

Rep. Pete Stark apologizes to Bush: Another abject climbdown by the Democrats

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In the latest example of what has become a ritual of Democratic self-abasement and political cowardice, Pete Stark, an 18-term congressman from northern California, on Tuesday delivered a tearful apology from the floor of the House of Representatives for pointed remarks he made the previous week against President Bush and his war policy in Iraq.

In response to a chorus of denunciations from Republican politicians and the threat of a censure motion by the House, Stark declared, "I want to apologize to my colleagues, many of whom I have offended, to the president, his family, to the troops." The 75-year-old congressman continued, "I apologize for this reason: I think we have serious issues before us, the issue of providing medical care to children, the issue about what we're going to do about a war that we're divided about how to end."

He concluded with a self-flagellating flourish that evoked applause even from Republicans who had voted to censure him, saying, "I hope that with this apology I will become as insignificant as I should be and that we can return to the issues that do divide us, but that we can resolve in a better fashion."

What prompted this exercise in self-abasement were remarks Stark, who chairs the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Health, made last week during the debate on a measure to override Bush's veto of a bipartisan bill to appropriate \$35 billion to expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program and insure an additional 4 million children. The measure failed to garner the necessary votes to override Bush's veto.

Stark attacked the Republicans for spending hundreds of billions for the war in Iraq (money allocated with Democratic support) while refusing to spend \$35 billion to insure more children. "You don't have money to fund the war or children," he said, "but you're going to spend it to blow up innocent people if we can get enough kids to grow old enough for you to send to Iraq to get their heads blown off for the president's amusement."

Stark's "crime" was appealing, in a limited way, to the deep-seated anger of tens of millions of Americans against the war and against Bush, who is arguably the most despised president since Richard Nixon. Of course, Stark, in attributing the mass killing in Iraq to Bush's personal "amusement," obscured the

very real, material interests of the American ruling elite that underlie the colonial-style invasion and occupation of Iraq, and which account for the Democrats' ongoing support for the war, notwithstanding their muted anti-war rhetoric.

His suggestion, however, that Bush is indifferent to the tragic toll on US troops and their families, not to mention the human catastrophe being inflicted on the Iraqi people, is entirely justified. This is man who has exhibited a sadistic streak throughout his political career—presiding over the execution of 152 people during his six years as governor of Texas, and, as president, launching aggressive wars that have killed hundreds of thousands and authorizing such atrocities as torture, abductions and indefinite imprisonment without legal counsel or trial.

Stark's remarks prompted a cascade of denunciations from Republicans, who immediately demanded a public apology. Utilizing the standard smear that any criticism of the "commander in chief" is an attack on the troops, Republican House Minority Leader John Boehner declared, "His remarks dishonored our soldiers, their families and our commander in chief. I don't think the House can afford to let these kinds of remarks go unanswered."

Predictably, the congressional Democratic leadership and the major Democratic presidential candidates immediately and demonstrably distanced themselves from Stark, in some cases joining in the attack on his remarks.

Stark initially refused to apologize, issuing a statement on October 18 saying he supported the troops, but adding, "I respect neither the commander in chief who keeps them in harm's way nor the chicken hawks in Congress who vote to deny children health care."

This was too much for the Democratic speaker of the house, Nancy Pelosi, who publicly denounced Stark on October 19, declaring that his comments were "inappropriate and distracted from the seriousness of the subject at hand."

The censure resolution, which called Stark's remarks "despicable," was killed Tuesday when the House voted 196-173 on a motion by the Democrats to table it. All 168 Republicans voted against the Democratic measure. Significantly, they were joined by five freshman Democrats, all of whom were elected last November by running right-wing,

generally pro-war campaigns in districts that Bush had won in the 2004 presidential election. An additional eight Democrats voted “present,” to underscore their opposition to Stark’s anti-administration remarks.

Stark’s mea culpa was a virtual replay of the public act of contrition carried out in June of 2005 by Illinois Senator Dick Durbin, the second leading Democrat in the Senate. Durbin made a sobbing plea for forgiveness in the well of the Senate for having denounced the Bush administration’s use of torture against detainees at the Guantanamo prison camp.

Durbin had read aloud on the Senate floor a declassified FBI memo detailing the horrific treatment of Guantanamo prisoners. He then commented: “If I read this to you and did not tell you that it was an FBI agent describing what Americans had done to prisoners in their control, you would most certainly believe this must have been done by Nazis, Soviets in their gulags, or some mad regime—Pol Pot or others—that had no concern for human beings.”

Durbin was immediately pilloried for making the entirely justified comparison between US methods at Guantanamo and those utilized by the Nazis, and promptly deserted by his Democratic colleagues, leading to a craven apology for casting “a negative light on our fine men and women in the military,” and a profession of “heartfelt” remorse for having “crossed the line.”

The fact that the two incidents are separated by the November 2006 congressional elections, in which the American electorate signaled its opposition to the war and the Bush administration by handing control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats, only underscores the congenital cowardice of the Democratic Party and its complicity in the crimes of the Bush administration.

Democratic control of Congress has done nothing to halt the escalation of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or block the Bush administration’s preparations for war against Iran. Nor has it slowed the administration’s attacks on the social conditions of the working population or its assault on democratic rights.

Stark’s abject apology takes place within a definite political context. The Democratic Congress is about to authorize some \$200 billion more to continue the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, pass a domestic spying bill that will authorize virtually unlimited warrantless surveillance of Americans—gutting the Fourth Amendment’s proscription on unreasonable searches and seizures—and confirm as attorney general Michael Mukasey, a former judge who openly defends the use of torture, presidential seizure and imprisonment of so-called “enemy combatants,” and quasi-dictatorial presidential powers, including the president’s “right” to ignore laws.

Why this abject capitulation to the Bush administration, the Republican Party and the military? It cannot be attributed to the pressure of popular opinion. Since the November election, all opinion polls have registered a growth of popular opposition to

both the war and the Bush administration. They have, moreover, shown growing popular disgust and anger toward the Democrats because of their refusal to oppose the war and the administration’s policies in general.

But the Democrats’ actions and policies are not determined by the will of the people. However much they may posture as critics of the Bush administration, the Democrats are beholden to the same corporate-financial oligarchy that dictates the policies of the Republicans. They are a second party of American imperialism, which is why they have supported and continue to support its wars of aggression for control of oil, other vital resources, markets and geo-strategic domination around the world.

The Democrats are perpetually confounded by a basic contradiction: In line with their particular historical role in upholding the two-party political monopoly of the American ruling elite, they are obliged to present themselves as the party of the “people.” Hence their efforts to posture as critics of the war and the anti-social and anti-democratic policies of the Republican administration.

In fact, they rest on a very narrow social base, consisting primarily of sections of the financial elite and the most privileged sections of the upper-middle-class. Democratic politicians, no less than their Republican counterparts, are beholden to the corporate interests that finance their campaigns.

The substance of their policy differences with the Republicans is increasingly insignificant. They support imperialist war as an instrument of foreign policy, the further enrichment of the financial aristocracy at the expense of the working class, and the gutting of democratic rights.

To the extent that leading Democrats choose to oppose the administration, they invariably articulate the concerns of factions within a ruling establishment that is divided over how best to advance the interests of American capitalism. This is why the Democrats’ opposition is always characterized by political evasion and duplicity, with the party leadership prepared at every point either to capitulate or accept a rotten compromise.



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