

Former US commander blames “partisan” politics and “agenda-driven” media for Iraq debacle

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In an extraordinary speech delivered October 12, retired Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the top US commander in Iraq from June 2003 to June 2004, gave vent to deeply anti-democratic sentiments emerging within growing sections of the US officer corps.

Addressing the Military Reporters and Editors annual conference in Arlington, Virginia, Sanchez attributed American military failures in Iraq to the “unscrupulous reporting” and “agenda-driven biases” of the media, and “the corrosive partisan politics that is destroying our country and killing our service members who are at war.”

Sanchez avowed his support for freedom of the press and democracy, but the implicit message of his speech was the incompatibility of democratic processes with the pursuit of a global war against “extremism.” He declared, “Our forefathers understood that tremendous economic and political capacity had to be mobilized, synchronized and applied if we were to achieve victory in a global war. That has been and continues to be the key to victory in Iraq...”

“Partisan politics have hindered this war effort and America should not accept this. America must demand a unified national strategy that goes well beyond partisan politics and places the common good above all else...”

“Our politicians must remember their oath of office and recommit themselves to serving our nation and not their own self-interests or political party. The security of America is at stake and we can accept nothing less.”

At one point, Sanchez all but called for systematic press censorship, saying, “As I assess various media entities, some are unquestionably engaged in political propaganda that is uncontrolled.”

He seemed to suggest that the only basis for waging a successful war in Iraq and beyond was some form of military rule at home, declaring, “As we all know, war is an extension of politics, and when a nation goes to war it must bring to bear all elements of power in order to win. War-fighting is not solely the responsibility of the military commander, unless he has been given the responsibility and resources to synchronize the political, economic and informational power of the nation.

“So who is responsible for developing the grand strategy that will allow America to emerge victorious from this generational struggle against extremism?”

Given the lack of such a “grand strategy,” Sanchez said the best the US could hope for was

a stalemate, with a reduced US military force in Iraq “for the foreseeable future.”

Voicing the widespread anger and frustration within the military over the strains resulting from simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he obliquely raised the need for a restored military draft, saying, “the American military finds itself in an intractable situation... the deployment cycles of our formations has been totally disrupted, the resourcing and training challenges are significant, and America’s ability to sustain a force level of 150,000-plus is nonexistent without drastic measures that have been politically unacceptable to date.”

Sanchez’s speech was, in part, a broadside against the Bush administration’s military strategy and conduct of the war. Calling the Iraq war “a nightmare with no end in sight,” the retired commander declared, “From a catastrophically flawed, unrealistically optimistic war plan to the administration’s latest ‘surge’ strategy, this administration has failed to employ and synchronize its political, economic and military power.

“The latest ‘revised strategy’ is a desperate attempt by an administration that has not accepted the political and economic realities of this war, and they have definitely not communicated that reality to the American people.”

Media reports on the speech focused on Sanchez’s criticisms of the administration’s war tactics, while virtually ignoring its broader, authoritarian thrust.

There was a pronounced element of personal bitterness in the remarks of Sanchez, who was removed from his Iraq command in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal that erupted in April of 2004. The sadistic torture of Iraqi prisoners and its exposure occurred under his command. Sanchez testified before Congress that he had no role in approving the torture methods employed at the US-run prison, but documents subsequently released showed that he personally signed off on the use of interrogation methods banned by the Geneva Conventions.

An internal Army investigation concluded that Sanchez was indirectly responsible for the abuses at Abu Ghraib, but cleared him of any wrong-doing as part of the official whitewash of military officers and Bush administration officials. However, the political fallout from the scandal deprived Sanchez of a new command, and he retired from the military in November of 2006, shortly after then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was ousted by Bush.

In the course of his tirade against the media, Sanchez alluded to Abu Ghraib, saying, “Over the course of this war tactically insignificant events have become strategic defeats for America because of the tremendous power and impact of the media and, by extension, you the journalist. In many cases the media has unjustly destroyed the individual reputations and careers of those involved.”

However, Sanchez was clearly speaking for a broader constituency. The failure of the US military adventure in Iraq has fuelled recriminations and conflicts within the military and between it and civilian authorities. Among sections of the officer corps, the commitment to the Constitution and its principle of the subordination of the military to civilian authority is growing increasingly tenuous.

In his speech, Sanchez directed his fire against the Bush administration, the State Department, the National Security Council, Congress, the Democratic and Republican parties and the media, while sparing the Pentagon and brushing over the role of military

commanders.

On Sunday, two days after Sanchez's speech, the *New York Times* published an article based on interviews with officers attending the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas which made clear that the possibility of a military coup in the US is openly being discussed. The article described conflicting views among the mid-career officers at the school as to where the chief blame lies for the military disaster in Iraq, with the civilian authorities or the military commanders who refused to defy them.

The article cited retired Col. Gregory Fontenot, an instructor at the school, saying "he questioned whether Americans really wanted a four-star general to stand up publicly and say no to the president of a nation where civilians control the armed forces."

The article continued: "For the sake of argument, a question was posed: If enough four-star generals had done that, would it have stopped the war?"

"'Yeah, we'd call it a coup d'etat,' Colonel Fontenot said. 'Do you want to have a coup d'etat? You kind of have to decide what you want. Do you like the Constitution, or are you so upset about the Iraq war that you're willing to dismiss the Constitution in just this one instance and hopefully things will be OK? I don't think so.'"

That Sanchez is both reflecting and encouraging putchist moods within the military is underscored by one section of his speech, in which he declared, "Who will demand accountability for the failure of our national political leaders involved in the management this war? They have unquestionably been derelict in the performance of their duty. In my profession, these type of leaders would immediately be relieved or court-martialed."

Sanchez concluded his remarks with an avowal of his evangelical Christian beliefs, saying, "Praise be to the Lord, my rock who trains my fingers for battle and my hands for war." This is significant, since an important ideological component of the increasingly politicized US military is the promotion of right-wing fundamentalist dogmas within its ranks.

The threat of a military coup in the United States is very real. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has been pointing out and warning of for some time, the military is wielding ever greater influence over political life in America. It consumes a massive portion of the national budget, its leading figures occupy key posts within government and the corporate establishment, and it is currently engaged in the neo-colonial occupation of two countries.

The growing political power of the military, and the weakening of civilian control, is a process that has been developing over a protracted period, under both Republican and Democratic administrations. With the Bush administration, this process has assumed more pronounced and open forms. The current administration is one in which the president and vice president rarely speak in public before any but military audiences.

Presiding over an unpopular war, resting for support largely on a financial aristocracy of multi-billionaires and multi-millionaires, the administration openly bases itself on an alliance with the military against the will of the people. Last July, at a White House press conference, Bush justified his continuation of the war in opposition to the will of the population, as expressed not only in opinion polls but in the 2006 congressional elections, by citing the military as a constituency with greater weight than the American people.

Just this month, Gen. Peter Pace, the outgoing chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, declared

that the people cannot “vote an end to the war.” This followed the passage of resolutions in both the House of Representatives and Senate, with bipartisan support, denouncing the Democratic pressure group MoveOn.org for publishing an ad criticizing the current US commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus.

Neither the Democratic Party nor the media are prepared to oppose the increasingly ominous intervention of the military into political affairs. The response of the political establishment and the media to Sanchez’s speech further confirms this.

Neither the White House nor the Pentagon issued any response. The National Security Council merely thanked Sanchez for his military service and opined that the US military and security situation in Iraq were improving.

No major newspapers have published editorials on the speech. Nor have they reported its thoroughly anti-democratic content.

Leading Democrats have maintained a craven silence. On the Sunday morning television talk shows, Sanchez’s speech was noted only in passing. Republican supporters of the Bush administration and the war, such as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, merely pointed to an editorial in the *Washington Post* arguing that Iraqi casualty numbers indicate an improving security situation in Iraq.

As Sanchez’s speech underscores, the war in Iraq and the preparations for new and even bloodier wars increasingly imperil the democratic rights of the American people. No section of the ruling elite retains any serious commitment to the defense of these rights. Only the independent political mobilization of the working class against the two parties of American capitalism can put an end to war and danger of dictatorship.

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