

The Kerry apology: Democrats cower before Bush and military

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John Kerry is guilty of the most fatal of blunders for an American bourgeois politician: speaking the truth inadvertently. Worst of all, his momentary lapse from conventional lying brought him into conflict with the military, the most powerful institution in contemporary America and the one that, above all others, cannot be criticized.

Kerry's now-famous remark, at a Monday rally at Pasadena City College in southern California, resembles nothing so much as the mistaken truth-telling by Michigan Governor George Romney in 1967, when he was gearing up for a campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Romney described a tour of Vietnam put on for him by the Pentagon as an exercise in "brainwashing," a remark that, because it was so apt, destroyed his political career.

It is now well established that Kerry's comments were a somewhat labored attempt at a joke at the expense of President Bush. According to the script prepared by his political handlers, the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate was to tell the students, "I can't overstress the importance of a great education. Do you know where you end up if you don't study, if you aren't smart, if you're intellectually lazy? You end up getting us stuck in a war in Iraq. Just ask President Bush."

Instead, he mangled the line, omitting the word "us" and the final reference to Bush. The comment emerged from Kerry's mouth as a suggestion that soldiers in Iraq were recruited from among those who did not perform well in school: "Education, if you make the most of it, you study hard, you do your homework and you make an effort to be smart, you can do well. And if you don't, you get stuck in Iraq."

What ensued was a predictable piling on by Republican spokesmen, from the White House on down, with the bulk of the American media joining in. White House Press Secretary Tony Snow took 31 questions on the Kerry comment at his Wednesday press briefing, and both Bush and Cheney rushed to denounce Kerry before friendly media interviewers. Bush was interviewed on the "Rush Limbaugh

Show" Wednesday and endorsed the right-wing talk show host's assertion that Kerry viewed US troops as "basically uneducated rubes."

Republican Senator John McCain appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America" program to demand an apology from Kerry and defend the supposedly injured reputation of American soldiers. "They are not there because of academic deficiency, they are there because of love for our country," McCain claimed.

Kerry's initial response to such diatribes was to declare that he would not be "Swift-boated" again, a reference to his passive response to Republican smear tactics during the decisive weeks of the 2004 presidential campaign. "They're trying to change the subject," he declared at a press conference. "It's their campaign of smear and fear," he added, "This is Swift boat stuff all over again."

Within 24 hours, however, Kerry had changed his tune, making a verbal apology on the Don Imus radio program Wednesday, then issuing a written apology that declared: "As a combat veteran, I want to make it clear to anyone in uniform and to their loved ones: my poorly stated joke at a rally was not about, and never intended to refer to any troops. I sincerely regret that my words were misinterpreted to wrongly imply anything negative about those in uniform and I personally apologize to any service member, family member or American who was offended."

Behind the apology was a near-universal disowning of Kerry by his fellow Democrats, particularly those running in closely contested Senate and House races. Three Democratic House candidates canceled Kerry appearances on their behalf, and Kerry then canceled his entire campaign schedule and returned home.

Congressman Harold Ford, the Democratic candidate for an open US Senate seat in Tennessee, declared, "Whatever the intent, Senator Kerry was wrong to say what he said," adding, "He needs to apologize to our troops."

Senator Hillary Clinton, the early frontrunner for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, speaking at a Veteran of Foreign Wars post, joined the criticism of the 2004

Democratic nominee. “What Senator Kerry said was inappropriate,” she said.

Larry Grant, a Democratic congressional candidate in Idaho, said Kerry “shouldn’t have tried to make a joke about it in the first place.” Scott Kleeb, a Democratic candidate in Nebraska, said, “Many of us have serious concerns over the current situation in Iraq, but no one should question the intelligence and dedication of our troops. Senator Kerry’s remark was disrespectful and insulting.”

None of these sanctimonious preachments about the “honor” of the troops addressed the real circumstances under which young people, largely from the working class and with less access to higher education and high-paying jobs, actually enlist in the military. Study after study has shown that rural and small-town America, and impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, account for a disproportionate share of US military personnel.

As the casualty toll has mounted in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Bush administration’s wars have become deeply unpopular, the Army and Marines, which bear the brunt of the fighting, have had ever-greater difficulty in meeting their recruitment targets.

The Army announced last month that it had met its targets for recruiting in the 2006 fiscal year, which ended September 30, but this was accomplished only by a distinct lowering of standards. The Army raised the maximum acceptable age from 35 to 42 and decided to double the percentage of applicants scoring towards the bottom of its standardized aptitude examination, raising the limit from 2 percent to 4 percent. The Army also agreed to waive some disqualifications for criminal records that would have barred enlistment in previous years.

Particularly significant in meeting the recruiting target was the offering of cash to new recruits, with large bonuses for those accepting dangerous assignments—\$40,000 for soldiers enlisting to drive convoy trucks in Iraq, for instance. Two thirds of the 80,000 new Army enlistees received some form of bonus, which one press account described as “the primary incentive for recruits.”

The Army has also greatly beefed up its corps of recruiters—like those whose efforts at recruiting minority youth in Flint, Michigan, were recorded in Michael Moore’s film *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The number of recruiters jumped from 5,500 to 6,500, while the number of recruits remained the same, an indication of the far greater effort required to pressure young people into enlisting.

The tactics employed by recruiters were documented in a report issued in August by the Government Accountability Office, which found that allegations of wrongdoing by recruiters rose by 50 percent in 2005, to 6,600 cases, compared to 4,400 in 2004. The number of cases judged to

be substantiated after investigation rose by a slightly greater percentage, from 400 to 630, while criminal violations by recruiters more than doubled, from 33 to 68. The violations included coercion, sexual harassment, falsifying documents and concealing information that would otherwise disqualify an enlistee. More than 80 military recruiters were disciplined for sexual misconduct with potential recruits.

In an effort to step up the pressure on recruits, the Pentagon has also contracted out recruiting in some areas to private companies, rather than entrusting this task to uniformed personnel. These civilian recruiters are little better than bounty-hunters, paid nearly \$6,000 per head, and accounting for more than 15,000 of the new enlistees this year—a payoff approaching \$100 million in blood money.

Since the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, Pentagon officials have repeatedly sounded the alarm over the difficulties confronting recruiting and the consequent danger that the size of the US armed forces remains too small to accomplish the ambitious goals set out in the Bush administration’s foreign policy.

Kerry is undoubtedly aware of these concerns, which have been voiced especially by those retired military officers who endorsed his 2004 campaign or are running as Democratic candidates in 2006. It is quite possible that this awareness contributed to his verbal slip in Pasadena.

The Democrats are incapable of acknowledging what is understood by any politically honest observer: that many of those who enlist in the US military, to be transformed into the oppressive occupation forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, are themselves victims of injustice, oppression and poverty within American society.

The abject prostration of his fellow Democrats to the howls of feigned outrage about Kerry’s “insult” to the troops is a politically significant event. It demonstrates the basic commitment of the Democratic Party, whatever minor differences exist on tactics, to the Bush administration’s program of war and aggression—a commitment that will be quickly and clearly manifested should the Democrats gain control of either or both houses of Congress in next week’s midterm elections.



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