

Grief and the fall of the House of Bush



By Naomi Klein

Fury is an entirely appropriate response to a system that sends young people to kill other young people in a war that never should have been waged

THERE is a remarkable scene in Fahrenheit 9/11 when Lila Lipscomb talks with an anti-war activist outside the White House about the death of her 26-year-old son, Michael, in Iraq. A pro-war passerby doesn't like what she overhears and announces: "This is all staged!"

Ms Lipscomb turns to the woman, her voice shaking with rage, and says: "My son is not a stage. He was killed in Karbala, April 2. It is not a stage. My son is dead." Then she walks away and cries: "I need my son."

Watching Ms Lipscomb doubled over in pain on the White House lawn, I was reminded of other mothers who have taken the loss of their children to the seat of power and changed the fate of wars. During Argentina's dirty war, a group of women whose children had been "disappeared" by the military regime gathered every Thursday in front of the presidential palace in Buenos Aires. At a time when all public protest was banned, they would walk silently in circles, wearing white headscarves and carrying photographs of their missing children.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo revolutionised human rights activism by transforming maternal grief from a cause for pity into an unstoppable political force. The generals could not attack the mothers openly, so they launched fierce covert operations against their organisation. But the mothers kept walking, playing a significant role in the eventual collapse of the dictatorship.

Unlike the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who march together every week to this day, in Fahrenheit 9/11 Lila Lipscomb stands alone, hurling her fury at the White House. But Lila Lipscomb is not alone. Other American and British parents whose children have died in Iraq are also coming forward to condemn their governments, and their moral outrage could help to end the military conflict still raging in Iraq.

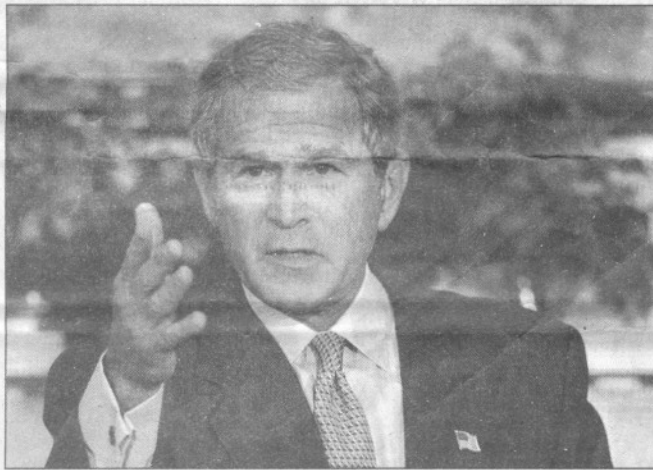
Last week, Nadia McCaffrey, a California resident, defied the

Bush administration by inviting news cameras to photograph the arrival of her son's casket from Iraq. The White House has banned photography of flag-draped coffins arriving at air force bases, but because Patrick McCaffrey's remains were flown into the Sacramento International airport, his mother was able to invite the photographers inside. "I don't care what [President Bush] wants," Ms McCaffrey declared, telling her local newspaper: "Enough war."

Just as Patrick McCaffrey's body was coming home to

such bold statements were "making the war seem fruitless", Mr Berg responded: "The only fruit of war is death and grief and sorrow. There is no other fruit."

It is as if these parents have lost more than their children - as if they have also lost their fear, allowing them to speak with great clarity and power. This represents a dangerous challenge to the Bush administration, which likes to claim a monopoly on "moral clarity". Victims of war and their families aren't supposed to interpret their losses for themselves, they are supposed to



In losing their children, the parents of dead US and British soldiers have also lost their fear, allowing them to speak with great clarity and power. This represents a dangerous challenge to the Bush administration, which likes to claim a monopoly on 'moral clarity'. Victims of war and their families aren't supposed to interpret their losses for themselves, they are supposed to leave that to the flags, ribbons, medals and three-gun salutes

California, another soldier was killed in Iraq: 19-year-old Gordon Gentle, from Glasgow.

Upon hearing the news, his mother, Rose Gentle, immediately blamed the government of Tony Blair, saying: "My son was just a bit of meat to them, just a number...This is not our war, my son has died in their war over oil."

And just as Rose Gentle was saying those words, Michael Berg happened to be visiting London to speak at an anti-war rally. Since the beheading of his 26-year-old son, Nicholas, who had been working in Iraq as a contractor, Michael Berg has insisted that "Nicholas Berg died for the sins of George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld". Asked by an Australian journalist whether

leave that to the flags, ribbons, medals and three-gun salutes.

Parents and spouses are supposed to accept their tremendous losses with stoic patriotism, never asking whether a death could have been avoided, never questioning how their loved ones are used to justify more killing. At Patrick McCaffrey's military funeral last week, Paul Harris, the chaplain of the 579th Engineer Battalion, informed the mourners: "What Patrick was doing was good and right and noble...There are thousands, no, millions, of Iraqis who are grateful for his sacrifice."

But Nadia McCaffrey knows better and is insisting on carrying her son's own feelings of deep disappointment from beyond the

grave. "He was so ashamed by the prisoner abuse scandal," Ms McCaffrey told the Independent. "He said we had no business in Iraq and should not be there."

Freed from the military censors who prevent soldiers from speaking their minds when alive, Lila Lipscomb has also shared her son's doubts about his work in Iraq. In Fahrenheit 9/11, she reads from a letter Michael mailed home. "What in the world is wrong with George, trying to be like his dad, Bush. He got us out here for nothing whatsoever. I'm so furious right now, Mama."

Fury is an entirely appropriate response to a system that sends young people to kill other young people in a war that never should have been waged. Yet the American right is forever trying to pathologise anger as something menacing and abnormal, dismissing war opponents as hateful and, in the latest slur, "wild-eyed". This is much harder to do when victims of wars begin to speak for themselves: no one questions the wildness in the eyes of a mother or father who has just lost a son or daughter, or the fury of a soldier who knows that he is being asked to kill, and to die, needlessly.

Many Iraqis who have lost loved ones to foreign aggression have responded by resisting the occupation. Now victims are starting to organise themselves inside the countries that are waging the war. First it was the September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, which speaks out against any attempt by the Bush administration to use the deaths of their family members in the World Trade Centre to justify further killings of civilians. Military Families Speak Out has sent delegations of veterans and parents of soldiers to Iraq, while Nadia McCaffrey is planning to form an organisation of mothers who have lost children in Iraq.

American elections always seem to swing on some parental demographic or other: last time it was soccer moms, this time it is supposed to be Nascar [stock-car racing] dads. On Sunday, Nascar champion Dale Earnhardt Junior said that he had taken his buddies to see Fahrenheit 9/11 and that "it's a good thing as an American to go see". It seems as if there may be another demographic that swine this election: not soccer moms Nascar dads but the parents of the numbers of the war. They don't want to change the numbers in swing states, but they want to change something more of the hearts and minds of America.

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The writer is author of *Life and Fences and Wind*