

US: Right-wing campaign launched to counter opposition to Iraq war

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The Bush administration and its co-thinkers, seeking the best way to distract the populace from the facts of the Iraq occupation, an economy on the rocks, a collapsing national infrastructure, the ongoing devastation in New Orleans and other scandals too numerous to mention, have inaugurated a new public relations exercise.

A front group called “Freedom’s Watch” has spent \$15 million creating a series of television advertisements using Iraq war veterans and the families of dead or wounded soldiers in an attempt to convince voters to demand that their representatives resist any calls for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and support Bush administration policy.

This series of advertisements has obviously been scheduled to coincide with the run-up to the promised report by General David Petraeus on the results of Bush’s “surge” in Iraq.

The 30-second spots, which began airing on August 22 in select states, uses images of the burning World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001 and martial music to conflate the terror attacks on that day with the invasion and occupation of Iraq, even though it is widely acknowledged that the Iraqi regime had nothing to do with the attacks, a fact admitted by the administration itself. The appeal of the advertisements is to the emotions, not the critical faculties, of their audience.

The Freedom’s Watch ads encourage viewers to call their members of congress and to that end they provide a toll-free number. However, the number is neither the number of the US Senate nor the US House of Representatives. Callers of the number in the ads are greeted with the question, “Do you believe the Iraq war is important to the war on terror?” If the caller answers ‘No,’ the operator ends the call!

Freedom’s Watch is the brainchild of former Bush Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, he of the famed warning to the nation to “watch what you say and watch what you

do.” In a statement made at the launch of the propaganda campaign, Fleischer was quite frank when he said that the group is “rolling out television, radio and internet advertisements ... to encourage voters to put pressure on their representatives for continued support of the war.” (*New York Times*, August 22, 2007). Fleischer proclaimed, “For people who believe in peace through strength, the cavalry is coming.”

In its official press release on August 22, Freedom’s Watch described itself as launching “a nationwide grassroots campaign aimed at ensuring Congress continues to fully fund the troops with the ultimate goal of victory in the War on Terror.” It went on to state that it has “partnered with a host of veterans’ organizations in an effort to ensure terrorism is confronted all over the world.”

The backers of this “grassroots” and “peace through strength” enterprise? The organization is a non-profit corporation under 501(c)(4), and therefore is not required to list its members or backers on its web site, although it does list some. These include prominent Bush supporters and former Bush officials such as Bradley A. Blakeman, the group’s president, who was a member of the White House senior staff during George W. Bush’s first term; Mel Sembler, a Florida millionaire and former US ambassador to Australia and Italy; Sheldon Adelson, chairman of Las Vegas Sands Corp. and ranked by Forbes as the third wealthiest American; William P. Weidner, president of Las Vegas Sands Corp.; and Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition.

Other major donors are Anthony Gioia, former Ambassador to Malta and member of Rudolph Giuliani’s finance team; Howard Leach, a major GOP donor who served as Ambassador to France until 2005; and Edward Snider, chairman of Comcast-Spectator, the huge Philadelphia sports and entertainment firm. Both Sembler and Leach donated to the legal defense fund of I. Lewis

“Scooter” Libby, the now-convicted former Chief of Staff to Vice President Dick Cheney. Sembler is now chairman of the Libby Legal Defense Trust.

These are the representatives of the “grassroots” that Freedom’s Watch claims to represent.

Blakeman pronounced the mission of Freedom’s Watch this way: “The mission of Freedom’s Watch is to ensure a strong national defense and a powerful effort to confront and defeat global terror, especially in Iraq,” while deriding advocates of withdrawal as “[t]hose who want to quit while victory is possible.”

In the opening advertisement, produced by Jamestown Associates, a self-described “full-service Republican political and public affairs consulting firm,” we hear an Iraq war veteran who lost both of his legs saying:

“Congress was right to vote to fight terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. I re-enlisted after September 11 ... They attacked us and they will again ... They won’t stop in Iraq ... It’s no time to quit. It’s no time for politics.”

Another ad, featuring a woman who lost her uncle, a fireman, on September 11 and her husband in Iraq, has her saying that if the US military leaves Iraq, “it will mean more attacks in America.”

It is tragic that individuals who suffered grievous losses as a result of US foreign policy, which only benefits the tiny elite at the top of American society (oil company executives, bankers, other members of the corporate-financial oligarchy), should be roped in to encouraging others to give their lives for the geopolitical interests of American imperialism.

The notion that this is ‘no time for politics’ is of course preposterous. The Bush administration, in fact, has politicized every aspect of American life like no other. The ads are politics, reactionary politics. The war in Iraq is failing because the project of establishing US neo-colonial control over the Middle East has provoked massive opposition. The Iraqi people have resisted Washington’s efforts and will continue to do so. The extreme right is already rehearsing the argument, first raised by the nascent fascist elements in Germany after World War I, that the war effort has been ‘stabbed in the back’ by treacherous forces at home.

The ads give voice to the arrogant belief of the entire political establishment, including both Republicans and Democrats, that it has the mission to conquer lands, people and resources, regardless of the huge personal costs to soldiers, their families, and the principal victims of US military aggression—the Iraqi and Afghan peoples.

Are we, the viewers, meant to believe that the positions

advanced here are representative of the majority of the American people? Poll after poll has indicated that this is not so.

The enterprise has been undertaken primarily to place pressure on Republican legislators who may be wavering in their support for Bush’s Iraq policy—37 of the 41 districts where the ads will run are represented by Republicans.

While various liberal and left web sites denounced the Freedom’s Watch campaign, none of the Democratic Party presidential hopefuls summoned up the nerve to comment. Indeed, the very possibility of such a duplicitous and malicious campaign, aimed at playing on patriotic and nationalist sentiments, is bound up with the acceptance of the Democrats of the legitimacy of the “war on terror.” The latter are determined to run in 2008, firm on “national security” and terrorism. Hence the candidates’ reactionary squabble as to who will be toughest on Pakistan and Afghanistan, or most unwilling to take the nuclear option “off the table.” No leading Democrat can deliver a major address without expressing his or her devotion to the military.

Millions of ordinary working people of America are awakening to the truth about the goals of the ruling elite and have indicated their disenchantment and disgust in poll after poll. Both Bush and the Democratic congress—elected in 2006 to put an end to the war and occupation—have seen their approval ratings sink into the cellar.

The production of these ads and their crude recycling of old lies, coupled with new provocations, express the desperation of an elite that recognizes its sway over public opinion is waning.



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