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Group at courthouse protests Bush ceremony

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Nearly 50 people gathered at noon Thursday in front of the Robert C. Byrd Federal Building in Charleston to protest the war in Iraq and Bush administration policies.

As light snow began to fall, Mary Ellen O'Farrell opened the rally, criticizing Thursday's "lavish, reckless and unseemly celebration" in Washington. "It makes us ashamed for our country."

O'Farrell and her husband, Robin Godfrey, have a son serving in Iraq. "Daily, our children are blown up. And daily, Iraqi children and families are killed," she said.

Others attending the rally and vigil held banners with the names of all American soldiers who have died in Iraq since the war began in March 2003.

Joseph Wyatt, a Marshall University psychology professor, said, "I listened on July 2, 2003, when Bush said, 'Bring 'em on.' Three days later, my son was nearly killed in a mortar attack."

"My son is a U.S. Marine who has done two tours in Iraq. He will be out in three weeks. That will be the happiest day of my life."

The Rev. Jim Lewis offered a "challenge" to local religious leaders.

"I ask people in our churches, temples and mosque to do two things. First, we need to prepare for the return of over 10,000 injured and broken troops to our country. After the Vietnam War, we had a center at St. John's [Episcopal] Church to help counsel guys coming back home. Soldiers coming back from Iraq will also need all kinds of help."

"Second, at least one religious institution in town should open itself up and be willing to help young men who seek 'conscientious objector' status. I just spoke with one 40-year-old man who is refusing to go back to Iraq.

"Churches have that responsibility, but very few have picked up on it. The religious community has to stand up," Lewis said.

Godfrey, who chaired Thursday's program, pointed to two headlines on the front page of The New York Times on Dec. 19.

One said, "At Bush Inauguration, Lunch Will Set You Back \$250,000." The other said, "Armor Scarce for Big Trucks Serving in Iraq."

Godfrey asked people attending the rally to contribute to a special fund providing money to buy more armor for soldiers serving in Iraq and for their vehicles.

Godfrey also urged people to visit the Patriots for Peace Web site: www.wvpatriotsforpeace.org.

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