Obituary: John P. Murtha

Congress Has Lost Its Leading FDR Democrat

by Anita Gallagher

The United States and the institution of the U.S. Congress suffered a great blow Feb. 8, with the death of John P. Murtha, 77, Democratic Representative of the 12th C.D. in central and western Pennsylvania for 36 years, and the first Vietnam veteran elected to Congress.

Murtha, who had initially voted to authorize the Iraq War, stunned the nation in November 2005 by declaring Dick Cheney's perpetual war militarily unwinnable, and calling for the return of all U.S. troops. No one in Congress had stronger pro-military credentials than Murtha, a highly decorated Marine colonel, who served in the Korean War, Vietnam, the National Guard, and then worked to strengthen the military and its personnel, as chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. Murtha, during numerous trips to Iraq, had listened to the U.S. commanders on the ground report that the war could not be won militarily, and brought the case that they could not make, to Congress and the American people.

Nor did Murtha flinch from making public the particularly destructive effects on soldiers which occurs in a no-win war. He spoke out against the coverup of the Haditha massacre of unarmed women and children in November 2005. This drew the venom of the "Swift Boat" apparatus, and vicious campaigns against him, in 2006 and 2008, by the Karl Rove networks. He also fought to pass the anti-torture legislation, after torture at Abu Ghraib prison was exposed.

But, above all, Congressman Jack Murtha demonstrated a zeal for promoting the general welfare for the people of his district—a district which already had 24% unemployment when he was elected. When the second great Johnstown Flood occurred in 1977, the area had lost 100,000 jobs. Through the funding of infrastructure—"hundreds of millions of *earmarks*"—for what Murtha characterized as, "things that nobody wants to talk about, like sewage and water," the region was able to diversify. Murtha worked with others in Congress, to lift up their "districts" across the United States. In May 2009, he told his annual Showcase for Commerce event: "Western Pennsylvania was the backbone of the Industrial Revolution. And, during World War II, we produced the steel; we produced all the things that were needed. We overwhelmed the Germans and the Japanese. So the industrial capacity of the United States was as important as anything else we do."

In one of his last interviews, he was informed that President Obama had declared a discretionary spending freeze. Murtha—who had been a strong supporter of Hillary Clinton for President—reportedly chuckled, and said, "He may have called for a discretionary spending freeze. But Congress makes that decision." In one reported instance, Murtha pulled a worn copy of the U.S. Constitution from his pocket, and read to a reporter needling him about "earmarks": "The Congress appropriates the funds. . . . Got that?"

In 1980, Murtha was targetted by the Justice Department "sting" operation known as Abscam, for which he was not prosecuted. He and Rep. Joe McDade (R-Pa.) succeeded in curbing the DoJ's political prosecutions of constituency-oriented politicians with the passage of the McDade-Murtha Act in 1998, for which the political dirty-tricks side of the Justice Department never forgave Murtha.

In 2009, the anti-FDR crowd tried again to get a prosecution against Murtha, with a heavy drumbeat in the press, trumpeting campaign contributions to him from defense firms who received Federal money. After a year of front-page smears, the Office of Congressional Ethics, on Dec. 18, 2009, released its 6-0 recommendation: that the Congressional Ethics Committee "dismiss the above allegations." The OCE closed its investigation, finding nothing to investigate.

Murtha summarized his credo when he told the "Showcase for Commerce," in 2009: "My great-grandmother, when I was six years old, said, 'You're put on this Earth to make a difference.' We have made a difference in this area, and I'm proud of everything that we've done."