

Veterans Group Calls on Soldiers to Refuse Orders to Deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq

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Global Research, December 16, 2009

[Truthout](#) 14 December 2009

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ REPORT](#)

In response to President Barack Obama's announcement on December 1 to deploy 30,000 additional troops to the occupation of Afghanistan, the organization [March Forward!](#), with comprising both veterans and active-duty members of the US military, has called on all soldiers to refuse their orders to deploy.

"March Forward! calls on all service members to refuse orders to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq," reads a press release from the group from December 3. "We offer our unconditional support and solidarity. Join us in the fight to ensure that no more soldiers or civilians lose their lives in these criminal wars."

Michael Prysner, a former corporal in the Army who served from 2001-2005 and a veteran of the occupation of Iraq, co-founded the group with another Iraq war veteran, James Circello.

Truthout asked Prysner how he responds to those who believe a soldier should always follow orders, no matter what.

"In my experience the majority of people joining the military today join out of necessity, like money, jobs, help for their family, etc., so most don't join for ideological or patriotic reasons. Most are driven into the military by economic conditions. We see this playing out now, as people are joining in droves because of the economy."

Prysner added, "Yes, people do sign a contract to follow orders, but those orders are wrong and unlawful. We want to educate people to the fact that these are immoral orders, and they [soldiers] are being used as muscle for corporations, to colonize the developing world, and it's not legitimate. People who join and take this oath seriously who think they are in [the military] to defend the US, this is not what we are being used for in the military today."

Prysner has written about his experience in Iraq, "... there was no computer screen separating me from the suffering civilian population. I spent 12 months in Iraq, doing everything from prisoner interrogations, to ground surveillance missions, to home raids. It was my firsthand experiences in Iraq that radicalized me. I believed I was going to Iraq to help liberate and better the lives of an oppressed people, but I soon realized that my purpose in Iraq was to be the oppressor, and to clear the way for US corporations with no regard for human life."

After he separated from the Army in 2005, Prysner "understood that the occupation I was a part of was a crime against humanity. I understood that illegal conquering of Iraq was for

profit, carried out by a system that serves a tiny class of super-rich whose endless drive for wealth is at the expense of working people in the United States and abroad.”

According to Prysner, the lessons he learned from being part of the US occupation of Iraq taught him that, “I still had the same drive to fight for freedom, justice and equality as I did when I joined, and I understood that fighting for those things meant fighting against the US government, not on behalf of it.”

To those who call him and his organization “anti-American” and/or “unpatriotic,” Prysner has this to say:

“I would say that I have more in common with my sisters and brothers in Iraq and Afghanistan than I do with these people in DC who’ve sent us to war. If that’s unpatriotic, then yes, I am. But patriotism and racism are the only things the military has to fall back on to convince people to do the things we are being asked to do today.”

March Forward! was founded in 2008, and the aim of the organization is “to unite all those who have served and who currently serve in the US military, and who want to stand up for our rights and for that which is right.”

“We are new and growing,” Prysner explained. “We have seen somewhat consistent growth, and we’re expecting this to accelerate now.”

The group’s statement from December 3 adds, “On December 1, we got a clear order from President Obama. For many more years, we will be sent to kill, to die, to be maimed and wounded, in a war where ‘victory’ is impossible, against a people who are not our enemies. For over eight years, we have come home in coffins, in wheelchairs, with our skin burned and with our days and nights haunted by the trauma of war. We return home to a VA whose services are so inadequate that active duty soldiers who succumb to suicide outnumber those killed in combat.”

James Circello is a former Army sergeant and veteran of the US occupation of Iraq. Circello, who joined the military in 2001, describes his experience in Iraq as follows:

“During the occupation of Iraq, the truth about what the United States government has done to the country of Iraq became more apparent. Open wastewater flowed through neighborhood streets where children played soccer. Families were thrown out of their homes with simple accusations from others. Vehicles were taken on sight by the military if individuals couldn’t provide proper documents claiming they own the vehicle. These events and others helped in strengthening my opposition to the so-called ‘War on Terror.’”

In April 2007, Circello left his base in Vicenza, Italy, and went absent without leave (AWOL) in protest of US policy in the Middle East. In November 2007, he turned himself in to the military at Fort Knox and was discharged within three days.

Circello has remained very active with his work against US Foreign Policy, having worked with [Iraq Veterans Against the War](#) and the group [Courage to Resist](#) before joining March Forward!.

Circello’s decision to go AWOL was his way of refusing to deploy to Afghanistan.

I had been fighting myself internally after my time in Iraq, about whether to deploy again," he explained to Truthout, "I ended up back in my old unit that was preparing to deploy, so at that moment I took it into my hands, and decided I wasn't going to go kill Afghans that had done nothing to me, or the American people. It was a defining moment for me."

According to Pentagon figures, since October 2001, more than 50,000 soldiers from all branches of the military have gone AWOL.

John Raughter is the communications director for the American Legion, an organization that describes itself as "a patriotic, war-time veterans organization, devoted to mutual helpfulness," according to its web site.

Raughter is clear about his stance on the rights of soldiers. "We have an all-volunteer force," he explained to Truthout, "These are not draftees. They swore an oath to obey the orders of the Commander in Chief."

According to Raughter, the American Legion does not, in any way, support AWOL soldiers or those who refuse to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan. "Within reason, the military should be able to enforce obedience. Obedience and order are critical for the military to do its mission. People can't pick and choose which orders to obey and which not to [obey]. If it's a lawful order, they are obliged to obey."

Yet the oath enlisted soldiers must take before being deployed, reads:

"I, _____, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God."

Marjorie Cohn, president of the National Lawyers Guild, is the co-author of "Rules of Disengagement: The Politics and Honor of Military Dissent" with Kathleen Gilberd. In the book, they write, "Rules of Engagement limit forms of combat, levels of force, and legitimate enemy targets, defining what is legal in warfare and what is not. (They're also) defined by an established body of international (and US) law that leaves no ambiguity."

Cohn and Gilberd argue that every US war since WWII has been illegal. Article 51 of the UN Charter only permits the "right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member ... until the Security Council has taken measures to maintain international peace and security."

In addition, Article I, Section 8, Clause 11 (the war powers clause) of the US Constitution authorizes only both houses of Congress, not the president, to declare war. Nonetheless, that process has been followed only five times in our history and last used on December 8, 1941, after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

Nevertheless, Raughter believes soldiers who are dissenting against the occupations should have never joined the ranks. "If they are ethically opposed to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, I would say that most of these people have enlisted or reenlisted since the beginning of the war. These wars were occurring when they made this oath of enlistment. It should have come to their minds."

Circello's response to those who refer to their tactic of encouraging soldiers to refuse deployment orders as being "unpatriotic or un-American?"

"This is a tactic of demonization and we reject it," he explained, "The corporations profiting in these wars don't care about America or the American people. Is providing mercenaries to kill innocent people overseas, and bombs to kill innocent people, is that American and patriotic? The people who use these terms are demagogues. We can't forget that America was a land of institutionalized slavery, slavery was American, and folks like Dr. Martin Luther King, when they stood up to racism were called un-American ... so the same thing happens today. When you protest war, or call on soldiers to desert based on their own interest, you are called un-American."

Prysnor and Circello's organization has stated, "March Forward! supports the right of all service members to refuse illegal and immoral orders. Orders to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq are just that: illegal and immoral. We have no reason to fight in these wars, and we have every right to refuse to be a part of them.

Dahr Jamail's new book, *The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan*, is now available. Order the book here <http://tinyurl.com/cnlgyu>. Visit Dahr Jamail's website <http://dahrjamailiraq.com> **

*As one of the first and few unembedded Western journalists to report the truth about how the United States has destroyed, not liberated, Iraqi society in his book **Beyond the Green Zone**, Jamail now investigates the under-reported but growing antiwar resistance of American GIs. Gathering the stories of these courageous men and women, Jamail shows us that far from "supporting our troops," politicians have betrayed them at every turn. Finally, Jamail shows us that the true heroes of the criminal tragedy of the Iraq War are those brave enough to say no.*

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