

US Senate censure of MoveOn.org: An attack on free speech in the service of militarism

By Bill Van Auken
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The US Senate's 72-to-25 vote in favor of a resolution condemning the liberal antiwar group MoveOn.org for publishing a newspaper ad questioning the credibility of Iraq war commander Gen. David Petraeus represents a chilling attack on freedom of speech and a further undermining of the bedrock constitutional principle that subordinates the military to democratic civilian control.

The vote follows two weeks of agitation by the Republican right over the ad, which appeared in the *New York Times* on the eve of congressional testimony given by General Petraeus and Ryan Crocker, the American ambassador in Baghdad, defending the Bush administration's military surge, which has sent an additional 30,000 US troops into the war in Iraq.

Republican lawmakers took to the floor in the House and Senate, brandishing copies of the ad and demanding that the Democrats repudiate it. Republican presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani took out his own ad in the *Times*, extolling Petraeus's record and attacking Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton for failing to rebuke MoveOn.org. Not to be outdone, Giuliani's Republican rival, Senator John McCain, expressed the opinion that the liberal lobbying group should "be thrown out of the country."

Finally, on the same day that the Senate approved the resolution, President Bush declared at a White House press conference that the MoveOn.org ad was "disgusting" and attacked the Democrats for failing to denounce it. Most Democrats, he declared "are afraid of irritating a left-wing group like MoveOn.org—or more afraid of irritating them than they are of irritating the United States military."

The vote in the Senate, however, proved Bush's accusation against the Democrats completely wrong. In the end, virtually every Democrat in the Senate cowered before the military, voting in favor of one of two resolutions defending Petraeus and condemning the MoveOn.org ad.

The first of these was approved by an overwhelming, 72-to-25 vote, with as many Democrats voting for it or abstaining as voting against. Among those who abstained were Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

This bill "strongly condemns" the MoveOn.org ad, declaring that it "impugns the honor and integrity of General Petraeus and all the members of the United States Armed Forces," while citing at great length the US commander's military record.

The second measure, which failed, was a slightly watered-down version of this act of censure, offered by California Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer. Its stated purpose was to "strongly condemn all attacks on the honor, integrity and patriotism of any individual who is serving or has served honorably in the United States Armed Forces, by any person or organization."

It endorsed the condemnation of the MoveOn.org ad, but added that Republican-backed attack ads, such as the Swiftboat Veterans' campaign against Democratic 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry and right-wing attacks on former Georgia Senator Max Cleland, who lost both legs and an arm in Vietnam, should also be repudiated. All but two Senate Democrats—Biden, who again abstained, and Wisconsin Senator Russell Feingold, who voted "no"—supported this measure.

The phony furor whipped up over the newspaper ad served largely as a distraction from the Republican support for continuing unchanged a criminal war in Iraq that is opposed by a large majority of the US population. It also served to divert attention, if only momentarily, from the abject failure of the Democratic majority in both the House and Senate to enact a single piece of legislation altering the course of the war.

The Senate on Friday ended the week of debate that followed the Petraeus-Crocker report with the defeat of an amendment to the Pentagon appropriations bill sponsored by Democratic senators Carl Levin (Michigan) and Jack Reed (Rhode Island) calling for the "redeployment" of a portion of the present US occupation force within nine months. Like other Democratic "antiwar" proposals, the measure envisioned tens of thousands of US troops remaining in Iraq to continue the suppression of national resistance and secure US interests in the region.

Nonetheless, the bill went down to defeat, with only 47 Senators voting in favor, 13 short of the 60 needed to secure a straight up-or-down floor vote. Three Democrats (as well as the so-called independent Democrat Joseph Lieberman) joined Republicans in opposing the measure.

The defeat followed the overwhelming rejection Thursday of a bill sponsored by Senator Feingold that would "transition the mission" of US troops in Iraq by June of 2008, withdrawing some forces while continuing to fund a US military presence in Iraq that would supposedly be limited to "counterterrorism" operations, protecting American assets and training Iraqi puppet forces. This measure picked up only 28 votes.

Finally, there was the failure Wednesday of the Democratic Senate leadership to secure passage of a bill that they had touted as their best chance for success. Sponsored by Senator James Webb (Democrat of Virginia), it demanded that troops returning from Iraq be given "dwell time" at their home bases equal to the length of their combat deployment. The proposal was supported by 56 senators, including six Republicans, leaving it four shy of the 60 votes needed to cut off debate and proceed to a floor vote.

The string of defeats signals the end of the Democratic Party

leadership's false pretense that it is seeking to legislate an end to the war. This claim is belied by the fact that from the outset this leadership has ruled out the use of the only power that Congress has to end war: the cutting off of military funding. Now, Levin and others are reportedly preparing a new round of meaningless legislation that would include "goals" for withdrawal, with no binding power over the actions of the White House.

While serving largely as a political diversion, the MoveOn.org controversy nonetheless has grave political implications.

For the overwhelming majority of the US Senate to support resolutions condemning political speech in the name of upholding the "honor, integrity and patriotism" of the US military amounts to telling the population to keep their mouths shut and defer to the authority of the generals.

A Republican member of the House, Thomas Davis of Virginia, has taken this approach to its logical conclusion, calling for the convening of McCarthyite-style hearings on the politics of MoveOn.org.

The facts of the case, however, substantiate the substantive charges made against Petraeus in MoveOn.org's ad. It said he was "cooking the books for the White House" in order to claim that the escalation of the US intervention in Iraq has produced "progress" and a reduction of violence. It went on to cite the numerous independent reports indicating that the civilian death toll has actually mounted.

The thrust of the attacks on the ad have centered on its headline: "General Petraeus or General Betray US?" which has been portrayed as an unconscionable attack on the unimpeachable record of a great military commander as well as an attack on every member of the armed forces.

The reality, of course, is that Petraeus is directing a criminal, colonial-style war against the Iraqi people that has produced untold killings and suffering. While the Senate staged its obscene debate over a newspaper ad, the Iraqi authorities were still counting casualties from last Sunday's massacre by Blackwater mercenaries in central Baghdad, which has produced a death toll placed at 28 and still rising.

Moreover, Petraeus is a political general who was placed in his position because he accepted the policy of escalation advocated by the Bush White House, under conditions in which other military commanders rejected it. He was then brought back to Washington to serve as an advocate for this policy, allowing Bush and the elements of the American ruling elite that support an unending occupation of the oil-rich country to hide behind his uniform. Crying foul over political attacks on a political general used for openly political purpose represents a hypocritical and sinister attempt to silence all opposition to the war itself.

The attempt to equate criticism of Petraeus and his political role with the denigration of every working class youth in uniform is equally deceitful. The fact is that Petraeus serves as an advocate for a policy that keeps these young soldiers killing and dying in Iraq for years to come.

More fundamentally, the thesis that the military is above criticism from either elected officials or the general public—a conception that is enthusiastically promoted by the Republicans and cringingly accepted by the Democrats—fundamentally serves to subvert the essential constitutional principle that the military is subordinate to civilian control.

This principle has already been gravely weakened by the transformations in the military itself, which has become a largely mercenary force of professionals, commanded by a predominantly conservative Republican officer corps and provided with vast funding

to wage multiple wars of aggression. Under these conditions, to promote the conception that the military is above reproach and anyone daring to criticize it must be formally rebuked is tantamount to greasing the skids towards a military dictatorship in America.

The Senate resolution is but the latest sign of the deep-going corrosion of democratic processes in the United States. Nor is the inability and unwillingness of the Democrats to defend elementary democratic principles a new development.

A major factor in the theft of the 2000 election, in which the Democratic candidate Al Gore won the popular vote, was a Republican-led drive to marshal absentee military votes for Bush in the disputed Florida contest, including those illegally cast after the voting deadline. When Florida Democrats sought to challenge the illegal military votes, the Bush campaign launched a witch-hunt, attacking Gore as unpatriotic and hostile to the military. Gore quickly capitulated, agreeing to allow the invalid votes to be counted.

Later, Democratic Party officials and Gore campaign aides revealed that the then-vice president decided to allow the invalid military votes for fear of alienating the military brass. The Democratic National Committee's general counsel at the time told the *New York Times*: "I can give you his exact words. 'If I won this thing by a handful of military ballots, I would be hounded by Republicans and the press every day of my presidency and it wouldn't be worth having.'"

Another Gore aide was quoted as saying, "Gore got very stuck on the notion that if he became president, it was not in the national interest that he have a relationship characterized by his mistrust of the military."

If anything, the flaw in MoveOn.org's provocative headline stems from its pro-Democratic politics. Petraeus is merely an instrument of a policy crafted by others. If one wants to look for "traitors," a good place to begin is with the Democrats and those who promote illusions in the Democratic Party. It was, after all, the Democratic leadership of the US Senate that provided the unanimous vote in the Senate last January confirming the general as the commander of American occupation forces in Iraq.

The aim of MoveOn.org is to influence and pressure this party to carry out a policy to end the Iraq war. The deeds of the Democrats in the 10 months since they gained their congressional majority, thanks to an election dominated by the antiwar sentiments of the American people, have amply demonstrated the bankruptcy of this perspective.

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