

# Behind the defeat of Georgia congresswoman: Republican right, Israel lobby unite to silence criticism of "anti-terrorism" war

By Patrick Martin and Barry Grey  
28 August 2002

From the standpoint of the interests of the working class, there is no essential difference between incumbent Georgia congresswoman Cynthia McKinney and former judge Denise Majette, who defeated McKinney in the August 20 Democratic primary election. Both Democrats are bourgeois politicians who defend the profit system. Neither offers a serious alternative to the growth of militarism and the intensifying assault on democratic rights and working class living standards.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is no supporter of McKinney, a Democrat of the Jesse Jackson mold. She has made a career by voicing certain limited criticisms of the status quo, while in practice adapting her politics to the rightward shift in official American politics.

Nevertheless, the background to the unseating of McKinney, a five-term member of the House of Representatives, raises political issues that are of serious concern to working people. Her defeat was very much the product of a coordinated drive that brought together the Republican right and elements of the American Zionist establishment, with the tacit blessing of the national Democratic leadership. These forces intervened into the Georgia primary and targeted McKinney mainly because of her public statements opposing Israeli policy on the West Bank and more recent remarks questioning the role of the Bush administration in the events of last September 11.

In the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center, the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon has become one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Bush's "war on terrorism," using it as the pretext for an intensified assault on the occupied territories. Sections of the American Zionist establishment have followed suit, fully backing the war in Afghanistan, pressing for a new attack on Iraq, and, in general, defending the Bush administration against its critics. This has brought them into an alliance with extreme right elements within the Republican Party, including the Christian right and other forces linked to racist and anti-Semitic forces.

At the same time the Bush administration—with the help of its ostensible Democratic opposition—has worked relentlessly to block any public investigation into the September 11 attacks. It is evident that the White House fears the consequences of a public airing of its own role in the events both before and after the hijack-bombings.

For these reasons, McKinney—who combined pro-Palestinian statements with pointed questions about Bush and September 11—was singled out as the target of a well-financed political intervention organized on a national scale. Her defeat was meant to serve as an object lesson to any other bourgeois politicians who might consider

questioning publicly the official line regarding September 11 and the "war on terrorism."

McKinney was initially targeted by the most powerful pro-Israel lobby, the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), for her public statements sympathetic to the plight of the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. McKinney is the senior Democrat on the human rights subcommittee of the International Relations Committee, and would have chaired that panel in the event that the Democrats won back control of the House in November.

After September 11 and the launching of the US war in Afghanistan, together with the anti-Arab racism implicit in Bush's domestic anti-terrorism campaign, AIPAC evidently concluded that the political climate made it possible to target several incumbent black Democrats for defeat by sponsoring primary challengers.

The first such campaign was against Earl Hilliard, longtime congressman in Alabama's seventh congressional district, which includes most of the city of Birmingham and the rural area to its south. AIPAC threw its support to Artur Davis, a black former prosecutor who had challenged the incumbent unsuccessfully in 1998 and 2000, never raising much campaign money and never winning more than 34 percent of the vote.

In the course of a vicious primary campaign, in which television ads suggested Hilliard was a defender of terrorism because he had gone on a business junket to Libya in 1997, Davis raised far more money than the incumbent, outspending him by 60-40 and winning a runoff vote in June by about that margin. More than 80 percent of Davis's funding came from outside Alabama, and more than half of the individual contributions came from residents of New York State.

Denise Majette, a local judge in the Atlanta suburbs who had been appointed to the bench by then-governor Zell Miller, announced her candidacy against McKinney last January. Her campaign was initially dismissed as an under-financed long-shot, until McKinney's comments in an interview with Pacifica Radio became the subject of a media witch-hunt in April.

In the interview and a subsequent statement issued by her congressional office, McKinney raised a number of pointed questions about the Bush administration's claims concerning September 11. Among other things, she said: "We know there were numerous warnings of the events to come on September 11th. What did this administration know, and when did it know it, about the events of September 11th? Who else knew, and why did they not warn the innocent people of New York who were needlessly murdered?"

She asked, "How much of a role does our reliance on imported oil

play in the military policies being put forward by the Bush administration? And what role does the close relationship between the Bush administration and the oil and defense industries play, if any, in the policies that are currently being pursued by this administration?"

McKinney's opposition to the Bush administration was by no means unequivocal. She voted for the post-September 11 resolution that authorized Bush to take military action in Afghanistan, although she opposed the USA Patriot Act, which gave the administration expanded powers to attack democratic rights at home. But she denounced the White House for opposing any independent investigation into the terrorist attacks.

Describing the Bush administration as a government that "stole from America our most precious right of all, the right to free and fair elections," she noted that it was now carrying out sweeping domestic repressive measures. "An administration of questionable legitimacy has been given unprecedented power," she said.

The reaction to these blunt—and, so far as they went, entirely accurate—remarks was outrage from the political and media establishment. Senator Zell Miller, a Georgia Democrat, described her as "loony" and "dangerous and irresponsible." White House spokesman Scott McClellan declared, "The fact that she questions the president's legitimacy shows a partisan mind-set beyond all reason."

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the city's major daily newspaper, described her as "a fringe lunatic, well outside the congressional mainstream." But when the newspaper ran a poll on its web site, asking whether readers believed the Bush administration or the congresswoman, it found a 50-50 split. The poll was shut down and its results never published.

The Southeastern Legal Foundation, an ultra-right group financed by billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife, wrote to Democratic House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt demanding that he remove McKinney from her positions on the Armed Services and International Relations committees. Meanwhile, campaign contributions poured into the Majette campaign. According to one press account, Majette raised seven times as much money as McKinney during the summer months.

Majette ultimately raised more than \$1.1 million, an enormous sum for a congressional primary race—nearly \$20 for every vote she received—and outspent the incumbent by two to one. The race would have been close but for heavy crossover voting by Republicans in white, upper-middle-class precincts, where Majette won by margins approaching 30-1. But even in McKinney's home area of DeKalb County, largely black and working class, she trailed.

The bulk of the civil rights establishment backed McKinney, but with little enthusiasm and to little effect. One election day rally told the story, as only a handful gathered to hear Rev. Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King III, Rev. Joseph Lowery and Louis Farrakhan at Stoneview Elementary School. Two years ago, some 1,800 people voted there in the general election, the vast majority for McKinney. On August 20, only 169 people cast ballots at the same precinct.

The national Democratic Party leadership tacitly supported the right-wing purge. At the time of the initial media campaign against McKinney, House Democratic leader Richard Gephardt issued a tepid statement through a spokesman: "Mr. Gephardt does not agree with many of the things she said, but she has the right to say them. He's confident all her questions will be answered by the congressional investigation that will be headed by the Intelligence committees."

In fact, that investigation has been virtually shut down and the FBI mobilized to investigate the committees for alleged leaks of national

security information. As the anniversary of September 11 nears, there has still not been a single public hearing on the actions of the US intelligence agencies in the period leading up to the greatest single security failure in US history.

The response of McKinney and her supporters to the attacks on her demonstrates that her criticism of Bush and Israel was based, not on principled opposition to imperialism, but rather on "left" posturing and black nationalism. She denounced the pro-Majette forces as "outsiders"—i.e., whites and Jews—who had no right to intervene into an election in the black community.

In her criticism of Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, McKinney made common cause with anti-Semitic demagogues like the Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam. This made it easy for pro-Zionist groups to spread political confusion and propagate the lie that opposition to Israeli oppression of Palestinians equals anti-Jewish racism.

McKinney's father, state representative Billy McKinney, made openly anti-Jewish comments. Asked in a television interview the day before the primary why his daughter was facing such a difficult reelection challenge, he spelled out the answer: "J E W S." The father was himself forced into a runoff against a challenger in the same primary vote.

In the end, McKinney's defeat revealed her own lack of a serious and active mass base of support in the working population.

The element of witch-hunt and purge in the unseating of McKinney is indicative of the ever-more pronounced role of big money and political conspiracy in American electoral politics. Under conditions of widespread popular alienation from the political system, where mass support for both major parties has drastically eroded and Democrats as well as Republicans rest on an extremely narrow social base, numerically small forces with big resources have enormous scope to manipulate elections. The entire process reflects the profound decay of democratic institutions and processes in the US.

To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>