

Complaint filed with Pentagon over Kerry medals

The anatomy of a right-wing provocation in US election campaign

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Several right-wing organizations and the Murdoch media are seeking to generate a new round of crude smears against the Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, openly inciting the military brass to take sides in the US elections. The latest provocation began with the right-wing group Judicial Watch filing a formal complaint with the Pentagon inspector general, seeking an investigation into the medals awarded to Kerry during the Vietnam War.

The Pentagon has not yet made any decision on the complaint, or even agreed to begin an official investigation. Nor has the issue yet been raised in the mass media outside of Rupert Murdoch's Fox News and several daily newspapers also owned by the Australian-born billionaire. But there have been repeated attempts over the past two weeks to generate another media campaign against Kerry, building on the scurrilous and largely discredited allegations by the grotesquely misnamed Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

The latest campaign is politically instructive, since it demonstrates both the cynical distortions that are the *modus operandi* of the ultra right, and the close coordination between right-wing operatives and the Murdoch/Fox empire. More importantly, should the Pentagon decide to take up the Judicial Watch complaint or even uphold it, this would represent an unprecedented intervention by the military in an American election campaign.

Judicial Watch filed its complaint on August 18, citing the statements by members of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and the book *Unfit for Command*, written by the group's leader, John O'Neill, a Vietnam veteran recruited in 1971 by the Nixon administration to attack Kerry's antiwar activities.

The Judicial Watch complaint denounces Kerry for alleged "false official statements, distortions of fact and subornation" about his four months in command of a Swift boat in the Mekong delta, in 1968-69. The group represents Kerry's antiwar activities after he returned from Vietnam as tantamount to treason, claiming he was guilty of "aiding the enemy" by meeting North Vietnamese and NLF representatives at the Paris talks and making statements in favor of peace in Vietnam.

According to the ultra-right group, this conduct was so "dishonorable and possibly unlawful" and "so grievously damaging to the dignity, honor and traditions of the US Navy and the American republic that the Secretary of the Navy may be compelled to revoke Senator Kerry's awards."

For all its claims, in legalistic terminology, that the Pentagon inspector general is required by law to consider the charges against Kerry, the Judicial Watch document adds not a single fact to the allegations made by the Swift Boat group, already exposed as baseless and politically motivated. The group of Vietnam veterans was financed and given legal advice by prominent Republicans and Bush campaign aides, and

organized as a "dirty tricks" operation against the Democratic candidate, modeled on the attacks on Clinton which led to his impeachment.

The Pentagon has done nothing beyond routine acknowledgment of the filing of the complaint against Kerry. The office of the inspector general sent a letter to Judicial Watch noting that it had received the documents. On September 2, the complaint was forwarded to the Secretary of the Navy, a formality that simply means that the inspector general's office had determined that the Navy was the appropriate service to review the charges, because Kerry was in the Navy and the Navy had the documentary records.

Both actions, however, were trumpeted by Judicial Watch and its media accomplices as proof that the charges against Kerry were serious and substantial. Fox News reported the letter from the inspector general's office to Judicial Watch in breathless tones, as though it was confirming the credibility of the allegations. The letter actually merely states the fact that the inspector general's office is responsible to "report suspected or alleged violations. We have informed the secretary of the Navy of the allegations."

Fox also interviewed John Lehman, a member of the 9/11 commission, who as secretary of the Navy in 1986 had issued Kerry a duplicate of the citation awarding him the Silver Star, the highest medal he won in Vietnam. Lehman said he did not know why Kerry had received the duplicate, but clerical workers in Lehman's office would have routinely signed such a citation, one of thousands like it, with an autopen. Lehman added that Navy records should be "thoroughly researched and the facts established," a truism that Fox presented as a virtual allegation that Kerry was lying.

Other right-wing publications chimed in. The *New York Sun* ran a column by Thomas Lipscomb claiming that the Navy was questioning the description of Kerry's medals on his campaign web site, calling the listing "incorrect." According to this account, Kerry's web site listed his medals as a Silver Star with combat V for valor, and a Bronze Star, when he actually won a Silver Star (all Silver Stars are for valor in combat and so the combat V is not used) and a Bronze Star with combat V. This elevates a typographical error—one which actually understated rather than overstated Kerry's medals—into a criminal offense.

Lipscomb's column was also published in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and his comments are now being regularly cited on right-wing web sites as the work of a "*Chicago Sun-Times* reporter." But Lipscomb is anything but a politically neutral journalist. A long-time figure in the New York publishing industry, former head of Times Books and several web publishing ventures, he is now chairman of a corporate-funded think tank, the Center for the Digital Future.

Lipscomb is a part of the neo-conservative clique which has campaigned for US military action in the Middle East, writing regularly for the *Jewish*

World Review, a leading journal of right-wing Zionist opinion (Daniel Pipes, among others, is on its editorial board). Among his writings is a November 12, 2002 column headlined, “Does Saddam Already Have the Bomb?” criticizing the Bush administration for not moving quickly enough in its drive to war with Iraq.

More distortions have followed Lipscomb’s. The right-wing web site *Newmax.com* published a dispatch headlined, “Navy Challenging Kerry’s Medals,” although the challenge was filed by Judicial Watch and the Navy has taken no position. The web site made its political wishes evident, writing: “The United States Navy is challenging the authenticity of Sen. John Kerry’s Vietnam War medals, in a development that could prove to be the most damaging yet to the embattled Democrat’s presidential campaign.”

Another right-wing publication, *WorldNetDaily.com*, rehashed the Fox report and *Sun-Times* column, and quoted Jerome Corsi, co-author with John O’Neill of the anti-Kerry screed *Unfit for Command*. The webzine admitted, however, that the inspector general’s action was routine, citing a spokesman, Gary Comerford, who said, “We get a lot of complaints. When they come in, we look at each one and forward it to where the information is.”

Then came the big push to leverage the new allegations into the “mainstream” mass media. On September 6, the London-based *Daily Telegraph* published a report by its US correspondent following the Kerry campaign, retailing the Fox News report under the headline “Navy probes Kerry medals.”

The article described the routine processing of the Judicial Watch complaint as a “highly unusual inquiry” and said it was “to be carried out by the Inspector-General’s Office of the US Navy.” Actually, the inspector-general’s office, which has jurisdiction over the whole Department of the Defense, not just the Navy, is carrying out no inquiry. It merely forwarded the complaint to the Navy, as we have seen.

The right-wing newspaper, one of the few in Britain to glorify Bush and support the war in Iraq, added: “to the consternation of [Kerry] campaign strategists, the navy has agreed to a request by Judicial Watch, a bipartisan lobby group, for a full inquiry.” Actually there is not yet any indication that the Navy will do more than recheck the archival records, which confirm Kerry’s account of the events.

The *Daily Telegraph* article has been reprinted in daily newspapers in Australia, but the issue has not yet been brought to public attention more generally in the United States. Needless to say, the Kerry campaign has said little or nothing about this latest right-wing provocation, taking the course of little or no resistance, as it did with the initial Swift Boat fabrications.

By now the method of the right-wing and the media is familiar: take baseless and unsubstantiated charges, label them “serious allegations,” demand an investigation, then portray every subsequent event, however humdrum, as a further sensational revelation. This pattern was repeated endlessly during the Clinton administration, with the manufacture of one “scandal” after another—the original Whitewater real estate deal, the Vincent Foster suicide, the White House travel office, the FBI files, culminating in the Lewinsky affair and impeachment.

There is a precedent for such methods, as well, from the 1992 campaign, in which the first Bush administration sought repeatedly to dig up dirt on the Clinton campaign and provoke a media firestorm against the Democratic candidate. One such effort involved the State Department, where officials launched a feverish effort to find documents relating to Clinton’s visit to Moscow as a college student—presumably to suggest that he had been recruited by the KGB—or to prove that he had renounced his US citizenship in the early 1970s as a protest against the Vietnam War.

These efforts actually backfired, and one lower-level State Department official was cashiered. Other efforts bore fruit over a longer time. A Bush administration loyalist, L. Jean Lewis, an investigator for the federal

agency handling the liquidation of bankrupt savings and loan institutions, filed a criminal referral on September 2, 1992, charging that Bill and Hillary Clinton had corruptly profited from the collapse of Madison Guaranty through their partnership in the failed Whitewater investment with former Madison chief Jim McDougal. She followed this up with phone calls and visits to Little Rock, demanding an immediate investigation into the Democratic presidential candidate.

On October 16, 1992, only three weeks before the election, the FBI agent in charge of the Little Rock, Arkansas office, Charles Banks, a Reagan appointee, rejected Lewis’s request—although a year later, the same referral would become the starting point of the bogus Whitewater investigation. In a letter to FBI headquarters in Washington, Banks wrote, “I must opine that after such a lapse of time, the insistence for urgency in this case appears to suggest an intentional or unintentional attempt to intervene into the political process of the upcoming presidential election.”

Twelve years later, the Pentagon is in the same position in relation to Kerry. No one should harbor illusions that the military brass necessarily entertains the same scruples as special agent Banks about disruption of the electoral process.

Nor should one believe that the Democrats will conduct any struggle against such a brazen interference by the military into political life. On the contrary, by basing his claim to the presidency on his combat record in Vietnam—rather than his participation in the protest movement against the war—Kerry has sought to retroactively legitimize the Vietnam War as “self-defense” on the part of the United States, rather than bloody imperialist aggression. Kerry has invited just the kind of right-wing campaign of slander which is now unfolding, fueled by anticommunism and bitterness over the US defeat in Vietnam—and panic over the current quagmire in Iraq.

More fundamentally, as the experience in 2000 showed, the Democratic Party is incapable of any serious opposition to attacks on democratic rights, even the rights of its own presidential candidate. It is an imperialist party, inseparably committed to defending the institutions of the capitalist state, above all the military-intelligence apparatus.

In a recent speech, Al Gore attributed his capitulation to the Republican theft of the 2000 elections, at least in part, to his unwillingness to challenge clearly invalid military absentee ballots. He could not become president of the United States against the will of the military, he declared.

In this respect, as in all others, the Kerry campaign represents a further shift to the right in the Democratic Party and the whole spectrum of bourgeois politics.



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