



Murtha War Fighter: Fighting for the Soul of America

Brad Clemenson, Jim Penna

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MURTHA: War Fighter Fighting for the Soul of America "The war in Iraq is not going as advertised. It is a flawed policy wrapped in illusion." With those words, the late Congressman John P. Murtha set America on a new course. Jack Murtha's life presents an inescapable irony. As a decorated Vietnam War veteran and undeniable hawk, he was the only person in Washington who had both the credibility and courage to withstand the venomous attacks when he called for redeploying U.S. troops from Iraq. Yet this gruff old Marine had a simple message: let's be civil and talk through our differences. War is about killing, he said, and even in war, killing leaves "shadows" on the soul. He said torture sears the soul of those who do it and those who witness it. In campaigning for Democrats to take control of Congress in 2006, he said, "We're fighting for the soul of America." That fight was partly about getting American troops out of the crossfire of Iraq's civil war. It was also a fight to end the vicious name-calling of politics and allow America to have an open, civil discussion about our direction. Mentored by former House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Murtha was an old-school, behind-the-scenes power broker who often backed Republicans on defense issues. The Pennsylvania Congressman forced President Reagan to fund stinger missiles so the Afghan rebels could beat the Soviets, which ultimately brought down the Berlin Wall. He convinced many Democrats to back Operation Desert Storm in 1991. On national security, he supported every president, Republican and Democrat, over thirty-six years in Congress; every president, that is, until George W. Bush rebuked and ignored him. He was convinced by his old friend, Vice President Dick Cheney, to vote for the war in Iraq. But when Murtha called for redeployment from Iraq, he was branded a "cut-and-run" coward. A near free-for-all erupted on the floor in Congress and several Republicans defended him. His courage moved America beyond the "false patriotism" that had silenced voices as leaders feared being called "cowards" or "soft on terrorism." He stirred more controversy when, after talking with the Marine Corps Commandant, he said that Marines had killed innocent civilians "in cold blood." The shrill tone of politics inspired him to run for House majority leader, in large part so he could be a voice for civility. He often lamented that, when he first went to Congress, the left wingers made their speeches, the right wingers made their speeches, and, at the end of the day, the moderates from both parties would compromise and move the process forward. As that changed and political leaders moved toward a divisive, winner-take-all approach to policy issues, Murtha felt America was losing its soul. "I think Murtha's the kind of guy who makes Capitol Hill and Congress and the Constitution work," said Chris Matthews, host of Hardball on MSNBC. "The statutes don't make government work. They're nice statutes but they don't do anything, they guide you but they're just there. It's the living people that make democracy and our government work." Authors Brad Clemenson and Jim Penna knew Murtha well as a Murtha staffer and TV newscaster, respectively. They offer a highly readable, behind-the-scenes look at the man and his impact on America.

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