

VETS PAC

FROM NOWHERE TO A POLITICAL PLAYER

BY GARY ROTSTEIN

The political advertisement depicting a mannequin in U.S. military wear being shredded by small-arms fire began showing up in August against U.S. Senator George Allen of Virginia.

The powerful, bullet-blazing ad, claiming the Senator failed to support sufficient funding for body armor to protect troops in Iraq, made its way into races against three other incumbent Republican senators who were defeated November 7: Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, Jim Talent of Missouri and Conrad Burns of Montana.

Another evocative commercial, softer in tone while showing a paralyzed Iraqi war veteran in a wheelchair, was used in the final days of the campaign against U.S. Representative Melissa Hart of Pennsylvania, as well as two other GOP House members who lost, Gil Gutknecht of Minnesota and John Sweeney of New York. The claim this time: The incumbents voted against veterans' benefits.

The note at the end of the ads made clear they were paid for not by Democratic candidates but by VoteVets Political Action Committee. It is a group that came out of nowhere this year.

VoteVets supported a small group of war veterans running for office around the country, including Democratic congressional winners Patrick Murphy and Joe Sestak in Pennsylvania. It attracted more attention, however, with the emotional nature of its opposition to conservative Republicans like Santorum and Hart, whose appeal to constituents' patriotism has long been among their political strengths.

"These are the young Turks of the veterans' world, a counterweight to the hardcore radical right," said former U.S. Senator Max Cleland, Vietnam War veteran and Democratic Party activist. "They learned real fast and went to war on the ground, and became extremely effective. They are a powerful force in this guerrilla war for the moral high ground of who really represents America's vets."

Such comments are tempered by challenges to the accuracy of the group's ads; questioning of any group's rightful claim to represent mainstream vets; and a perception that VoteVets' claims of bipartisanship poorly disguise strong Democratic leanings.

It's also hard to sort out the various factors that contributed to defeat of individual candidates and determine what role the political action committee's ads had.

It also failed in some of its efforts, spending a quarter-million dollars unsuccessfully trying to unseat Rep. Jon Porter (R-Nev.), among others. But it's clear that VoteVets made a quick name for itself, raising \$2.5 million in a matter of months and finishing on the winning side an unusually large number of times in targeting incumbents.

It's a principle of war — the only time you're on defense is when you're preparing to be on offense," said Jon Stoltz, the VoteVets chairman. He wants the group to be a forceful counter to other political groups claiming to represent veterans that assail the patriotism of war vets who question U.S. policy, like Cleland and U.S. Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.).

Much of the credit, or blame, depending on one's perspective, for VoteVets' success lies with Stoltz, 29, a relative newcomer to politics. He is an Army Reserve captain who drills in Oakdale, Pa., served on active duty in Kosovo and Iraq and is working toward a master's degree at University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public & International Affairs.

He divides his time between the organization's New York headquarters and work in Washington. His political involvement began as a volunteer in Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign.

Stoltz said he was a mentally fragile, uncertain young man after his time in Iraq when Kerry took an interest in what he had to say about the war during a brief encounter at Pittsburgh International Airport in the summer of 2004.

Stoltz, an Army captain organizing truck convoys in Iraq in 2003, had entered the war as a believer in the Bush administration's cause, but emerged disenchanted with the mission and the treatment of soldiers. He worked for Kerry's presidential campaign and was dismayed by the well-publicized attacks on the Senator's decorated Vietnam War service by the Republican-backed 'Swift Boat Veterans for Truth' group.

A year ago, he began talking with Jeremy Broussard, another Iraq veteran who had volunteered for Kerry, about the need for a new political action committee working on behalf of veterans and veteran issues. After initially collaborating with an existing group, the Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America, they formed VoteVets as a separate organization, with Stoltz as chairman and Broussard as president. Their advisory board lists some notable Democratic figures, including former NATO commander and presidential candidate Wesley Clark and former U.S. Senator Bob Kerrey.

VoteVets raised money to back veterans who shared their view about the Bush administration's handling of the war, including congressional candidates Sestak and Murphy, and to target vulnerable incumbents who had been pro-war while joining the Republican majority on certain votes that limited funding on veterans-related issues.

The group's body-armor ad, against Allen, earned it its first attention. National media in Washington commented on it. Stoltz said VoteVets spent most of what it had at the time, \$15,000, to produce the ad, raised \$5,000 each from six people who like it to put it on the air, and money flowed in afterward from other contributors who supported the aggressive approach VoteVets was taking.

But a political advertising research group based at the University of Pennsylvania, FatCheck.org, found the ad misleading. It said the 2003 Senate budget amendment on which the criticism was based made no specific reference to body armor. It accused VoteVets of being unfair to suggest Allen or any other senator voting against it was uncaring of the safety of U.S. troops.

Gary Rotstein wrote this article for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

"A petition to 'investigate and indict John F. Kerry for acts of treason' has been circulating around the country since 2004, sponsored by a group that calls itself 'The Patriot Post.' The intent seems to be to separate 'patriotic' Vietnam veterans from such traitors as Vietnam Veterans Against the War (Kerry was for a time a prominent member) — an obvious attempt to 'reimage' history.



WULF ZENDIK (1969)

STATEMENT TO THE TROOPS

The following petition was circulated among active-duty U.S. servicemen just before the invasion of Iraq on March 19, 2003. For a list of signers, check the Internet: [/www.calltoconscience.net](http://www.calltoconscience.net).

We are the veterans of the United States armed forces. We stand with the majority of humanity, including millions in our own country, in opposition to the United States' all out war on Iraq. We span many wars and eras, have many political views and we all agree that this war is wrong. Many of us believed serving in the military was our duty, and our job was to defend this country. Our experiences in the military caused us to question much of what we were taught. Now we see our *real* duty is to encourage you as members of the U.S. armed forces to find out what you are being sent to fight and die for and what the consequences of your actions will be for humanity. We call upon you, the active duty and reservists, to follow your consciences and do the right thing.

In the last Gulf War, as troops, we were ordered to murder from a safe distance. We destroyed much of Iraq from the air, killing hundreds of thousands, including civilians. We remember the road to Basra — the 'Highway of Death' — where we were ordered to kill fleeing Iraqis. We bulldozed trenches, burying people alive. The use of depleted uranium weapons left the battlefield radioactive. Massive use of pesticides, experimental drugs, burning chemical weapons depots and oil fires combined to create a toxic cocktail affecting both the Iraqi people and Gulf War veterans today. One in four Gulf War veterans is disabled.

During the Vietnam War we were ordered to destroy Vietnam from the air and on the ground. At My Lai we massa-

cred over 500 women, children and old men. This was not an aberration, it's how we fought the war. We used Agent Orange on the enemy and then experienced first-hand its effects. We know what Post Traumatic Stress Disorder looks, feels and tastes like because the ghosts of over two million men, women and children still haunt our dreams. More of us took our own lives after returning home than died in battle.

If you choose to choose to participate in the invasion of Iraq you will be part of an occupying army. Do you know what it is like to look into the eyes of a people that hate you to your core? You should think about what your "mission" really is. You are being sent to invade and occupy a people who, like you and me, are only trying to live their lives and raise their kids. They pose no threat to the United States even though they have a brutal dictator as their leader. Who is the U.S. to tell the Iraqi people how to run their country when many in the U.S. don't even believe their own President was legally elected?

Saddam Hussein is vilified for gassing his own people and trying to develop weapons of mass destruction. However, when Saddam committed his worst crimes, the U.S. was supporting him. This support included providing the means to produce chemical and biological weapons.

Contrast this with the horrendous results of the U.S.-led economic sanctions. More than a million Iraqis, mainly children and infants, have died because of these sanctions. After having destroyed the entire infrastructure of their country, including hospitals, electricity generators and water treatment plants, the U.S. then, with the sanctions, stopped the import of goods, medicines, parts, and chemicals necessary to restore even the most basic necessities of life.

There is no honor in murder. This war is murder by another name. When, in an unjust war, an errant bomb dropped kills a mother and her child it is not "collateral damage," it is murder. When, in an unjust war, a child dies of dysentery because a bomb damaged a sewage treatment plant, it is not "destroying enemy infrastructure," it is murder. When, in an unjust war, a father dies of a heart attack because a bomb disrupted the phone lines so he could not call an ambulance, it is not "neutralizing command and control facilities," it is murder. When, in an unjust war, a thousand poor farmer conscripts die in a trench defending a town they have lived in their whole lives, it is not victory, it is murder.

There will be veterans leading protests against this war on Iraq and your participation in it. During the Vietnam War, thousands in Vietnam and the U.S. refused to follow orders. Many resisted and rebelled. Many became conscientious objectors and others went to prison rather than bear arms against the so-called enemy. During the last Gulf War many GIs resisted in various ways and for many different reasons. Many of us came out of these wars and joined with the antiwar movement.

If the people of the world are ever to be free, there must come a time when being a citizen of the world takes precedence over being the soldier of a nation. Now is that time. When the orders come to ship out, your response will profoundly impact the lives of millions of people in the Middle East and here at home. Your response will help set the course of our future.

You will have choices all along the way. Your commanders want you to obey. We urge you to think. We urge you to make your choices based on your conscience. If you choose to resist, we will support you and stand with you because we have come to understand that our *real* Duty is the people of the world and our common future.

HOW MANY BEFORE THIS IS ALL OVER

How many more U.S. troops have to die before this is all over

How many more innocent children have to die before this is all over

How many more families have to be split apart before this is all over

How many more U.S. families have to receive the news that their son or daughter died in Iraq before this is all over

How many more will make the comment that this is World War III before this is all over

How many more families will be refugees in Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel before this is all over

~ANNA MYERS

Anna Myers is an "Agent Orange baby." Her father loaded Agent Orange onto airplanes during the Vietnam War, and died from his exposure when she was 18 months old. She is now 22. She lives in Astoria and has written about Agent Orange and its effects upon veterans for this newspaper.