

Republican witch-hunt over military ballots incites anti-Gore comments from officer corps

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Right-wing demagoguery over the disputed presidential election results in Florida has found considerable support within the US officer corps. Two major US military units recently warned their commanding personnel that it is a crime for officers to publicly express contempt for civilian political authorities.

The official notices were sent out by the Air Force's Air Combat Command and the Army's Training and Doctrine Command, which together comprise 156,000 soldiers and civilians at 32 bases, after press reports quoted comments by military officers denouncing the Democratic Party and Vice President Al Gore over challenges to military absentee ballots cast in Florida. The messages were first reported Thursday by the *Washington Post*.

Brig. Gen. Jack Rives, the top legal officer at the Air Combat Command, sent a message to officers telling them that “this is not the time to send e-mails or otherwise get involved in an improper or unprofessional manner with the continuing controversy over the presidential election.”

Col. James Rosenblatt, the staff judge advocate for the Training and Doctrine Command, sent an e-mail reminding the command's generals and lawyers that Article 88 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice forbids military officers from using “contemptuous words against the President, Vice President, Congress, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of a military department, the Secretary of Transportation, or the Governor or legislature of any state.”

He also urged local commanders to conduct educational sessions for their subordinates “on the question of civilian control of the military.” Rosenblatt told the *Post* it was the first time in his 28 years of military service that he had felt it necessary to issue such a cautionary message. Violation of Article 88 can

result in dismissal from the military and one year's imprisonment.

Military sources could cite only one such prosecution in history, the case of an Army reservist, Second Lieutenant Henry Howe, who was sentenced to one year in confinement and dismissal from the service during the Vietnam War for participating in an antiwar protest demonstration in which he carried a placard calling President Lyndon Johnson a fascist.

The widespread violation of Article 88 has occurred on two previous occasions under the Clinton administration—first, after denunciations of Clinton by military personnel in 1993 over his proposed relaxation of the persecution of gay and lesbian servicemen and women; and again in 1998, during the Monica Lewinsky affair.

During the first controversy, the mood among sections of the military brass became so hostile to the newly elected Democratic president that Senator Jesse Helms, the ultra-right North Carolina Republican, publicly warned Clinton that he would be in physical danger if he visited such military bases as Fort Bragg.

The officer corps was even more incensed during the Lewinsky affair, since it followed the well-publicized sacking of Navy and Marine officers for sexual assaults carried out during a convention of the Tailhook Association, as well as the forced retirement of several senior generals charged with sexual harassment. *Navy Times* and *Army Times* both published letters from active-duty officers denouncing Clinton as a “criminal,” while other officers circulated petitions supporting the impeachment and removal of their nominal commander-in-chief.

The hostility to Gore is partly a carryover from the hatred of Clinton within the officer corps, but the immediate occasion is the rabid Republican Party witch-

hunting over the Florida presidential vote. After county election boards throughout the state invalidated a significant percentage of the absentee military vote, Republican operatives like Governor Marc Racicot of Montana declared that Gore and the Democrats had “declared war” on American soldiers and sailors overseas.

The bulk of these disqualifications, however, were not due to supposed technicalities, but to gross irregularities such as voting in the wrong county, voting while unregistered, voting more than once (many overseas absentees in Florida were sent two ballots and returned them both, but only one was counted) or the absence of a signature attesting to the voter's identity. After the Bush campaign filed a blizzard of lawsuits and most counties rechecked the overseas ballots, only a few hundred votes were restored out of the over 1,500 disqualified.

Even these votes included major irregularities, such as votes postmarked or witnessed after Election Day, ballots which arrived after the November 17 deadline, and even ballots that were faxed in. One county election supervisor admitted that, in response to Republican protests, she had done exactly what the Republicans claimed to oppose: “It changed from following strict adherence to statutory law to a more general interpretation based on new information, basically,” said Stephanie Thomas, assistant supervisor of elections in Clay County.

Republican congressional leaders also fanned the flames of the military reaction against the Gore campaign. Senator John Warner of Virginia and Congressman Stephen Buyer of Indiana (one of the House impeachment managers) announced that they would hold committee hearings on the military overseas voting procedure and the rules followed in Florida.

In a related development, Republican leaders in both houses of Congress announced Wednesday that they are considering legislation requiring Florida election officials to retroactively count all military absentee ballots.



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