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US Generals Reject War

Generals opposing Iraq war break with military tradition

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[UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER](#)

The generals acted independently, coming in their own ways to the agonizing decision to defy military tradition and publicly criticize the Bush administration over its conduct of the war in Iraq.

What might be called The Revolt of the Generals has rarely happened in the nation's history.

In op-ed pieces, interviews and TV ads, more than 20 retired U.S. generals have broken ranks with the culture of salute and keep it in the family. Instead, they are criticizing the commander in chief and other top civilian leaders who led the nation into what the generals believe is a misbegotten and tragic war.

The active-duty generals followed procedure, sending reports up the chain of command. The retired generals beseeched old friends in powerful positions to use their influence to bring about a change.

When their warnings were ignored, some came to believe it was their patriotic duty to speak out, even if it meant terminating their careers.

It was a decision none of the men approached cavalierly. Most were political conservatives who had voted for George W. Bush and initially favored his appointment of Donald Rumsfeld as defense secretary.

But they felt betrayed by Bush and his advisers.

"The ethos is: Give your advice to those in a position to make changes, not the media," said Maj. Gen. Paul Eaton, now retired. "But this administration is immune to good advice."

Eaton has two sons serving in Afghanistan and Iraq; his father, an Air Force pilot, was shot down and killed over Laos in 1969. He said his frustration began festering in 2003, when he was assigned to build the Iraqi army from scratch. His internal requests for more equipment and properly trained instructors went unheeded, he said.

While on active duty, Eaton did not criticize his civilian bosses - almost to a man, the generals agree active-duty officers have no business doing that. But he was candid in media interviews. Building an Iraqi army, he warned, would take years, and the effort might never succeed.

In 2004, he was replaced by Gen. David Petraeus - now the military commander in Iraq - and reassigned stateside. Sensing his once-promising Army career had foundered, Eaton retired Jan. 1, 2006.

Two months later, on the third anniversary of the U.S. invasion, Eaton criticized the administration in an opinion piece in The New York Times.

"I didn't think my op-ed would be a big deal," he said. "It certainly turned out to be otherwise."

Eaton said he wrote the piece because he believed that three pillars of our democratic system had failed:

The Bush administration ignored alarms raised by him and other commanders on the ground; the Republican-controlled Congress had failed to exercise oversight; and the media had abdicated its watchdog role.

"As we look back, it appears that without realizing it, we were reacting to a constitutional crisis," Eaton said in a recent interview.

Some of Eaton's colleagues, both active and retired, endorsed his decision to speak out. Others thought he had stepped out of bounds. He became persona non grata with ethics instructors at the U.S. Military Academy, his alma mater.

Eaton said he has no regrets.

Maj. Gen. John Batiste, former commander of the First Infantry Division in Iraq, chronicled his painful journey from stalwart soldier to outspoken critic in a post on the political Web site Think Progress this month.

Once heralded by many military observers as headed for appointment to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Batiste began his journey of introspection after he retired with two stars in 2005.

The self-described arch-conservative and lifelong Republican made the "gut-wrenching" decision to end his 31-year military career in order to "speak out on behalf of soldiers and their families."

"I had a moral obligation and a duty to do so," Batiste wrote. "I have been speaking out for the past 17 months and there is no turning back."

Code of silence

It is rare in U.S. history for even retired generals to step outside the chain of command and criticize the nation's civilian leaders.

That was true even at the time of the unpopular Vietnam War.

Andrew Bacevich, a professor of history and international relations at Boston University, said several generals who served in Vietnam now regret they didn't go public when it might have done the nation some good.

"That has encouraged generals today to voice their unhappiness," Bacevich said. The once-sacred line between private and public opinion began to blur during the 1991 Gulf War, Bacevich said, when retired generals appeared for the first time as TV network analysts.

"But that war was brief, it seemed to go very well and the generals' comments were almost uniformly positive," he said. "This war is very long, it has not gone well and that's a main reason we're hearing the voices we're hearing."

For retired Brig. Gen. John Johns, the decision to finally stand up against the administration was a deeply personal one.

"My wife lost her first husband in Vietnam," said Johns, who taught leadership and ethics at West Point.

"To learn later that President Lyndon Johnson and (then-Secretary of Defense) Robert McNamara knew as early as 1965 that we could not win there, that hurts her deeply to this day."

Six months before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Johns, who retired in 1978, agonized over whether to go public with a paper calling the impending war "one of the great blunders of history."

He sent it to retired Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni and to Pete McCloskey, the moderate-Republican former congressman from California who had opposed the Vietnam War.

"At that time, they did not want to go public," Johns said.

Zinni has since become one of the war's most vociferous critics, and McClosky now calls for bringing the troops home.

"And I was not convinced that the invasion would not be stopped

internally," Johns said. "Zinni was close to (then-Secretary of State) Colin Powell; I believed sane heads would prevail."

But Powell's notoriously inaccurate speech to the United Nations in February 2003 "sealed the deal," Johns said, and he knew the war was unstoppable. "I was very disappointed he did that. Powell was used."

Many sleepless nights, long talks with his wife and solitary walks followed, said the veteran combat officer.

But Johns didn't reach his tipping point until 2005, when a longtime friend, retired Lt. Gen. Robert Gard, invited him to discuss the war at tiny Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia.

"Four out of five of us retired military panelists there said it was a moral duty for us to speak out in a democracy against policies which you think are unwise," Johns said. "The time was right."

The lifelong Republican-leaning conservative joined a pair of liberal organizations opposed to the war and supported the Democrats' call to get the United States out of Iraq.

"I appreciate those who hold to the old school of not speaking out," said Johns, 79. "I hope they will appreciate my deeply held feelings that led to my decision to do so."

Reaction mixed

One of those who falls into that old-school camp is Navy Vice Adm. David Richardson.

A one-time adviser to Pentagon chiefs, Richardson, who retired in 1972, said that while retired generals are "entirely within their rights under the First Amendment," he was quite surprised to see so many speaking out against the Iraq war.

"They may sound off as they please, but I don't approve of that," said Richardson, 93, who served in World War II, Korea, and commanded an aircraft-carrier task force during the Vietnam War. He now lives in North Park and remains active in military circles.

"When we are at war, voices that may give aid and comfort to the enemy can cost American blood," Richardson said. "I would not want what I said to in any way affect our troops' morale and effectiveness."

Gard, who retired from the military in 1981, displayed a stoicism

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typical of old soldiers when asked about his decision to publicly criticize the conduct of an ongoing war.

"I did some serious soul-searching," Gard said simply.

A West Point graduate with a doctorate in politics and government from Harvard, Gard saw combat in Korea and Vietnam.

Gard's introspection ultimately led him to conclude that patriotism means more than following orders and keeping complaints inside the military.

"When you feel the country - to its extreme detriment - is going in the wrong direction, and that your views might have some impact, you have a duty to speak out," he said.

It may not have been that way during the Vietnam era, Gard added. "But times have changed."