

Fed Up Soldiers Finding New Ways to Protest the War

by Jeanine Plant via rialator - altnet *Monday, Jan 22 2007, 8:07pm*

international / peace/war / other press

There is a strict protocol for military dissent. A service member can exercise free speech, for example, but she should be off-duty. She can protest the war, but not in uniform.

In an unprecedented move, 1,171 service members signed the Appeal for Redress -- a three-sentence statement that beseeches Congress to support the prompt withdrawal of troops from Iraq -- amid a flurry of anti-war activity happening around the country and a vigorous public debate about escalation in Iraq.

According to its creators and their lawyer, J.E. McNeil, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Conscience and War, the appeal is perfectly legal and stays within the bounds of respectful discourse.

The appeal's message is not groundbreaking; anti-war sentiment in the military is well-known. The oft-cited February 2006 Le Moyne College/Zogby poll showed that 72 percent of active-duty troops wanted out of Iraq by the end of last year. And the GI Rights Hotline, affiliated with the Center on Conscience and War, gets roughly 4,000 calls a month, 40 percent of which, McNeil estimates, are questions about going AWOL.

And dissent in the ranks is not exceptional either. But the way in which these service members expressed their objection to U.S. policy in Iraq is. Their employment of the Military Whistleblower Protection Act, which shields military members from reprisals for communicating with Congress, is relatively novel.

Last week, the creators, Navy Seaman Jonathan Hutto and Marine Corps Sgt. Liam Madden, announced the appeal to Congress at a press conference held on the steps of the Cannon House Office Building in Capitol Hill. Supporters from the anti-war groups Iraq Veterans Against the War, Veterans for Peace, and Military Families Speak Out attended and spoke. Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., who introduced the End the War in Iraq Act in the last session to curb spending on the war, and Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, also came out in support. Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., and Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., issued letters of support.

Hutto and Madden, joined by others from the military, like Army National Guard Sgt. Jabbar Macgruder, wore civilian clothing, and were careful not to disparage the president or speak on behalf of the military. These reflect the rules under the Department of Defense's Directive "1325.6" or "Guidelines for Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces." The guideline forbids petitioning Congress, which is why Hutto and Madden made it explicitly clear that their statement is a "redress." Service members have the right to "complain and request redress," it reads.

"Those directives are what constrain what they can and can't do," said McNeil. "I encourage them to be very careful."

"Generally [when you join the military], you don't give up your right to be a citizen," she explained. "You have a right to vote or talk to members of Congress, but not in your official capacity. And you could talk to reporters, but not say anything that would tend to subvert the mission of the military."

While there have been no complaints of overt retaliation yet, these service members can be reprimanded in insidious, indirect ways such as being passed up for a promotion or feeling alienated from their unit.

Kucinich promised to rebuke any such overt threats or actions.

"These are amazing men and women who say that this war is abhorrent to them, and still follow orders," said McNeil. "I hope that Congress understands that they are making a double sacrifice: They are risking their careers," she says, "and their lives."

In fact, according to Hutto, 60 percent of the signatories already served in Iraq.

Macgruder, who served in Iraq in 2004 and joined the military in 2000, says he has heard rumors about his unit's redeployment at his base. And though few of his unit's soldiers lost their lives, he felt the personal impact of the war.

"I was engaged to get married," Macgruder said. "And that whole thing fell apart because of the deployment."

The people most angered by the war, he says, are "the people who get called up after they got out of the military." The service members listed I.R.R., or Independent Ready Reserves, "these are the people most against the war; those guys are more willing to speak their mind."

The Pentagon has statistics about how many service members were deployed to Iraq more than once, but such statistics are not readily available to the public.

The Army Times did publish such numbers in its December 2006 article "Deployment data underscore the strain of combat operations." But a senior editor at Army Times told AlterNet that obtaining the information is atypical; the Pentagon is usually cagey about releasing it for public relations reasons, and their journalist got an anomalous tip.

According to the data obtained by Army Times, out of the 1.4 million soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, nearly one-third of them, roughly 420,800 service members, deployed more than once.

And since September 2001, 683,380 soldiers deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq, 163,949 of them at least twice, according to Army Times.

Recruitment statistics are also hard to come by, but the National Priorities Project, a Northampton, Mass.-based advocacy organization, was able to obtain it through the Freedom of Information Act.

"We do get the data through FOIA, but it does require some followup," said Anita Dancs, research director of the National Priorities Project.

"If you are dealing with the Pentagon, you are dealing with FOIA," Dancs said. She also mentioned that the reason National Priorities received so much media attention is that it is too time consuming for independent journalists to access information through FOIA.

"Who is bearing the burden of war? It certainly is not the wealthy; it is the low-and-middle-income families, the people who are most likely to be attracted to the economic incentives," Dancs said, confirming the stereotypes.

Macgruder was one such recruit who joined for the financial benefits.

"I really wanted to earn my spot to go to school," Macgruder said.

Macgruder, like the others who signed the appeal, is not a pacifist, but says he became disenchanted with the war when it no longer seemed to make sense. "This is what changed my mind," Macgruder said, citing a lack of justification for the war. "To me it wasn't deployment, it was the reason behind the deployment."

The Appeal for Redress started out as a kind of book club. Hutto read David Cortright's *Soldiers in Revolt*, which chronicles GI resistance during Vietnam. Hutto was so taken with the book that he invited Cortright to speak near his base in Norfolk, Va. Cortright, a key figure in military resistance during Vietnam and now a research fellow at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, inspired Hutto, along with Liam Madden, to start their own movement.

In his first-person essay, "Reminiscences of Resistance," Cortright describes feeling utterly satisfied by his anti-war activities that started to consume him in 1968.

"The commitment to speak out, once I had finally made it, was incredibly fulfilling. Suddenly my life had meaning and purpose -- I was a committed anti-war activist, spending every waking moment agitating and organizing against the war."

Cortright's anti-war activities as a service member include a full-page ad of a petition signed by 35 members in his unit in the *New York Times* and his role in *Cortright v. Resor*, a class-action lawsuit against the army.

"My experience as a GI protestor was a small part of the large-scale resistance movement that shook the foundations of the U.S. military during Vietnam," Cortright writes.

"The rebellion in the ranks spread to all the services and reached every base where U.S. troops were stationed, including and most especially in Vietnam, where fraggings [which means an assassination of an officer by his own troops by grenade] and combat refusals sapped the military of its fighting capacity."

Jeanine Plant is a New York-based freelance writer.

© 2007 Independent Media Institute

<http://www.alternet.org/story/47085/>

Cleaves Alternative News. <http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-392.html>