

The Democrats in the 2006 elections: the second party of reaction and war

Part two

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This is the second part of a two-part article. The first part was posted November 4.

With virtually all pre-election polls and estimates predicting that the Democratic Party will regain control of the House of Representatives November 7, for the first time since 1994, it is worth examining the social and political profile of those individuals who would make up the bulk of the new congressmen and congresswomen.

There are 75 Republican-held seats that the magazine *Congressional Quarterly* now rates as competitive, giving the Democrats a realistic chance of victory. Considering the 75 Democrats running in these races as a group, whose election would significantly shape the Democratic House caucus as a whole, the following questions arise: who are these individuals, what social layers are they drawn from and what life experiences do they bring to politics?

The usual categories are certainly represented among the Democratic candidates; state legislators, local government officials and other current and former officeholders and aides make up one third of the 75. There are eight lawyers, a social worker, a teacher, and a university professor.

While the Democratic Party always postures as the friend of the working people and the party less closely aligned with the wealthy, only one of the 75 candidates is a (former) blue collar worker, while two have white collar careers. By contrast, there are at least a dozen millionaires, including two doctors, two manufacturers, two ranchers, a banker, a former professional athlete and four software executives.

There was a concerted effort this year by national Democratic Party officials to recruit former military and intelligence officials, and especially Iraq war veterans, as candidates, in order to offset Republican claims that Democratic criticism of the conduct of the war in Iraq is disloyal and unpatriotic.

There are at least a dozen of the top Democratic congressional candidates whose military or intelligence record is their principal credential. These include rear admiral Joseph Sestak, who retired in January and announced his candidacy in Pennsylvania's 7th Congressional District (CD) on February 1.

At least three Iraq war veterans could win congressional seats Tuesday, including Tammy Duckworth, a helicopter pilot who lost both legs in the war, running in the Chicago suburbs, Patrick Murphy, running in the Philadelphia suburbs, and Andrew Duck, running in western Maryland.

Other Democrats with a military background include Eric Massa, a 24-year Navy veteran who served as an aide to former NATO Commander Wesley Clark running in New York's 29th CD in the

Finger Lakes region, Jay Fawcett, a recently retired Air Force colonel running in the district that includes Colorado Springs, home of the Air Force Academy, Charlie Brown, another retired Air Force officer, running in California's Fourth CD, Chris Carney, a former military intelligence officer, running in Pennsylvania's Seventh CD, Mike Weaver, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, in Kentucky's Second CD, and Tim Walz, a teacher with 25 years in the Army National Guard.

Two others have close ties with the intelligence apparatus: Colleen Rowley, former FBI attorney in Minneapolis, came to public notice after she protested the refusal of FBI headquarters to authorize an investigation into Zacarias Moussaoui before the 9/11 attacks. She is the Democratic candidate in Minnesota's Second CD. Jim Marcinkowski, a former CIA agent and friend of Valerie Plame, is running in Michigan's Eighth CD.

The impact of these new military-related candidates can best be seen in Pennsylvania, where there are five seats in which Republican incumbents face significant danger of ouster by a Democratic challenger. One of the five Democrats is a conventional liberal; Lois Murphy, who is running against incumbent Jim Gerlach in the 6th District, is a lawyer who once worked for the National Abortion Rights Action League.

The other four Democratic challengers include Admiral Sestak, facing Curt Weldon in the 7th District, Patrick Murphy, an Iraq War veteran turned prosecutor, opposing Michael Fitzpatrick in the 8th, Chris Carney, a former military intelligence officer at the Pentagon, now a college professor, running against Don Sherwood in the 10th District, and Jason Altmire, a healthcare executive and former Republican congressional aide, challenging Melissa Hart in the 4th District, west of Pittsburgh.

The overall stance of the new Democratic candidates is far more conservative on social issues than the current delegation, insuring that the center of gravity in the Democratic Party on such issues as abortion and gay rights will shift further to the right as the result of the election, whatever the intentions of those who cast their votes for the party.

The incoming Democrats are fiscal conservatives as well. The co-chairwoman of the New Democrat Coalition, Congresswoman Ellen Tauscher, told the *New York Times* that 27 of the 40 top Democratic challengers had pledged to become members of the group, which promotes a hard-line stance on national security and budget-cutting. This right-wing group would thus enjoy the support of at least one third of the entire Democratic caucus.

Below we profile some of the Democratic challengers who are likely

to win seats on November 7.

Jack Davis is a representative of a politically-significant subcategory among the Democratic candidates: the ex-Republican. The millionaire Buffalo, New York furnace parts manufacturer was a lifelong Republican, a backer of the ultra-right libertarian Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation. He only broke with his party in November 2003, when he clashed with aides to Vice President Dick Cheney after Davis voiced his opposition to free trade. In 2004, Davis sought and won the Democratic nomination in New York's 26th Congressional District, to run against Republican Tom Reynolds, a senior member of the House leadership. Davis lost the race in 2004, but sought the nomination again in 2006 and has benefited from Reynolds' role in the Mark Foley scandal.

Davis bases his campaign on national chauvinism, calling for efforts to "seal" US borders, while denouncing exports by "Red China" for destroying America's manufacturing base. He has naturally been received with open arms by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, despite operating a non-union factory.

A spokesman for the New York State Democratic Party portrayed the Davis campaign as a strategic master stroke. "All the ways that Tom Reynolds would normally try to defeat a Democratic rival are off limits with Jack Davis," the spokesman said. "He can't call Davis a liberal because it clearly isn't true. He can't tie him to national Democrats who might be unpopular in the district because people know Jack's a maverick who isn't taking his pointers from anyone but himself."

Brad Ellsworth is the sheriff of Vanderburgh County, which includes the city of Evansville, Indiana, and now odds-on favorite to defeat incumbent Republican John Hostettler. The national Republican Party has abandoned the seat and pulled all financial support for Hostettler. Ellsworth's advertising focuses on his socially conservative views, including opposition to abortion rights, gay marriage and gun control. He cites his law-and-order record and calls for a crackdown on immigration, while offering a few sops to the working class, such as a minimum wage increase. Ellsworth has been joined by at least a dozen other anti-abortion Democrats, who are contesting seats in Indiana, Pennsylvania, Florida, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Kentucky and North Carolina.

John Yarmuth is another millionaire former Republican, who ran twice unsuccessfully as a Republican candidate for local office in Louisville, Kentucky, then used his family fortune (derived from banking and Ashland Oil Company) to buy an alternative weekly newspaper. Yarmuth worked on Capitol Hill as an aide to Republican Senator Marlow Cook, and eventually switched parties in 1985. He is running in the Third District of Kentucky for the seat held by Republican Congresswoman Anne Northup.

Mike Weaver is an actual Kentucky colonel, a 67-year-old ultra-conservative Democratic state legislator who went into politics after retiring from a long Army career. He shares the positions of incumbent Republican Ron Lewis on such issues as abortion, gay rights and gun regulation, offering as his campaign slogan, "Faith, Family, Freedom." He has criticized the Bush administration's conduct of the Iraq war and attacked Lewis over health care and the minimum wage.

Phil Kellam is a local government official running in the Second District of Virginia, which includes the huge naval complex of Norfolk and Hampton Roads. According to Kellam's web site, in his nine years in public office "his primary focus has been on cutting costs through better management and operating efficiencies."

His campaign against one-term incumbent Republican Thelma Drake has been based on appealing to the hostility among military personnel to the Bush administration's conduct of the Iraq war. Kellam has voiced support for the initial decision to invade Iraq, but criticized the apocalyptic approach of Drake, who has suggested that US military forces could remain in Iraq for 10-20 years, and that the "war on terror" could last a century.

In a debate with Drake, Kellam denied that the war in Iraq was a mistake and embraced the Bush administration's claims that Iraq is central to the "war on terror." At one point he declared, "I think that the war in Iraq is where we are. We need to take the battle—this worldwide war on terror—and we need to take it to them."

Heath Shuler, a former quarterback for the Washington Redskins and activist in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, is the Democratic candidate now favored to win in the 11th District of North Carolina over eight-term incumbent Charles Taylor. Shuler is a Christian fundamentalist who has refused to campaign or debate on Sundays because that would violate the Sabbath. He boasts of his opposition to abortion and restrictions on gun ownership. Shuler was recruited by the Republicans to run for a Tennessee congressional seat in 2001, shortly after his pro football career ended, but declined.

Shuler portrays his ultra-conservative views as "middle of the road," declaring at one campaign appearance, "The Democrats as a whole have begun to understand and recognize, as I did, that we have the extreme left and the extreme right, and 80 percent of America is in the middle."

Charlie Brown is a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel and Vietnam War veteran helicopter pilot who is challenging incumbent Republican John Doolittle in California's Fourth District. Doolittle is one of a half-dozen Republicans most closely linked to the Jack Abramoff influence-peddling scandal, and his campaign has been further hit by reports that his wife, who operates a fundraising firm, has made substantial profits from the congressman's own campaign activities.

Brown is one of a tiny handful of congressional candidates who has a son serving in Iraq, and he has used his military background to bait Doolittle as a physical coward. "While I was being shot at in Vietnam, John Doolittle was practicing his tennis game at [the University of California] Santa Cruz," Brown told one news conference. He was reacting to an attempt by Doolittle's campaign to link him to anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan. Doolittle is "hiding behind the flag saying he is defending this country, but I'm the only candidate in this race with real national security experience," Brown said.

These are only a fraction of the incoming Democratic delegation, but they are indicative of the sharp rightward turn of the party as a whole.



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