

Murtha's Address to Virginia Town Meeting

On Jan. 5, Rep. Jack Murtha (D-Pa.) addressed an overflowing town meeting in Arlington, Virginia, which was hosted by Rep. James Moran (D-Va.). Murtha's message was enthusiastically received, and a growing pro-impeachment mood was palpable in the crowd. Because the speech was not widely reported, we provide the transcript of Representative Murtha's opening statement here. Following a glowing introduction by Representative Moran, Murtha was greeted by a standing ovation. Subheads have been added.

I want to make a couple of comments today, because I've found that every time I make a comment, I get rhetorical answers, and that's frustrating to me. And I said the other day on a program—and it was all about Iraq. . . . I said that because of the policy, because I disagreed with the policy, I wouldn't encourage people to enlist. So that's my personal opinion. Now, there's other people that have found ways to avoid going into the service, for one reason or another, and that's fine. That's a personal thing. So instead of that, talk about the problems of recruitment, which they had. Now they fell 6600 short in recruitment this year. They have the smallest army since 1941—they've been overdeployed over and over again—we have some people who have been deployed five times.

We have some that didn't have battle armor, which I discovered when I was over in Iraq. Some families had to buy battle armor for the troops. Now this greatest country in the world, is allowing our troops to go into combat without battle armor, without humvees, without armored humvees, without all these things they needed, with inadequate forces to go to peace. So, I was upset about it obviously, and for a long period of time, I have been trying to answer their problems with substantive answers, and requests and suggestions about what needs to be done.

The other thing is training. We have a well-trained force, there is no question about it, but GAO just recently said, we have 112,000, in an inappropriate MOS—that's a Military Occupation Specialty. 112,000! Now, what do you mean by that? In other words, you've got truck drivers doing jobs of MP work. We have people that are switched into other types of positions. We have four critical shortages. Those four shortages are intelligence, translators—it takes a long time to train any of them—and the special forces people, and demolitions experts. We are paying \$160,000 to recruit some people.

Now that's a problem they have, and they don't face it with substantive answers. They face it with rhetoric. "Murtha's hurting our recruiting" [a reference to Gen. Pace's remarks earlier that day about Murtha].

All this happened before I said anything. So, when they start to talk to me—I know what I'm talking about. And when I talk about problems, and not being able to meet the requirements—when you keep deploying people over and over again. What's happening in recruitment, is, the guys come home, the men and women come home, and they tell their brothers and sisters, "Don't go, we don't have a clear mission." And the mission has changed five or six times. And so nobody knows exactly what is happening.

Iraq Is a Political Conflict

Now, to go to—Iraq itself has now become absolutely political. All the top military people have agreed with me: We can't win it militarily. So, my recommendation has been, that we redeploy as quickly as we can.

Now, for a number of reasons, I think we've become the enemy. And why have we become the enemy? For the very reason I talked about—inadequate training. For instance, at Abu Graib, we have people who should not have been in the prison, who weren't trained and weren't supervised in the prison. I'll give you an example. One fellow from western Pennsylvania, actually in my Congressional district, had a court order against him, that he was not allowed to see his family because he had abused his family. And he told the Army that, and they still put him in that position. And he was the leader in the group in Abu Graib. Now you know the damage that did to our forces. When the Arab countries, when the world, saw those unsupervised, untrained people.

Now, I've had troops tell me in the United States, they didn't have adequate radios to train on, before they went overseas. They went to Kuwait and had to open up the equipment and read the instructions about how to use it. Some of the units were at the lowest level of readiness before they left the States, because they didn't have the equipment to train on. Jim will tell you this. We have a \$50 billion backlog of equipment that needs to be repaired—ground equipment—in the United States! We need 52,000 radios; we have 27,000. So we're looking at the smallest army being redeployed—a very small percentage of people in this country making that sacrifice—you begin to see the problem I have when I make suggestions to them, and there's nothing being readied.

Eighteen months ago I said, you have to either mobilize, or you have to get out of Iraq. They paid no attention to me at that time at all. I said in several shows—and I don't usually go on shows, I usually try to do it behind the scenes. A year ago I said we can't win this militarily, and I got all kinds of criticism. It wasn't substantive criticism. It was criticism like I received when I made my statement on the floor. People got up and criticized me personally. Now, I

try not to take it personally, but it's hard when they don't answer it substantively.

Soldiers Glad I Am Speaking Out

And so, when I get letters from the troops themselves—like one young soldier wrote to me and said, “I tell you, we don't have a clear mission. We don't know why we're in Iraq, I'm so disappointed, and I'm so proud of you speaking out.” Out of the 18,000 communications I got, 16,000 were favorable. The people were thirsty. This is not about me. This is about thirsting for a policy that makes sense. We have an open-ended policy right now, in Iraq, with no exit strategy.

Now, I've always said, when you go to war, you go to war only when it threatens our national security. And some people say to me: Well, you're just getting old, and you're worried about the troops losing their lives. Yeah, you're damn right I'm worried about the troops losing their lives! I want to save every single life I can save.

And there are times when we make sacrifices. WWII, we made sacrifices, because we needed to make those sacrifices. And it was well worth those sacrifices. And the families now don't feel that same thing. The mothers come to me, the wives come to me—I had two young women come to me, one was 23, one was 19. One had two children, the other didn't have any children. But their lives had been turned over completely. And they were so dedicated, that they went out to the hospital to tell the young wounded people how well-off they were, even though they hurt so badly.

Now, we've lost almost as many in Iraq as we lost at the Towers. Imagine what I'm saying. And if you add the 7,500 that have been seriously wounded—and I see them all the time. I've seen young people so disfigured that their wives can't look at them. It's heartbreaking to see the problems we have because of this continual rotation. One young woman said to me, she said, my husband—he's lying there—has been deployed in Iraq twice. He'd been deployed in Iraq twice, and he enlisted to fight for America. He didn't enlist to fight for Iraq. Now, they're starting to open up to me. When I used to go to the hospital, I had to drag things out of them. Now they're hearing what I'm saying, and they appreciate what I'm saying.

We Have No Exit Strategy

One of the Generals was saying to me just the other day, how high the morale is. Well, that's what the Generals think. They're going to tell the Generals how good the morale is. Sure, I understand that. I can remember when I said to the Commandant of the Marine Corps when I first came to Congress, that the staff sergeant at Paris Island said that they wouldn't fight. We had some real problems in those days, with drug addiction and so forth during the early '70s, and the



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Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), the 30 year veteran of the Marines who shocked Washington by starting debate on the need to withdraw from Iraq, drew over 1,000 people at a town meeting in Northern Virginia. Here he is shown (left) in Kosova in 1999.

Commandant said, this Murtha, he came in and he's trying to run the Marine Corps. I wasn't trying to run the Marine Corps; I just told them what I heard. He finally realized it was accurate. We got rid of 10,000 Marines the next year. The Army started to do the same thing, the Navy, so we then went to a volunteer Army, and it turned out to be good.

Now, very few people are making sacrifices, and this is the thing that worries me. We have to continue to speak out against an open-ended policy. Nation-building is not the answer. We can't police the world. And nation-building—for a military! The reason it doesn't work . . . you had two things happen at the same time that Abu Graib happened. You had Fallujah. We put 150,000 people outside their homes. Now, that does not make friends. And there's a guerrilla war, and what I've been saying over and over and over again—there was a terrorist attack which emanated in Afghanistan. And we went into Afghanistan, had every right, and the world was with us. Well, when we diverted ourselves to the insurgency—and the insurgency is what is in Iraq—only 750 to 1000 insurgents are foreign fighters. So they are Iraqis that are doing the fighting against our troops. The only thing that could unite the Iraqis is the United States occupation.

We were considered as liberators at first. And now we're occupiers. And 60-80% of the Iraqis say that they want us out of there, and 45% say it's justified to kill Americans. And the Defense Department's own polls indicate the same thing. It's time to let the Iraqis take over this effort. Let them solve their own problems like we did in the Revolutionary War. And our troops should be redeployed outside the borders.