

American Vets Take Center Stage at Boston

by William Jones

The impressive array of flag officers gathered on the stage of the Fleet Center on the evening of July 28, the third night of the Democratic National Convention, was undoubtedly unprecedented in the history of American political conventions. But, contrary to the ads issued by the Republican “attack dogs” who were carefully monitoring every word of the convention, this was far from a political “gimmick” by the convention organizers. Rather, their presence on the podium was the culmination of the growing concern among the uniformed military of the United States, both active-duty and retired, that the Cheney-Bush war in Iraq is in the process of sacrificing another generation of Americans on the altar of a purposeless, no-win war, as occurred in Vietnam. Many of the flag officers, most of them veterans of the Vietnam War, now have sons and daughters serving in Iraq and in Afghanistan. For many of them, Iraq seems to be Vietnam revisited.

Speaking on behalf of many of his colleagues, Gen. John Shalikashvili (ret.), the former chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who first experienced the horrors of war as a young boy in 1944 Warsaw, summed up the position most eloquently: “I know about the horror of war, and thus join with others like John Kerry in believing that we must go to war only when all other efforts to resolve the threat to us have been exhausted,” he said, “and only then, when going to war becomes absolutely necessary, then to go with full resolve and to use force decisively. But we should never go to war without a comprehensive plan for how to secure the peace once military victory has been won.”

Max Cleland’s Introduction of Kerry

On June 29, just prior to John Kerry’s acceptance speech, Kerry’s former shipmates from the swift boat he commanded in Vietnam, including one soldier whose life Kerry had saved, joined him onstage. Max Cleland, a former Democratic Senator from Georgia, a Vietnam vet who had lost his legs and one of his arms as a result of combat wounds in Vietnam, gave a moving endorsement of his friend and colleague, John Kerry.

Cleland himself had been the particular target of the Republican neo-conservative “attack dogs” who had viciously taken out ads against him, using pictures of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, and claiming that he had encouraged them by his refusal to vote for the

Republican version of the Homeland Security bill. As a result of the scurrilous attacks, Cleland lost his seat in the U.S. Senate.

“While John Kerry was earning a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and three Purple Hearts, I was being treated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.,” Cleland told the Convention. “I was 25 years old. My body was broken and my faith was shattered. One day, on leave from the hospital, a friend was pushing me around the city. In front of the White House, it hit a curb. I fell forward out of the wheelchair. There were cigarette butts and trash all around me. I remember trying to lift myself up off the street. I was angry at the war, saddened that veterans weren’t getting good care, and frustrated that people in power weren’t listening.”

“My fellow Americans,” Cleland said, “John Kerry has *never* let me down. He’ll never let you down. He is an authentic American hero. He is the next captain of our ship of state. And he *will* be the next President of the United States.”

Turning Out the Veteran Vote

Earlier in the week, on June 27, a reception had been held by the Kerry Veterans’ Caucus at the Boston Harbor Hotel, with a good turn-out from veterans. Hosted by former Senator Bob Kerrey, a Vietnam veteran himself and a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, and by Cleland, the event fostered a great deal of camaraderie, with numerous Senators and Congressmen dropping in. There was a clear appeal here and in a numerous caucus meetings held during the course of the convention, to get out the votes among the vets. Many of them felt that it was now time to revive the traditions of the United States as a “beacon of hope,” an image which had been seriously tarnished by the effects of the Indochina war and its aftermath. One veteran said that he had already put on 10,000 miles on his pick-up truck mobilizing vets to vote for John Kerry.

The central role played by the veterans at the convention has already caused a freak-out among the Republicans. They have rearranged their own convention at the end of August to upgrade the presence of veterans there, assuring former POW Sen. John McCain (Ariz.) a major speaking role at the Convention.

When President Bush began his campaigning again at the beginning of August, just after the Democratic Convention, signs began appearing at the rallies, saying “Veterans for Bush.” Vice President Dick Cheney, whose wife conveniently had a baby at the time he was eligible for the draft, thus preventing his ever having to don a uniform, is trying to play up his time as Secretary of Defense (during the Gulf War) as “combat credentials” in the eyes of Americans veterans. It is unlikely, however, that people will be bamboozled by such ostentatious flag-waving by Cheney and his ilk, who like to start wars but only on condition that someone else does the fighting and the dying.