

# ROLL CALL

## MoveOn Ad, 'Phony Fred' Site Are Case Studies in Bad Politics

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After 25 years in politics, it never ceases to amaze me when I see, as we did last week, politicians who should know better shoot themselves in the foot or — in the case of MoveOn.org's now infamous New York Times ad and the phony "Phony Fred" Web site — shoot themselves in both feet.



Let's start with the worst of the two. After their failed "summer offensive" to end the Iraq War, Democratic leaders returned in September intent on breaking out of the untenable political box in which they had put themselves. By trying to have it both ways — to be seen as supporting the troops yet opposing the war — Democrats had only confused the issue and driven their job-approval numbers into the ground.

Requiring that U.S. commander in Iraq Gen. David Petraeus report to Congress in September on the state of the troop "surge" in Iraq seemed like a good idea back in the spring, when it was used as a bartering chip in the debate over the administration's supplemental military appropriations bill. But by summer's end, the news coming out of Iraq seemed to indicate that the increase was beginning to produce positive results.

That left many Democrats with what they saw as only one option: to attack the messenger and his credibility. But as one Democratic Senator told Politico, "No one wants to call [Petraeus] a liar on national TV. The expectation is that the outside groups will do this for us."

Enter MoveOn.org. As Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and other leading Democrats took pot shots at Petraeus from the sidelines, MoveOn brought out "Big Bertha," a full-page ad in The New York Times. But rather than blow Petraeus out of the water, the antics and ethics of MoveOn put Democrats on the defensive.

As the House hearings began, the controversy quickly became a distraction, taking the focus away from Iraq and setting up the one contrast Democrats wanted to avoid. Instead of Democrats up against Bush and his low job approval, the story became Democrats versus Petraeus' success. As the questioning moved to the Senate, Democrats tried to reassert themselves by revving up the rhetoric.

Most notably, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) told the general during the Senate hearings, "I think that the reports that you provide to us really require a willing suspension of disbelief" — one step away from calling him a liar. Republicans found themselves in the best position they could have hoped for.

Political pundits weren't debating the effectiveness of the surge but the wisdom of MoveOn's attack on Petraeus' patriotism and The New York Times' decision to sell the ad at a cut-rate price or, as Senate Minority Whip Trent Lott (R-Miss.) called it, the "friends and family" rate. As the criticism

escalated, MoveOn was forced to defend the ad in a lengthy explanation on its Web site.

According to MoveOn, "The truth about the mainstream media is that the kind of analyses with which some of us feel more comfortable don't generate enough attention or news coverage to shift the debate." In other words, it was the national media that forced MoveOn to adopt its over-the-top tone. Given the Times' generosity, placing blame on the media for their own misjudgment was a little like biting the hand that fed you.

Of course, Democrats haven't cornered the market on inappropriate campaign tactics. As ex-Sen. Fred Thompson (R-Tenn.) formally threw his hat into the ring, an anonymous Web site, "Phony Fred," launched a particularly nasty example of attack politics. While the "Phony Fred" Web site may not be in the same league as impugning the patriotism of a commanding general in the middle of a war, it is the kind of sleazy campaigning the gives all politics a bad name.

The site referred to Thompson as "Playboy Fred," "Hollywood Fred," "Moron Fred" and "Pimp Fred" among other less-than-flattering descriptions. It didn't take the media long to track the site to Under the Power Lines, which describes itself as "South Carolina's only online campaign strategy firm."

Under the Power Lines is headed by Mitt Romney's South Carolina consultant, who blamed other members of his firm for the site. Romney's campaign immediately disavowed the site and adamantly denied any connection to it. Romney himself took the unusual step of publicly criticizing the site and reaffirming that his campaign had nothing to do with it.

Whoever put the site together, it was clearly professionally designed. This was not the stuff of a couple of beer-inspired college students armed with a video camera and access to YouTube. Obviously, those behind the site thought it would hurt Thompson.

What they discovered, as did MoveOn, is that sometimes there is a price to pay for cheap political shots. Last week was a good week for those who believe campaigns can and should be waged on the strength of one's ideas.

Too much of our political discourse has devolved into partisan bomb-throwing and too many politicians have turned into rhetorical pit bulls willing to, as one consultant put it to me, "rip the lungs out of the opponent," to win. Contrast politics focused on a candidate's policy positions or record is fair game, but personal attacks are not.

Americans have a pretty good sense of fair play. They know what's acceptable and what is outside the norms of common decency when it comes to political tactics. They are tired of the kind of gutter politics represented most recently by MoveOn's attack ad and the "Phony Fred" site. Apologies are in order. So are higher standards for a country that must serve as an unimpeachable example of free and fair elections to an often doubting world.

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