

Thousands rally for America

Radio-host organizer says gatherings aim to boost troop morale

By Michael Rubinkam, Associated Press

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PHILADELPHIA - Flag-draped "Rallies for America" across the country are drawing thousands of people to demonstrate support for U.S. troops in the Persian Gulf - a less visible counterpoint to the large crowds who have flocked to antiwar protests.

Many of the pro-military gatherings were originated by syndicated radio host Glenn Beck, whose Philadelphia-based show is heard in more than 100 markets. There have been nearly 20 in recent weeks, with organizers estimating total attendance into the tens of thousands.

Beck, 39, is careful not to call the rallies pro-war, although participants tend to support military action against Iraq. The conservative commentator said the point of the rallies is to boost troop morale.

"I would find it obscene to be standing in a crowd saying, 'Let's kill Saddam,' " Beck said. "That's not what this is about.

"This is thoughtful, prayerful, decent human beings . . . there to just say, 'Whatever happens, we support these people in uniform.' "

About 15,000 people attended a rally in Auburn, Ind., on Saturday, cramming into a hangar-like building with a capacity of 16,000.

Rally-goers in red, white and blue sang patriotic songs, waved signs and cheered at photos of President Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and others. On the stage was a giant American flag and a replica of the Statue of Liberty.

"It makes me feel really, really good to know this many people really support our children," said Kim Cook, 43, whose son, Ross, is a Marine lance corporal in Iraq. "It's been a big fear that they'd come home and be treated like they were when they came home from Vietnam."

Other rallies have been held in cities including Houston, Atlanta, Cleveland, Oklahoma City, San Antonio, and Nashville, Tenn. Beck attended several of them.

Beck, who spent most of his career in Top 40 before debuting three years ago as a talk show host, said he worried that American troops were hearing only about antiwar protests.

"When you're in the thick of things, you can feel awfully lonely if you don't see other people actively standing up for you," he said.

Beck is syndicated by an arm of Clear Channel Communications, the nation's largest radio station operator. Most of the rallies are organized and paid for by local Clear Channel stations, with financial help from one of Beck's advertisers, clothing manufacturer Bills Khakis of Reading, Pa.

Clear Channel has a reporter embedded with a Marine unit in Iraq, leading one expert to question whether the company's support for the rallies creates at least the perception that its news report is compromised.

"When a media company takes an advocacy position on a significant public policy issue, it can certainly undermine the credibility of that media company's journalists," said Bob Steele, director of the journalism ethics program at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla.

But Amir Forester, a spokeswoman for Clear Channel subsidiary Premiere Radio Networks, which syndicates Beck, said, "There is no hidden agenda here."

"This is the pure creation of the media. It's amazing to me, the effort that is going into taking something so good that Glenn Beck is doing for and with his listeners in support of our American troops," she said.

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