

A wolf in wolf's clothing: West Virginia Democrat Richard Ojeda

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With a week until the November 6 election, the Democratic Party is promoting its slate of newcomer congressional candidates full-tilt. Among the most highly promoted is Richard Ojeda of West Virginia's 3rd congressional district. A one-term state senator and former career Army officer, Ojeda has been elevated to national prominence as a fighter for the working class. He is no such thing.

Often appearing in public in fatigues and combat boots, featuring in campaign videos shirtless, covered in military-themed tattoos and lifting weights, Ojeda has centered his fitness for office almost wholly on the basis of his military "toughness." He is a right-winger who supported Donald Trump in the 2016 election, a fact he uses to bolster his reputation as a supposed maverick not tied to the Democratic Party line.

In the past year, Ojeda has been the subject of fawning interviews with the likes of Michael Moore and Glenn Greenwald, and news outlets including the *New York Times*, Politico, *Rolling Stone*, the British *Guardian*, CNN, and many others.

The senator often speaks in exaggerated colloquialisms, military metaphors, and platitudes; his platform consists of clichés about helping the poor and going after drug companies that flooded the region with opioids. Much like Trump, Ojeda justifies his positions on pragmatic, emotional and personal grounds. And like Trump, Ojeda speaks out of both sides of his mouth, based on what he thinks his audience at any given moment would like to hear.

While tailoring his line for liberal or conservative news outlets, Ojeda has endorsed the Trump administration's policies on immigration, environmental deregulation, and corporate tax cuts, and applauded the stacking of the executive branch with military advisors. He is hardly an opposition figure.

During an interview with CNN's Van Jones in July, for example, Ojeda lamented Trump's softness on Russia. "He's got two brilliant military minds in generals Kelly and Mattis. He needs to listen to them."

But the senator went on to praise Trump's fictitious revitalization of the coal industry. "From where I live, he's done pretty good for southern West Virginia, believe it or not.

My people are working. That's my family. I have to give him a thumbs up on that." He added, "If Donald Trump has a good idea, I will support it wholeheartedly. If he doesn't, I won't."

Of his specific proposals, one is the product of discussion with establishment Democrats: the development of military contracting jobs in the Appalachian coalfields. "The check don't bounce and they're never late," he declared to West Virginia *MetroNews* earlier this month. "There's no reason why we can't put all those [military installations] up all over the 3rd Congressional District."

West Virginia's 3rd congressional district encompasses the southern coalfields region of the state. The district was represented by Republican Evan Jenkins until September 30, when he resigned to take a governor-appointed position on the state Supreme Court. The seat is vacant until the election.

The 3rd district is a mostly rural-area home to under 600,000 people, with a median income of \$25,630. The electoral moods of the region are followed almost obsessively by polling agencies, think tanks, and the country's political parties.

The media and Democratic Party present the region, one of the poorest areas of the United States, as a microcosm of all that is backward and reactionary in the nation's white "blue collar" voters—never mind the fact that Democrats controlled the state for most of the past century.

Although Trump won the state handily over Democrat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, the landslide win for self-styled socialist Bernie Sanders in the same area in the primary is indicative of the leftward-moving character and economic motivations behind the rejection of the Democratic establishment candidate Clinton. The counties encompassed by the 3rd district have seen a large drop in population as the coal industry has collapsed over the past few decades. Intense, long-term poverty has been joined by the worst opioid epidemic in the country's history.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, Ojeda is part of a raft of military and intelligence operatives being promoted in order to divert social opposition behind candidates that are aligned with the foreign and domestic policy prerogatives of the Democratic Party.

Ojeda has substantial financial backing for his campaign, from unions, marijuana-legalization investment firms, and

major corporate donors aligned with the American state—such as Alphabet, the parent company of Google. Alphabet has been working closely with the Pentagon and intelligence agencies on surveillance of the American people, censorship of the Internet, and the military’s drone murder program.

For the most recent reporting period ending September 30, the Federal Election Commission reports Ojeda has raised \$1.9 million, with more than 88 percent coming from out of state. His opponent, Republican state Senator Carol Miller, has raised \$1.16 million. Of the three districts in the state, the 3rd district has seen the most spending by PACs, with Democratic funding totaling \$1.37 million and Republican groups spending nearly the same. One of the largest PAC infusions to support Ojeda’s campaign comes from VoteVets.org, a military organization, which has spent \$489,929 against Miller so far.

The promotion of “outsiders” like Richard Ojeda and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is part of a Democratic Party rebranding effort, to recapture this “disillusionment vote.” Fully backing this effort are a menagerie of sham progressive and left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America and the International Socialist Organization, along with the trade unions.

The teachers’ unions in West Virginia all but appointed Ojeda as their mascot during the strikes and rallies last spring, putting the senator on the Capitol steps to spout pumped-up rhetoric on behalf of the Democrats. The unions, eager to tamp down teacher militancy and end the strikes, sought to direct anger into an electoral “blue wave.” Teachers were told to go back to work and “remember in November.”

The United Mine Workers (UMW) union, a corporate shell of the organization it once was, has also endorsed Ojeda, along with Democrat Senator Joe Manchin. Manchin, a former governor of West Virginia, is widely regarded as the most conservative Democrat in the Senate, voting in favor of Trump’s policy initiatives the majority of the time. The UMW bestows endorsements—and ladles out member dues—to any candidate who sings the praises of coal and “energy independence.”

Being “pro-coal” aligns naturally with the most nationalistic and militarist positions. To CNN’s Van Jones, Ojeda said that coal mining was needed because “we have a military might that is crumbling right now, you know, and if we want to fix those, we need steel.”

In August, when the Environmental Protection Agency released its so-called Affordable Clean Energy proposal to roll back emission standards on power plants—a plan that would kill up to 1,400 people each year from the increased pollution—Ojeda released a statement praising the proposal. “This will help West Virginia,” he said. “This will help coal mining families.”

While paying lip service to supporting teachers and miners, Ojeda’s main claim to populist fame is his extensive military participation in the illegal wars of the past two decades.

Indeed, his campaign website centers exclusively on his 24-year career as an officer in the Army Airborne during the destruction of Afghanistan and Iraq, followed by a stint as an Executive Officer of military recruiting in the town of Beckley, where he funneled working class youth into the Pentagon’s meat grinder.

This is no noble record: These wars have left well over a million dead, millions more wounded, tens of millions made into homeless refugees. These wars of aggression have also shattered thousands of American families, depleted the US social infrastructure of billions of dollars in funds, and militarized society. That Ojeda touts his involvement in these crimes marks him as an enemy of the working class.

Perhaps Ojeda’s strongest asset, ultimately, has been the near radio silence of his opponent, Republican Carol Miller. Miller comes from a wealthy family, owning the Dutch Miller Automotive Group and Dutch Miller Chevrolet car dealership chains. Her father, Samuel Devine, was a longtime Ohio congressman who made a name for himself as a rabid anticommunist.

Miller has declined to participate in public debates or forums, limiting her appearances to vetted audiences at country clubs. At the Logan Country Club, campaign staff removed reporters from what had been billed as a public event, the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* reported October 25. On her way out, Miller responded to a question about her platform to say only, “I’m pro-coal. I’m pro-business, I’m pro one-nation-under-God. Does that help you?” When asked for more specifics, Miller said, “Economic development, a lot of different things.”

The differences between the candidates lie in style more than in substance.



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