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"I See Tangible Progress". What Gen. David "Surge" Petraeus was saying in 2004

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN

On September 26, 2004, the general now picked by President Bush to "secure" Baghdad published an upbeat piece about military progress in Iraq in the *Washington Post*. In effect it was a piece of unalloyed self-promotion, designed to show that this ambitious lieutenant general knew how to turn things around.

Already in January 2004, when he was commanding the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul, Petraeus was cultivating admiring coverage in the press for his skill in bringing in former Iraqi army officers out of the cold and recruiting them to the Coalition's cause. What Petraeus was doing in Mosul, so the press reports proclaimed, could be the model for success throughout Iraq.

Later that year, on November 11, these fantasies collapsed with humiliating speed. Even as the U.S. forces destroyed Fallujah, Mosul – a city of 1.7 million people – fell into the hands of the insurgency, as thousands of police simply changed sides.

Gen. Petraeus was not in Mosul that November day to witness the utter refutation of his optimistic assessments of January 2004. He and the 101st Airborne had moved on. By then Gen. Petraeus was in command of the Multi-national Security Transition Command in Iraq, from which vantage point he transmitted his next upbeat assessment to the *Washington Post*, to be read by the White House and by Congress.

"Now, however," Petraeus wrote, (Cockburn continued on page 6)

Populism, Lite and Dark: From John Edwards to James Webb

BY JOANN WYPIJEWSKI

John Edwards was at Riverside Church in mid-January. It was a King day prelude, organized by the church and MLK III on the subject of poverty in America, so they asked the man who has made poverty his signature issue. Ever since Edwards scribbled his "two Americas" speech on an envelope on the way to Iowa in '04, people have looked toward him as the standard bearer of a longed-for populism. Even the right-wing *Times*' columnist David Brooks was lyrical about Edwards then, about his having tapped some deep wellspring in the country, distinguishing for one brief moment the Democrats as a party of values and ideas that resonated.

A few years on, Edwards is making the same pitch, and maybe it's just the familiarity or the greater grimness of the time or the fact that there, in Riverside Church, remembering King who in that same sanctuary forty years ago made his case against "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today, my own government", Edwards couldn't but be a comparison loser. Whatever the cause, Edwards was light, sunny-seeming even when talking about terrible things. "It's not okay," he said about the realities of poverty and war, as if talking to a grade school. It's not okay to talk in class. And then he appealed to service and responsibility, to "our better angels". It was all smooth and earnest and Kennedyesque, Obama in whiteface, with a dollop of Southern sentimentality. It wasn't populist. Edwards is not angry enough to be a populist.

For labeling sake Edwards will, no doubt, be called one as the campaign ratchets up, and maybe he'll even find the anger, but I can imagine a moment

down the line, as disaster worsens and the gloom from Iraq spreads, as the country staggers through the ritual emptiness of an election season and people switch on with even greater gusto to Lou Dobbs as the only exponent of their fury and their pain, some smarty-pants Democratic insider, the kind that gets campaign consultancies and loves handicapping and banters knowingly with Chris Matthews, will get on the tube and muse that what the Democrats need is a real populist, someone unburdened by a record of voting for the war and unaccustomed to the snake oil of Washington; someone who's tough as a soldier, smart as a statesman and mad as hell; someone like James Webb.

Webb came to politics last year as a kind of Cincinnatus, challenging the Republican incumbent, who was George Allen, the junior senator from Virginia, a student of Reagan without the actor's abilities and without the scriptwriters. He'd come to Virginia from California, conflating the South with the West and Virginia with wrangler country, chewing tobacco, wearing cowboy hat and boots, saying y'all, joking about nooses and collecting mementoes of the Confederacy. It was a bad act, but enough white people bought it, electing him first as governor, then as senator, and talking seriously about him as presidential timber, the Republican nominee in 2008. The Democrats had no formidable opposition to Allen last year until someone began a campaign to draft Webb.

To that point the party's idea of a challenge was a New Democrat of the Clinton mold, neoliberal and representative of the high-tech sector that the party has rightly seen as a source of its

own self-enrichment and wrongly identified with the voters' interests, casting all of Virginia, in this case, in the image of white professionals and technocrats in the D.C. suburbs, assuming the blacks would have to go along and simply factoring the immigrants and poor whites out of the equation.

Webb represented something else altogether: the Reagan Democrat, born into a line of Democratic voters going back generations but himself a Republican; Southern by family history but stateless by actual experience, a military brat and then a career soldier; a redneck by self-description, a Vietnam vet full of loathing for "the Vietnam generation," for hippies and the summer of love and, mostly, the liberal elite personified by Bill Clinton, who evaded the war but protected their own position in the system and then smugly wore their privilege in the halls of Georgetown Law School, where Webb, like Clinton, got a law degree.

To put it mildly, Webb has a chip on his shoulder. It is a class chip long ignored by the Democrats and brilliantly exploited by Reagan, in whose administration Webb served as secretary of the navy. Webb saw in "Dutch" an image of himself and the Scots-Irish about whom Webb presents himself as an authority. He offers the Scots-Irish as a people he essentializes as born poor but scrappy, blessed with the common touch and the storyteller's skill,

traditionally Democratic but fiercely independent, sour on unions but enamored of soldiering, "born fighting", in the term Webb uses to sum up himself, his Scots-Irish "stock," the working class of America and Ronald Reagan, even if the closest the latter got to combat in World War II was at Fort Wacky, the wartime movie set in Los Angeles.

If it hadn't been for George W. Bush, Webb might have remained a Republican. More accurately, if it hadn't been for Bush going to war, Webb might never have left the fold. But Webb opposed the war in Iraq before it started, and in Bush he no doubt recognized that same galling combination of entitlement and self-righteous certitude that so enraged him as a law student. Running for the Senate thus allowed Webb in one stroke to fight the president on the war and the Clinton Democrats on the nature of the party. He beat the neoliberal high-tech man in the primary, and then he launched his general election campaign with a TV commercial linking himself to Reagan. To win their support, he told the state's unions that he'd never paid much attention to Reagan's domestic policies, and besides that was another time. Then he campaigned against corporate greed and outsourcing, against a "disparity between the rich and the poor, the likes of which we have not seen since the 19th century." Regardless of audience, he asked the veterans to stand and thanked them for their service; then he decried the shame of New Orleans, the shame of the health care system, the shame of corporate overreach and tax evasion. He called for raising new "revenue" from corporations and the rich as a matter of simple accounting and patriotism, not "class war". He let everyone know he opposed the war in Iraq but not as some sissy pacifist or slippery politician, rather as a soldier who regarded it a diversion from the necessary war on terror, a drain on his truest home, the U.S. military, and a catastrophe for American power in a world with more formidable enemies, like China and the countries whose desperate straits compel their people to flock here as "illegals," a word he used too liberally.

"I Am a Man" might have been his campaign slogan, with an echo of the Memphis sanitation workers' self-assertion in 1968, only here appropriated on behalf of anyone who has ever been denigrated as "white trash", a paean to the redneck's rising and the return of the

man's man. Webb wouldn't get caught in debates over gay rights, opposing the ultimately successful marriage amendment, but largely keeping to himself his support for civil unions. Instead, he aimed to project a robust heterosexuality and in that way wordlessly to convey his long-held protest against the culture wars, promulgated by Marxists or pseudo-Marxists, so he writes in his book *Born Fighting*, to emasculate America and degrade its warriors, the white working class, who over hundreds of years have contributed the country's "most definitive culture".

On the last push of the campaign Webb rode in a heavily chromed, camouflage-painted Jeep, blazoned with decals and his campaign slogan, "Born Fighting". He told voters he was licensed to carry a concealed weapon and bristled that the National Rifle Association endorsed his opponent. Acquainted with killing and privation; at home with guns since he was 8 years old, just as all the male Webbs before and after him; potent like those elder Webbs too, at 60 married to a much younger woman who was rescued as a girl on a boat from Vietnam and was now heavy with his child. Dressed in army drab, Webb pumped his fists and appeared for all the world as someone trying so hard he doesn't even know he's trying anymore.

Unlike the big guns the party sent out with him in the campaign's last days – former Governor John Warner and Governor Tim Kaine, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton – he did not present himself as a boon to the larger fortunes of the party, a player on the team striving together to "take back America". He neither smiled readily nor pressed the flesh with ease. At a rally in Richmond he took the podium peevishly after Obama spoke for what seemed like thirty minutes, gliding back and forth upon the stage like a crooner or talk-show host, telling an adoring crowd of his hopes and dreams for America, plugging his book and forgetting, it appeared, that he was in Virginia for the midterms, for Webb, finally introducing the candidate as "the next great senator from the state of Illinois – oh, no, that's me!" Webb, florid and unsmiling, told the crowd, "For a while there I thought we were in New Hampshire." In later days he tried to make a joke of it, but the strain showed. By the final stretch Webb's driver, a one-armed vet whom Webb counts among his closest

(Wypijewski continued on page 4)

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