

Senator Reid's remarks on US generals prompt right-wing furor

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Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada provoked a storm of criticism from the Republican right Thursday after reports that he had labeled the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Peter Pace “incompetent” and declared Gen. David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, out of “touch with what’s going on in Baghdad.”

The initial remarks about Pace, whom the Bush administration has chosen not to nominate for a second term in order to avoid confirmation hearings reviewing his tenure during the Iraq war, were reportedly made during a Tuesday conference call between Reid and “liberal bloggers.”

The Democratic Congressional leadership has been desperately seeking some means of reviving its antiwar pretensions in the wake of its cave-in last month to the Bush administration over the supplemental war-funding bill that has helped to drive its standing in public opinion polls to record a low and has alienated much of its electoral base.

As the *New York Times* reported, the conference call was aimed at “offering assurances that Democrats would revive debate over the Iraq war.” Reid, the *Times* said, “pledged to revive it soon, ending the silence that followed the White House’s outmaneuvering of Democrats last month to win more money for the war without a timeline to end it.”

Reid’s comments to the bloggers, according to one of them, Bob Geiger, included the following: “I guess the president, uh, he’s gotten rid of Pace because he could not get him confirmed here in the Senate.... Pace is also a yes-man for the president and I told him to his face, I laid it out to him last time he came to see me, I told him what an incompetent man I thought he was.”

At a Capitol Hill press conference Thursday, Reid declined to confirm or deny the remark, but went on to say that he had told Pace “to his face” that “I felt that he has not done a very good job in speaking out for some obvious things that weren’t going right in Iraq.” He added, “The fact is, he’s not going to be the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, for which I’m happy.”

The Democratic majority leader went on to criticize General Petraeus over an interview that was published in

USA Today Thursday that included the US military commander’s incredible statement that he was seeing “astonishing signs of normalcy” in an Iraqi capital that is the scene of daily car bombings, death squad killings and martial law conditions imposed by tens of thousands of US troops.

“I was a little disappointed, to say the least, today reading the *USA Today* newspaper, where he’s saying things are going fine,” Reid told the media. He went on to recall that Petraeus had also told Congress “it was going great” when he was in charge of training Iraqi troops. “As we’ve looked back, it didn’t go so well,” said Reid.

The Senate majority leader’s comments provoked an immediate rebuke from the White House. Bush spokesman Tony Snow declared, “In a time of war, for a leader of a party that says it supports the military, it seems outrageous to be issuing slanders toward the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and also the man who is responsible for the bulk of the military operations in Iraq.” Snow went on to demand that Reid make an apology.

The White House statement was quickly echoed by the chairman of the Republican Party, Mike Duncan, who declared: “Harry Reid doesn’t understand that there are some lines you just don’t cross.”

Congressional Republicans joined in the attacks. “The debate about this war has gone into the gutter when the Democrat leader of the United States Senate uses disparaging remarks to describe our military leadership,” said Sen. Jim Bunning of Kentucky. GOP presidential candidate Senator John McCain of Arizona added that Reid “needs to clarify his criticisms, which can only be described as highly inappropriate and regrettable.” Senator John Warner of Virginia opined that, while he believed congressional leaders have the right to speak openly about the conduct of military commanders, “How this will affect the troops remains to be seen.”

Right-wing commentators and talk show hosts were less delicate, denouncing Reid as a traitor and accusing him of “cheerleading for the enemy” and “putting politics above

national security.”

That this deeply reactionary claim that politicians criticizing top military commanders is somehow beyond the pale is widely and approvingly echoed by much of the mass media and the political establishment as a whole is a telling indication of the putrefaction of American democracy. It calls into question the fundamental democratic principle of the subordination of the military to civilian rule, which was written into the US Declaration of Independence.

Those who rise to the level of Pace and Petraeus in the military are not merely dedicated soldiers doing their duty. They owe their stars to political favor from the White House and Congress and are selected for political reasons—principally their willingness to echo the ideological defense of the Iraq war put forward by the Bush administration and to stick to a ludicrously optimistic prognosis as to the outcome of this debacle.

Incompetence is certainly not the worst of the traits exhibited by the senior officer corps. They have participated in and directed a war of aggression that they knew to be a crime under international law and have acquiesced to the abrogation of the Geneva Conventions, presiding over the illegal detention and torture of “enemy combatants” and civilians alike.

Moreover, they have presided over the decimation of the military itself as a result of this dirty colonial war, implementing unprecedented levels of combat deployment for American troops, who are paying the price in terms of steadily rising casualty rates.

A succession of retired senior generals have come forward to condemn the administration’s policies, though it is noteworthy that nearly none of them chose to make their criticisms while still in uniform and back them up by resigning. Much of this is driven more by careerism than political cowardice, with those leaving the top ranks in the military looking forward to second careers in the executive offices of arms manufacturing firms and other branches of corporate America.

The equation of this layer of politically connected and well-heeled military executives with “our troops”—who we are incessantly told must be supported—is both ludicrous and sinister. Its principal purpose is to promote a political regime based upon militarism and the suppression of democratic rights.

Historically speaking, criticism of senior military commanders is as American as apple pie. The likes of Gen. George McClellan and other senior Union commanders who failed to vigorously prosecute the Civil War, for example, were routinely denounced in the Congress as “traitors” and worse.

Reid, a favorite target of the Republican right because of

his ineffectual political substance and style, is inevitably capitulating to the right-wing intimidation, refusing to repeat in public the comments he used in an attempt to score political points with his liberal supporters and merely pleading with reporters to “drop” the issue.

In April, it should be recalled, Reid provoked similar wrath from the Republican right by stating the obvious: that the Iraq “war is lost and that the surge is not accomplishing anything.” Of course, within barely a month, the Senate majority leader drew up and voted for legislation providing the Bush White House with \$100 billion, no strings attached, to pay for the war and the surge.

Moreover, the Senate Democrats organized the unanimous vote confirming Petraeus, in the face of ample evidence that he had been selected to take the top post in Iraq because he—unlike his predecessor Gen. George W. Casey—was willing to lend his wholehearted support to the White House plan to escalate the war in Iraq.

So too, it can be confidently predicted that Reid will preside over the Senate’s confirmation of Pace’s nominated successor, Adm. Mike Mullen, the Navy’s chief of operations. In a recent speech to sailors in the US Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, Mullens declared, “The enemy now is basically evil and fundamentally hates everything we are—the democratic principles for which we stand.” He went on to warn, “This war is going to go on for a long time. It’s a generational war.”

In other words, Pace’s replacement is another politically right-wing military officer, whose views are in sync with the policies of the Bush administration. His selection, following the appointment of another naval officer, Adm. William Fallon, to head the Central Command, is widely interpreted as a possible preparation for war against Iran.

The brief political furor provoked by Reid’s half-hearted criticism of the top military commanders directing the Iraq war is one more indication that the Democratic leadership’s antiwar posturing has nothing to do with a genuine desire or intention to end the occupation and withdraw all US troops from Iraq. Rather, its principal aim is to contain and divert the mass popular opposition to the war, while plans are elaborated for “redeploying” US troops so that the drive to secure US domination over Iraq and its oil wealth can continue indefinitely.



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