Another slap in the face to antiwar voters: Democrats embrace former Iraq commander

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Six weeks after he denounced the American media and US politicians for undermining the war effort in Iraq and called for an all-out mobilization of American power to win victory, the former US commander in Baghdad, retired Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, delivered the official Democratic Party response to President George W. Bush's weekly Saturday radio address.

The selection of Sanchez to make the broadcast November 24 is a calculated decision by the Democratic Party leadership to adopt a standpoint on the war in Iraq that criticizes the Bush administration largely from the right, rather than the left. The Democrats have rebuffed the desires of the vast majority of the American people, including those whose votes placed the Democrats in control of Congress a year ago, who want an end to the war as quickly as possible.

Sanchez commanded US forces in Iraq from June 2003 to June 2004, the period immediately following the US invasion. He is indelibly linked to two episodes in the bloody record of American oppression in Iraq: the murderous onslaught on the city of Fallujah, then one of the strongholds of Iraqi resistance to the occupation, and the abuse of captured Iraqis in the American military prison at Abu Ghraib.

The latter episode, which came to public attention in April and May 2004, essentially put an end to Sanchez's military career. He was replaced as Iraq commander in June, returning to duty at the Pentagon, but was denied promotion because of the controversy over Abu Ghraib and ultimately retired from the military at the end of 2006.

It is extraordinary that the Democratic Party should choose such a discredited and repugnant figure to serve as a public spokesman criticizing the Bush administration's conduct of the war. It demonstrates that there is within the Democratic Party leadership not a shred of moral opposition to the crimes that have been committed and are being committed by American imperialism in Iraq.

The sole grounds on which Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid "oppose" the Bush administration on the war is that it has been conducted incompetently and unsuccessfully. They don't object in principle to imperialist conquest and plunder. They merely complain that Bush has failed to deliver on his promise of a quick and profitable war that would pay for itself through access to Iraq's vast oil resources.

The selection of Sanchez is a further demonstration of the rapid shift to the right in the Democratic Party as the presidential nomination campaign enters its most critical period, with six weeks remaining before the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. This shift to the right has been accelerated by the recent media campaign portraying the Bush "surge" strategy in Iraq as a great success.

As the *New York Times* noted, in a front-page report Sunday, "Advisers to Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama say that the candidates have watched security conditions improve after the troop escalation in Iraq and concluded that it would be folly not to acknowledge those gains."

The *Times* cited Sanchez's radio appearance as a "boost" for the Democratic candidates, because he endorsed a Democratic resolution in the House that proposed a "goal" of withdrawing all US combat troops from Iraq by December 2008—although there are no provisions to enforce the goal, and the congressional Democratic leadership has adamantly opposed the use of the only constitutional means it possesses to end the war: cutting off funds for military operations in Iraq.

The newspaper admitted that the Democratic presidential candidates were risking alienating antiwar voters: "By saying the effects of the troop escalation have not led to a healthier political environment, the candidates are tacitly acknowledging that the additional troops have, in fact, made a difference on the ground—a viewpoint

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many Democratic voters might not embrace."

In his remarks broadcast Saturday morning, General Sanchez criticized "the administration's failure to devise a strategy for victory in Iraq that employed, in a coordinated manner, the political, economic, diplomatic and military power of the United States. That failure continues today." He blamed the Bush administration for failing to move aggressively on the diplomatic, political and economic fronts, particularly in pressuring the US-backed regime in Baghdad.

As a result, he said, "the improvements in security produced by the courage and blood of our troops have not been matched by a willingness on the part of Iraqi leaders to make the hard choices necessary to bring peace to their country. There is no evidence that the Iraqis will choose to do so in the near future or that we have an ability to force that result. America lost that ability upon the transfer of sovereignty back in June of 2004."

This language is remarkable, not only for its reference to "improvements in security," but for the expression of regret that the US restored Iraq's nominal sovereignty in June 2004, during Sanchez's final month as commander. Evidently, the retired general wishes that the White House had continued the colonial-style regime of the Coalition Provisional Authority until a satisfactory political settlement was imposed.

Sanchez hinted at the real reason for the growing opposition to Bush's Iraq policy within the American ruling elite, declaring, "Having fewer American troops in Iraq will also allow us to devote more resources to refit our ground forces to respond to different contingencies in other parts of the world." What are those "different contingencies"? Do they perhaps include military attacks on Iran, on Syria, or within Pakistan?

This is certainly the main thrust of the critiques offered by the leading Democratic presidential candidates, who have attacked the war in Iraq as a wasteful diversion of military forces that are needed to advance the interests of American imperialism elsewhere—particularly against Iran, regarded as the major threat to US dominance of the Middle East and Central Asia, the center of world oil and gas production.

There is another and even more ominous aspect to the selection of Sanchez as a spokesman for the Democratic Party. On October 12, Sanchez delivered an address to the annual conference of the Military Reporters and Editors, held in Arlington, Virginia. The *World Socialist Web Site* called that speech an "anti-democratic tirade," noting that "the implicit message of his speech was the incompatibility of democratic processes with the pursuit of a global war against 'extremism.'"

Sanchez devoted half of his October 12 speech to criticizing the role of the media in undermining public support for the Iraq war—ironic, since uncritical media coverage played a major role in promoting the war of aggression in the first place. The ex-general was clearly embittered by his career-ending encounter with a media firestorm over the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

He combined this attack on what he called "agenda-driven biases" and "political propaganda that is uncontrolled" with a denunciation of "the corrosive partisan politics that is destroying our country and killing our service members who are at war."

Portraying democracy as incompatible with the national unity required in wartime, he declared, "Partisan politics have hindered this war effort and America should not accept this. America must demand a unified national strategy that goes well beyond partisan politics and places the common good above all else... Our politicians must remember their oath of office and recommit themselves to serving our nation and not their own self-interests or political party. The security of America is at stake and we can accept nothing less."

What does it mean that an individual holding such extreme, authoritarian and anti-democratic views has now been selected to represent the Democratic Party on a national platform? As the WSWS noted in analyzing Sanchez's earlier speech, "The growing political power of the military, and the weakening of civilian control, is a process that has been developing over a protracted period, under both Republican and Democratic administrations."

As far back as the impeachment of Bill Clinton, an attempted political coup by the ultra-right, and then the crisis over the vote-counting in Florida in the 2000 presidential election, we have emphasized that there is no significant constituency for the defense of democratic rights within the American ruling elite.

In choosing Sanchez as its spokesman the Democratic leadership is underscoring its own subservience to the Pentagon and to those who are drawing the most reactionary and sinister political conclusions from the military debacle in Iraq.

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