

Retiring military chief declares: American people can't vote to end Iraq war

By Patrick Martin
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In a statement remarkable for its blunt rejection of democracy, the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace, said Monday that opponents of the war in Iraq could not bring it to an end by voting.

Pace made his comments before an audience that included President George W. Bush, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and hundreds of high-ranking Pentagon civilian and military officials, as he swore in his successor as the president's top military adviser, Admiral Michael Mullen. None of those present made any objection to Pace's statement.

Outside Ft. Myer, where the ceremony took place, a handful of antiwar demonstrators used a bullhorn to shout their opposition. Reporters inside could hear, "Stop the Killing, George!", "Arrest the Liar for War Crimes!" and other denunciations of the administration and the Pentagon.

Noting the presence of the demonstrators, Pace said the protest against the war was an exercise of the right of free speech, but that there were limits:

"I just want everyone to understand that this dialogue is not about 'can we vote our way out of a war.' We have an enemy who has declared war on us. We are in a war. They want to stop us from living the way we want to live our lives. So the dialogue is not about 'are we in a war,' but how and where and when to best fight that war."

Pace was employing the standard "big lie" technique of the Bush administration, presenting the war in Iraq as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The Iraqi people have not "declared war" on the United States—on the contrary, American imperialism carried out an unprovoked and illegal invasion and occupation, in order to secure access to the country's oil resources and reinforce the dominant US role in the Middle East.

But Pace's remarks went far beyond the deliberate bait-and-switch of conflating 9/11 and Iraq. The top US military official was declaring that there can and should be no public discussion about an end to the war in Iraq except on the basis of an American military victory: "How and where and when to best fight that war."

Pace prefaced his attack on opponents of the war with a profession of support for freedom and democracy and the right to dissent. But the implications of his statement are profoundly antidemocratic.

American public opinion is overwhelmingly opposed to the war in Iraq. According to a *Washington Post* poll published the day after Pace's remarks, a clear majority of the population rejects the war and wants funding for it cut sharply or eliminated entirely. Approval numbers are at record lows both for Bush, for continuing and escalating the war, and for the Democratic Congress, for doing nothing to stop him.

Pace says that this antiwar majority should not be allowed to use the ballot box to compel a change in policy: the war must go on indefinitely, regardless of the popular will. If there were a national referendum vote to end the war, Pace would presumably demand that the government disregard it and continue the military bloodbath. As he said, concluding his remarks, "We will prevail. There's no doubt about that."

The logical conclusion of this argument is the outlawing and forcible suppression of public opposition to the war in Iraq, the suspension of elections and the establishment of a military dictatorship in the United States.

Monday's is the latest and most reactionary of a series of political comments General Pace has made in the course of his last month in office. He has repeatedly defended the military's ban on gays and lesbians openly serving in its ranks, justifying it not with doubletalk about "unit cohesion" and military morale, like Colin Powell, but rather with an open avowal of Christian fundamentalism. Homosexuality is immoral, he told a Senate committee last month, and should not be permitted in the military because it violates "God's law."

The bitterness expressed by Pace has personal as well as institutional roots. He is leaving after only two years as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the shortest time in office since the position was established after World War II.

Secretary of Defense Gates made the decision during the summer not to nominate Pace for a second term—an extension that had become the norm—citing the likelihood of contentious hearings in the Democratic-controlled Senate, which must approve the nomination.

Since winning control of Congress in the November 2006 elections, the Democrats have refused to cut off funding for the war in Iraq, passing a \$100 billion funding bill in May. They have failed to win Senate passage of any policy changes on Iraq, and rubber-stamped the nominations of Secretary Gates, the commander of US forces in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey and other top Pentagon officials.

The ouster of Pace is thus the sole concrete “achievement” of the Democrats in the sphere of military policy, and the decision of Bush and Gates to end his military career rather than push through a second term undoubtedly rankles the general.

Pace gave voice to this sentiment in the course of his remarks, although he directed his fire entirely at unnamed opponents of the war, who he claimed were “more interested in letting their personal venom come forward instead of talking about how do we get from where we are to where we need to be.”

Just as telling as the substance of Pace’s comments was the reaction to them in Washington political and media circles, where his public rejection of democratic decision-making on the war provoked only yawns. No Democrat condemned his remarks or defended the right of the people to vote for an end to the war. No Bush administration official raised any objection. Press reports of the event were perfunctory.

In one quarter, Pace’s statement prompted high praise. *National Review Online* responded with an editorial, “Draft General Pace,” urging Virginia Republicans to choose him as their candidate to replace retiring Senator John Warner, a sentiment echoed by another ultra-right publication, *Human Events*. The *National Review Online* editorial said approvingly, “Unlike other senior military leaders, the Catholic General Pace has been outspoken about his conservative beliefs on social issues.”

There is, of course, one sense in which General Pace’s remarks are perfectly true. In the existing political system, dominated by a corporate financial oligarchy that controls both political parties and all the instruments of public policy, “voting our way out of a war” is, in fact, impossible.

Millions of people went to the polls in 2006 and voted for the Democrats in an attempt, now revealed as futile, to compel an end to the war. Every effort is now being made by the corporate-controlled media, the trade union bureaucrats and liberal publications like the *Nation* to convince the American people that the election of a Democratic president and Congress in 2008 will bring an end to the war.

But only last week, the three leading Democratic presidential candidates refused to commit themselves to remove American troops from Iraq even by the time of their second inaugural, January 20, 2013, nearly 10 years after Bush invaded the country. This confirms what the failure of the Democratic Congress has already shown: the Democratic Party is a party of the American ruling class, unshakably committed to the defense of imperialist interests.

Pace’s open repudiation of the most basic principles of democracy and assertion of military supremacy over civilian control is but the latest in a series of political interventions by high-ranking military officers and their allies in the Bush administration aimed at intimidating popular opposition to the war. Just last month President Bush, Vice President Cheney and other leading Republicans launched a political witch-hunt against the Democratic pressure group MoveOn.org for an ad it published in the *New York Times* criticizing Gen. Petraeus.

The McCarthyite attack resulted in the passage, with substantial Democratic support, of resolutions in both the Senate and House of Representatives condemning MoveOn.org, followed by the *New York Times*’ repudiation of the ad.

These instances are indicative of the immense and growing political weight of the military in American society.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote (See [“New York Times public editor repudiates MoveOn.org ad on General Petraeus”](#)):

“What next? Will criticism of the military be outlawed as treasonous and detrimental to national security? Such was the case in the Kaiser’s Germany of the early 20th century, when the socialist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were both jailed for their incisive writings and fearless agitation against German militarism.

“In the end, the episode exposes the very real danger of a military coup in the US, whether carried out by the military itself or by civilian leaders committed to utilizing the military—both practically and as an ideological justification—to suppress political and social discontent within the American working class.”

The unprecedented attack on democratic rights and growing danger of military dictatorship can be defeated only through a break with the Democratic Party and the building of a new mass political party of working people, opposed to American imperialism and committed to a socialist program.

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