats Undercut Our Military, Endanger Our Soldiers, and Jeopardize Our Security"; Lew Uhler, listed as a member of the Advisory Board is the founder and President of the National Tax Limitation Committee; Sal Russo, who is listed as Chief Strategist is a founder of Russo Marsh & Rogers; and Richard Dixon, who is named as the group's Acting Executive Director and is credited with leading the MAF staff on the "You Don't Speak for Me, Cindy" caravan.

One of MAF's earliest - and unsuccessful - non-partisan campaigns was aimed at getting movie theaters across the country to refuse to show Fahrenheit 9/11, Michael Moore's award-winning documentary film.

In an e-mail dated June 29, 2005 and titled "The War at Home -- in America," MAF identified its domestic opponents as "self-loathing liberal journalists and 'Blame America First' politicians."

According to a late-December 2005 Wall Street Journal article, "Move America Forward magnified its reach by making small television and radio ad buys and then relying on cable-and local-television news outlets to give the commercials heavy coverage." The organization "has no discernible formal ties to the White House or the Republican National Committee, and the group says it operates independently from the Republican Party establishment. Still, the organization provides a clear benefit to the administration by spreading a pro-war message that goes beyond what administration officials can say publicly."

Although it is unclear how successful MAF's pro-Iraq war advertisements are, the Wall Street Journal piece suggested that the ads, combined with a "flurry of speeches by the president and a ramped-up RNC effort aimed at boosting the war," showed that Bush's approval rating had risen. (Whether MAF's recent ads bear any responsibility for the recent tanking of the president's approval ratings is also unclear.)

"The White House has really done a poor job of getting the message out, which is why we've had to step into the breach," Sal Russo, one of MAF's three founders told the Wall Street Journal. "They should do a better job of coordinating with those willing to get out and tell the story. We shouldn't be the only ones out here fighting."

The Journal piece pointed out that MAF has raised more than \$1 million, mainly in small donations, over the past two years.

The story also noted that Move America Forward was still "clinging to and promoting the notion that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction." Morgan says she is baffled that the White House no longer makes the case that Mr. Hussein had WMDs, the Journal reported. "The White House dropped the claims after a variety of investigators found no evidence to substantiate them. But Morgan says her ads are justified, based on documents given to her in Iraq by an Iraqi general she identified as Abdul Qader Jassim, and on information from U.S. officials involved in the hunt for weapons there. She believes Mr. Hussein possessed WMDs, and that those weapons remain in Iraq today. It couldn't be ascertained that Mr. Jassim is a general and he couldn't be reached for comment."

MAF is currently raising money to get an ad titled "Bill Clinton's Terrorism Rewrite -- REBUKED!" on the air. The promo copy reads: "Move America Forward is pleased to unveil the new national television ad that counters former President Bill Clinton's recent assertions about his administration's effort to combat Islamic terrorism."

A relative Joanie come lately to conservative politics, Morgan has played a role in several significant political stories in California, including a successful campaign to remove MTBE from gasoline and the easing of smog checks. In addition, as Joe Garofoli pointed out in his October 8 profile of Morgan in the San Francisco Chronicle Magazine, "on her radio show in 2003 Morgan and then-California Republican Party chair Shawn Steel first publicly launched the idea to recall the Gov. [Gray] Davis, which ultimately led to the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as Governor."

While the Rodgers and Morgan program is extremely successful in the Greater Bay Area "it is the fourth-highest-rated morning show in the San Francisco market -- these days, Morgan is becoming better known for her provocative and controversial political statements " comments that appear aimed at earning her a spot alongside bestselling conservative author Ann Coulter, and nationally syndicated columnist Michelle Malkin.

While Morgan, and those in her audience still unalterably unconvinced that global warming exists, no doubt found humor in her "mocking" of Bay Area Spare the Air Days -- days when transportation officials call on Bay area residents to take public transportation and "avoid" pollution-creating activities -- advising listeners to get in their SUVs and drive as much as possible, her recent call for the jailing, and possible execution, of New York Times editor Bill Keller for treason was not greeted light-heartedly.

According to Garofoli, Morgan "told the San Francisco Chronicle in June that Keller should be jailed for treason for approving the publication of stories of how the federal government is monitoring international bank transfers to track terrorist financing. When it was pointed out to Morgan that the maximum penalty for treason is death, she told the Chronicle:

If he were to be tried and convicted of treason, yes, I would have no problem with him being sent to the gas chamber. It is about revealing classified secrets in the time of war. And the media has got to take responsibility for revealing classified information that is putting American lives at risk.

Morgan's comments about Keller earned her national recognition as she was named by Keith Olbermann, the host of MSNBC's "Countdown with Keith Olbermann," as one of his nightly "Worst Person in the World" awards.

Garofoli notes that Morgan's new book presents the latest opportunity for Morgan to point out what she sees as Sheehan's disrespect of American service personnel during wartime. Morgan and Moy juxtapose the reaction of Sheehan to the death of Casey with the reaction of the family of Army Specialist Justin Johnson, a friend of Casey who was killed days later in Iraq.

"The purpose of the book isn't to do a hit piece on Cindy Sheehan," Morgan told Garofoli. "But she is directly trying to undermine what the troops are trying to accomplish there."

Cindy Sheehan has published three books of essays and commentaries; "Not One More Mother's Child,"

which included photographs and forwards by John Conyers, Thom Hartmann, and Jodie Evans, covered the period from November 2004 to September 2005; "Dear President Bush," which was published this past spring and contains a lengthy interview she did with Greg Ruggiero and material from September 2005 through January 2006, plus a note from the editor, an introduction by Howard Zinn, and a forward by Hart Viges, a veteran of the war on Iraq and a conscientious objector; and most recently, "Peace Mom: A Mother's Journey through Heartache to Activism."

Interestingly enough, Garofoli's profile pointed out that Morgan, who grew up in suburban Kansas City, comes from a family of lifelong liberals. Her husband, Jack Swanson, who calls himself an "ACLU liberal," oversees operations at KGO, a very popular Bay Area talk radio station, and KSFO. According to Garofoli, Morgan considers herself "a pro-choice person until the last trimester" and doesn't "care what gay people do," two subjects that are rarely discussed on her radio program.

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