Wisconsin towns vote for immediate US military withdrawal from Iraq

Tom Carter
7 April 2006

On Tuesday, April 4, 32 communities in the state of Wisconsin voted on referenda calling for the immediate withdrawal of all American military forces from Iraq. Of these areas, 24 voted for immediate withdrawal, and eight voted against. In the Milwaukee suburb of Shorewood, 70 percent voted for immediate withdrawal.

The referenda results represent a major embarrassment for both big-business political parties in the US, as well as for the media, which consistently present the Bush administration's "war on terror" as enjoying a popular mandate, while attempting to marginalize any opposition. What these referenda reveal is that while the war may be fully supported by the media and big-business politicians, it is widely opposed by the broad masses of ordinary people in the US.

Significantly, when the same choice was put before the US Congress in November of last year, only 3 congressmen—less than 1 percent—voted for immediate withdrawal, and 403 against. Both the Democratic and the Republican candidates in the 2004 presidential elections were in favor of continuing the war in Iraq indefinitely.

The broad popular opposition to the war revealed by the referenda immediately provoked defensive remarks and denunciations from the Bush administration.

"I think all Americans want our troops to come home," White House press secretary Scott McClellan said, reciting a familiar line. "I think most Americans recognize the importance of succeeding in Iraq as well. I think most Americans want to see our troops achieve victory. That's what's important." "The worst thing we can do is withdraw before the mission is complete. That would be retreating and that is exactly what the terrorists want us to do."

Essentially, this amounts to accusing the 38,979 citizens of Wisconsin who voted for the referenda of treason. McClellan also reiterated Bush's position that he will pursue the "war on terror" regardless of popular sentiment.

University of Wisconsin political scientist Mordecai Lee called the referenda "silly" and said, "they just clutter up the ballot." Several right-wing political groups had been actively campaigning to get the referenda removed, leading to a number of court cases.

In one case, in Monona, residents gathered 570 signatures—well in excess of the amount required by law—to place the question "Should the United States bring all military personnel home from Iraq now?" on the ballot. William Cole, the city attorney, with the support of Mayor Robb Kahl, ruled that since Wisconsin law does not allow resolutions phrased as questions to be placed on the ballots, the petitions were invalid. Eventually, an intervention from the City Council overturned this brazenly anti-democratic maneuver.

Elsewhere, attempts were made to label the Iraq war a "federal issue," thereby making it inappropriate for local ballots.

One of the more fantastic accusations leveled against the supporters of the referenda was that they were hurting the morale of the soldiers in Iraq. By way of example, the pro-war group Vote No to Cut and Run, on its web site, www.votenotocutandrun.com, listed the following as reasons to vote against the referenda:

* "A NO vote shows your support for the troops and for letting them finish their mission.
* "A NO vote shows unity at home and sends a positive message to our troops."

In fact, a recent survey of US soldiers in Iraq conducted by Zogby International, printed in the military magazine *Stars and Stripes*, indicated that only 23 percent supported the official policy—"stay as long as needed." On the other hand, a staggering 72 percent of troops favored immediate withdrawal or withdrawal within at most a year's time.

To the average US soldier on combat patrol in Iraq, news that the invasion and occupation of Iraq is unpopular

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and broadly opposed by the American population is entirely welcome. The top military brass has desperately sought to hide this reality from the enlisted servicemen.

The family of Mark Maida, an Army Sergeant killed in Iraq in May, has been actively supporting the referenda for immediate withdrawal.

Steve Burns, the principal organizer of the referenda initiative, is affiliated with the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice (WNPJ), as well as the Wisconsin Green Party. The stated goal of the referenda is pressuring the Democratic Party to support a withdrawal; “it is by sending messages to them that the American people can influence the direction of US policies,” the WNPJ Web site declares.

Contrary to this political perspective, the reality is that the more widely recognized opposition sentiment becomes, the further the Democratic Party shifts its stance to the right. Those who petitioned for the Wisconsin referenda for this reason will be sorely disappointed when the Democrats ignore the vote and run on their “national security strategy” platform in the 2006 elections, attempting to position themselves to the right of the Republican Party. All prominent Democrats fully support the war, including Nancy Pelosi, John Kerry, Joseph Lieberman, Hilary Clinton, Bill Clinton, and Howard Dean.

The Wisconsin towns that voted “yes” to the referenda include Algoma, Amery, Baraboo, Casco, Couderay, Draper, Edgewater, Ephraim, Evansville, Exeland, Frederic, LaCrosse, Ladysmith, Luxemburg, Madison, Monona, Mt. Horeb, Ojibwa, Perry, Shorewood, Sturgeon Bay, Vermont, Whitefish Bay, and Winter.

Egg Harbor, Forestville, Hayward, Kewaunee, Newport, Osceola, Sister Bay, and Watertown voted “no.”

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