

New York Times public editor repudiates MoveOn.org ad on General Petraeus

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Recriminations over the MoveOn.org newspaper ad questioning the credibility of Gen. David Petraeus's defense of the Bush administration's military surge in Iraq continued over the weekend, with the public editor of the *New York Times* repudiating the newspaper's decision to run the ad.

The self-denunciation by the *Times* follows last week's vote—by a 72 to 25 majority—in the US Senate for an extraordinary resolution condemning MoveOn.org for daring to run an ad critical of America's top commander in Iraq. With just two exceptions, every one of the Senate Democrats who voted against this resolution supported a second measure (which failed to pass) that likewise denounced MoveOn.org, but also condemned the Republican vilification of the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004, Senator John Kerrey, and former Senator Max Cleland, both veterans whose military service was called into question for political purposes.

The piece published Sunday by *Times* public editor Clark Hoyt is entitled "Betraying Its Own Best Interests."

It begins by citing the wave of denunciations that followed the ad—the bulk of it coming from the Republican right, as part of an attempt to divert attention from the debacle of the US intervention in Iraq and intimidate mass antiwar sentiment among the American people.

"In more than 4,000 e-mail messages, people around the country raged at the *Times* with words like 'despicable,' 'disgrace' and 'treason,'" writes Hoyt.

He continues: "President George W. Bush called the ad 'disgusting.' The Senate, controlled by Democrats, voted overwhelmingly to condemn the ad. Vice President Dick Cheney said the charges in the ad, 'provided at subsidized rates in the *New York Times*' were 'an outrage.' Thomas Davis III, a Republican congressman from Virginia, demanded a House investigation. The American Conservative Union filed a formal complaint with the Federal Election Commission against MoveOn.org and the New York Times Company. FreedomsWatch.org, a group recently formed to support the war, asked me to investigate because it said it wasn't offered the same terms for a response ad that MoveOn.org got."

Clearly, this orchestrated campaign of intimidation had its desired effect, at least as far as the *Times* public editor is concerned.

He writes that "the ad appears to fly in the face of an internal advertising acceptability manual that says, 'We do not accept opinion advertisements that are attacks of a personal nature.'" Hoyt stresses that in this case the attack was particularly egregious as it involves "a respected general with nine rows of ribbons on his chest, including a Bronze Star with a V for valor."

This is by no means the first time that the most prominent voice of establishment liberalism in the US has exhibited abject political cowardice, bowing to demands that it suppress items in the interests of national security or the public image of the military. One only has to recall the disgraceful episode in which the newspaper suppressed a report on the secret and illegal domestic spying program conducted by the National Security Agency (NSA), withholding the news from the public until after the 2004 presidential elections.

But there is something particularly sinister in this latest episode, not only in relation to the *Times*, but to the Democratic Party, the Congress and the entire political establishment in America.

The insistence that it is forbidden to criticize the military or question the credentials of a uniformed commander is an entirely undemocratic conception that is wildly at odds with the constitutional principles of the United States and much of the history of relations between the American government and its military.

Since when have American generals been turned into plaster saints, above criticism and reproach? George Washington himself was regularly subjected to savage personal attacks from members of the Continental Congress. During the Civil War, the Republican Party heatedly debated the competency and even loyalty of Lincoln's generals, with the Union's supreme commander Gen. George McClellan referred to openly as an "incompetent," an "imbecile" and worse.

Irreverence and suspicion towards the military "brass"—along with recognition that its interests and those of the rank-and-file soldier are by no means identical—was a hallmark of the US military during the Second World War. This tendency found explosive expression in the storm of condemnation that fell upon Gen. George Patton for slapping a shell-shocked soldier.

One could cite as well Truman's firing of Gen. Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War, or the extreme skepticism exhibited by members of Congress towards Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of US forces in Vietnam, who in 1967 delivered a report to Congress that claimed similar "progress" to that touted by Petraeus in Iraq. When Westmoreland called critics of the war policy "unpatriotic," he was subjected to sharp criticism in both Congress and the press.

That today the Senate should pass a resolution formally condemning a private citizens' political group for daring to criticize a uniformed officer, while the House of Representatives is considering formal investigations into the group's actions—presumably along the lines of the old House Un-American Activities Committee—is symptomatic of the far-advanced undermining of democratic processes and elementary democratic rights under the heavy weight of unrestrained militarism.

No doubt, political calculations played a major role in this disgraceful episode. The Republican right saw an opportunity to attack the Democratic leadership in Congress and identify its extremely limited tactical opposition to the Iraq war strategy of the White House with a failure to "support the troops," in the person of David Petraeus—a four-star general who, according to some published reports, holds political ambitions to run for president.

For their part, the Democrats responded with predictable cringing before this campaign, determined to prove their deference to the military.

There is something more fundamental underlying the political calculations of both parties, and that is the immense and growing political weight of the military in American society. One can be certain that in this instance the military's far-reaching political influence was exerted not

merely implicitly, but rather the demand for a public repudiation of the criticism of Petraeus came from within the armed forces uniformed command itself.

The entire episode marks an extraordinary and deeply disturbing intervention by the military into politics.

It highlights tendencies that have been developing virtually unchecked over the four-and-a-half decades since President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered his farewell speech urging the American public to beware of the undue political influence of the “military-industrial complex.”

Today, that complex is a far more formidable force than in Eisenhower’s time, with the Pentagon wielding an annual military budget of over three quarters of a trillion dollars—more than the military budgets of every other country on the planet combined—and operating over 1,000 bases spread out over 132 countries.

It is a military engaged in unprovoked wars and colonial-style occupations, with its senior commanders wielding de facto political power over entire populations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Those who have studied the American military establishment have issued pointed warnings about its transformed role over the recent period.

Richard H. Kohn, a military historian for four decades, published an article entitled “The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today” in the Summer 2002 edition of the *Naval War College Review*.

While addressed in part as an appeal to the democratic sensibilities of mid-level military officers, Kohn minced few words in warning that “in recent years civilian control of the military has weakened in the United States and is threatened today.” While insisting that he did not envision “the nightmare of a coup d’état,” Kohn declared that there was “evidence that the American military has grown in influence to the point of being able to impose its own perspective on many policies and decisions.”

He continued: “I am convinced that civilian control has diminished to the point where it could alter the character of American government and undermine national defense.”

Kohn pointed to changes within the military that have accelerated this process and led to the increasing politicization of its officer corps.

“Unlike the large citizen forces raised in wartime and during the Cold War, today’s armed services are professional and increasingly disconnected, even in some ways estranged, from civilian society,” he wrote. This professional military force, he added, has become larger and more globally active than any such force ever maintained in American history.

He cited data gathered by the Triangle Institute of Security Studies documenting the breakdown of the American military’s traditional principle of nonpartisanship, in which officers of previous generations prided themselves on remaining apolitical and in many cases not even voting.

According to these statistics, a survey of active duty officers found a “shift from over 54 percent independent, ‘no preference,’ or ‘other’ in a 1976 survey to 28 percent in 1998-99, and from 33 percent to 64 percent Republican today.” This shift towards a predominantly—and openly—Republican officer corps has been accompanied by the growing evangelical Christian influence within the military.

These ideological trends cited by Kohn five years ago have been significantly intensified by the military’s participation in two wars and ongoing occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq (as well its running of a detention camp for illegally held “enemy combatants”) during the intervening period.

Kohn and others engaged in the study of the military returned to this question in a discussion in the article “Coup d’état: Military Thinkers Discuss the Unthinkable,” a transcript of which was published in *Harpers* magazine in April 2006.

Among the more perceptive comments in this discussion were those

made by Andrew Bacevich, a professor of international relations at Boston University and former career officer.

“The question that arises is whether, in fact, we’re not already experiencing what is in essence a creeping coup d’état,” Bacevich said. “But it’s not people in uniform who are seizing power. It’s militarized civilians, who conceive of the world as such a dangerous place that military power has to predominate, that constitutional constraints on the military need to be loosened. The ideology of national security has become ever more woven into our politics. It has been especially apparent since 9/11, but more broadly it’s been going on since the beginning of the Cold War.”

Bacevich pointed out that the use of the US military against American citizens was not some hypothetical scenario, but had already taken place with the domestic spying operation mounted by the NSA, which is part of the military.

It is within this broader context that the seemingly demented furor and public acts of contrition over the MoveOn.org ad assume ominous implications.

What next? Will criticism of the military be outlawed as treasonous and detrimental to national security? Such was the case in the Kaiser’s Germany of the early 20th century, when the socialist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were both jailed for their incisive writings and fearless agitation against German militarism.

In the end, the episode exposes the very real danger of a military coup in the US, whether carried out by the military itself or by civilian leaders committed to utilizing the military—both practically and as an ideological justification—to suppress political and social discontent within the American working class.

This danger has become all the greater under conditions of unprecedented social polarization in the US and the complete absence within the ruling elite and its political representatives in both major parties of any serious commitment to the defense of basic democratic rights. The Bush administration openly bases itself on an alliance with the military while it seeks to whip up the most reactionary sections of the population, without any serious challenge from the nominal opposition party—the Democrats.

The wholesale attack on democratic rights and growing threat of military dictatorship can be defeated only through the independent political mobilization of the working population against the financial oligarchy and all of its political representatives.



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