

## **On Meeting with Reichert: the Banality of Complicity**

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On Jan 7, 2008 a delegation of local MoveOn members met with Rep. Dave Reichert at his Mercer Island office to discuss Iran, global warming, and health care reform.

This is the second time our group has met with Rep. Reichert. In February of 2007, a group of us met with him to discuss the war in Iraq (the surge), verified voting, the environment, and health care – almost the same issues. Clearly, Reichert is reaching out to his opponents. We, in turn, have tried to be respectful and considerate towards Reichert and his staff.

This time especially, Reichert and his staff made a determined effort to come across as moderate and reasonable, especially on the topic of the environment. Reichert wants us to believe that he's not a slave to the Republican leadership. He proclaimed his sponsorship of a recent bill to raise CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) standards. He has supported some other environmental initiatives (opposition to ANWR drilling, for example). He has broken ranks with the Republican leadership on the SCHIP veto override.

We wonder, though, whether at least some of those votes (the SCHIP vote, in particular) weren't in fact "managed" votes, meaning that the Republican leadership allowed him to vote against their interests just because they knew they already had the votes they needed, and because they knew that Reichert is in a tough re-election race. In particular, Congress was unable to override Bush's veto of the expanded SCHIP plan.

On our arrival at the office, we were met by Reichert's chief of staff, Mike, a young, friendly, clean-cut, competent-seeming guy. He firmly shook hands with each of us. Almost the first thing Mike did was to apologize for the extremism of some Republican positions. I got the impression that Reichert wants to send us a message: I'm not like them (the Republican leadership). When Rep. Reichert greeted us we joked that there's nothing more to discuss, since we'd already covered all our points with Mike.

Throughout the meeting, Reichert's district director, Mairana, sat beside him – just as she did last year. And just like last year, at the end of the meeting she snapped a posed group photo, using a camera provided by one of our members. (See <http://truthsite.org/politics/images/ReichertGroupPhoto.jpg>. I'm the guy with glasses standing half hidden, on Reichert's right.) On the other side of Reichert sat his press secretary, an attractive, young woman, who seemed disturbed by our presence. She maintained a serious, unsmiling face, with distracted, blinking eyes. I don't think she even once made eye contact with us. Did she imagine that we were crazies? After all, Congress condemned MoveOn for its anti-Petraeus ad in the New York Times! sob, sob. MoveOn was called a radical group. So maybe she thought we are extremists. The press secretary left after five or ten minutes.

On the wall were plaques and certificates honoring Reichert and documenting his credentials (e.g., for police work). There were also photos of Reichert with famous people, including a photo with Bush in which the President was making a silly-looking face; it's one of those photos in which Bush looks like the idiotic but kinda lovable and harmless class clown.

Our meeting with Reichert lasted just over an hour. In an adjacent room were some staff members

who, now and then, opened the door to pass along messages, and who made sure we didn't run overtime.

Our discussions on Iran lasted 25 minutes. Basically, we asked, "Isn't there anything Congress can do to prevent Bush and Cheney from attacking Iran?" The answer: not much. While Bush should be susceptible to the influence of the Republican leadership, Reichert said, the President has constitutional authority to wage war. The extent of Bush's authority in the Middle East is unclear. And Congress hasn't been willing to cut off funding. Reichert seemed to agree that war with Iran isn't warranted but he's obviously not going to go out on a limb and demand that Bush not attack Iran. Heck, even the Democrats aren't doing much to stop Bush from attacking Iran.

Indeed, the Democrats have continued to fund the war (occupation) in Iraq. Moreover, for Nancy Pelosi and others, impeachment is "off the table." No wonder no one can stop Bush. The Republicans are behind him nearly 100%, and the Democrats haven't dared to cut off funding or pursue impeachment. Hence the mess we're in.

One of the MoveOn members at the meeting was Nahid, an educated Persian woman who lives on Mercer Island. Nahid spoke movingly of her love for her country, of the high level of education of Iranians, of how she wakes up at night fearing for the safety of her friends and relatives in Iran. She said that while she doesn't support the current leadership in Iran, she thinks an attack on Iran would be terrible. Reichert asked her, "But doesn't Iran support the terrorist organizations like Hamas and Islamic Jihad [or was it Hezbollah?]" Nahid responded, "I don't think they're terrorist organizations. I think they're freedom fighters."

Wow. That was unexpected.

Testily, Reichert responded, "Oh, now I see where you're coming from."

The odd thing about this exchange is that the rest of us were unaware that Nahid would say such a thing. Furthermore, four out of the seven people in the MoveOn delegation are from Jewish backgrounds (including me). But I don't think we feel hostility or anger towards Nahid. I realize that if I were in her shoes, I'd probably feel at least some sympathy for those groups too. Now don't get me wrong: I detest their violence and their targeting of civilians; I do think these groups are terrorist organizations.

A member of our delegation, Robert Sargent, sent the following email to Reichert (and later, apparently, spoke on the phone with him):

"Thank you for your generous time, graciousness, and hospitality yesterday. I wanted to follow up on Nahid's tentative answer of 'no' to the question of whether Hamas & Hezbollah are terrorist organizations. I had personal conversations with Nahid before and after the meeting on this very subject, and I'd like to explain.

Saddam Hussein, by our own decree, is a terrorist. A terrorist that was materially supported by the U.S. Government during the Iran/Iraq war, and with our help, killed Iranian nationals - lots of them. We also supported, of course, bin Laden and the Taliban in struggle against the Soviets. I don't even want to get into the implications of the current occupation of Iraq.

Nahid's position is this, and I think it is defensible and logical: If Iran supports terrorist organizations ( Hamas and Hezbollah) then so does the United States Government. If the U.S. government does not support terrorist organizations, neither does Iran. You can't have it both ways. She is terrified that our Government's logic, that we need to 'deal with' Iran, for doing the same thing we do ourselves, is going to cause millions to die in her homeland, which she loves, and where remain many of her relatives.

The concept that our torture, our executions, our invasions, our support of dictators, our support of insurgencies, that are carried out for our national interest are somehow morally justified, and 'theirs', whomever may they be, are not, because we have better reasons, is, to the world outside the U.S., prima facie hypocrisy and arrogance.

I respect your opinion on this matter (and of course I agree Hamas & Hez are terrorist org's), but I also respect Nahid's."

This is pretty close to my opinion. (Robert is smart and a brilliant blogger. Going forward, I hope to work with him. He wrote a blog about the meeting, though he later removed it; that blog helped me refresh my memory about many points.)

At one point in the meeting I tried to relate the Iran issue to the war in Iraq. I said, "Regardless of whether the surge in Iraq is successful or not, we shouldn't have been there in the first place. The reasons for getting involved were bogus. Given that the US killed hundreds of thousands of civilians, about 4000 US soldiers, and wasted close to a trillion dollars on the Iraq War, all based on false evidence about WMDs and alleged ties between Sadaam and 9/11, you can understand why people are worried that Bush & Cheney might want to attack Iran. Their track record isn't good." Well, I didn't want him to talk about the surge (because that would be a distraction from the issue about whether we should be there in the first place and because I knew that he'd probably say it's succeeding), but he did anyway. And he told stories about meeting various bigshots during his trip to Iraq. And, like last year, he told stories of violence that he experienced first hand, as a cop, including a case where a criminal held a knife to his stomach.

Reichert said he doesn't like war any more than we do, But still, like so many other members of Congress, he doesn't seem eager to oppose Bush and Cheney about Iran.

Reichert is the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment of the House Committee on Homeland Security. He mentioned this fact and suggested that he's privy to top secret information that may be relevant.

So, basically, our discussion about Iran went nowhere.

On the topic of health care reform, our speaker was Sherry Weinberg, who is a retired pediatrician and a confident, well-prepared presenter. She summarized the case for national health insurance, relating how inefficient and unethical the current system is, and how the insurance companies skim off huge amounts of money but add little value. She handed to Reichert a paper she's written with a title like, "What if we purchased police services the same way as health care?" Imagine if instead of a

centralized police force, there were competing police forces, and subscribers needed to choose a plan and buy police coverage from one of multiple police insurance companies. The inefficiency and ineffectiveness would be laughable. The analogy is brilliant! Reichert pointed out that he voted to override the SCHIP veto (though, again, Congress failed to override that veto). He seemed authentically concerned with the issue of health care reform. He showed us a book he's reading about the health care mess and Sherry gave him the names of some recommended books on the topic.

Sherry managed to slip in a couple of zingers, like about Bush being the worst president in history.

Next, near the end of our allotted hour, was my turn. I had a few words prepared on the topic of global warming. I quoted from his website his fence-straddling position. Specifically, his website says, "Until he [Reichert] reaches a definitive conclusion, he will continue to pursue an environmental agenda that presupposes global warming is caused by man's activity, and support environmental legislation that seeks to counteract man's influence."

I asked him "Do you believe global warming is real and human activity is largely responsible?" I wanted to hear him come out and say he's a not a denier. Reichert rather indignantly said that what he "believes" shouldn't matter. People used to believe the earth was flat. People used to believe that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction Why should he have to believe it? He's not an expert.

I responded, "Well, some conservatives, like on Fox News and groups funded by energy companies, are deeply into active denial of global warming."

He recalled that he wanted the endorsement of the Sierra Club at a meeting. He's convinced he deserves it. They asked him the same question (whether he believes in global warming). He refused to say, "I'm a believer." They didn't endorse him.

Alas, I now see that my effort to get him to state a position on global warming was doomed. His statement on the website is not unreasonable, and I should have concentrated my questions on specific policies proposals. I'm sure Reichert is under a lot of pressure from people in his own party not to be too strongly environmental. A few months ago I read criticisms of Reichert on a conservative blog; they thought he was too liberal on environmental issues. I'm not excusing him, but just pointing out that my trying to put him on the spot was probably doomed.

I said to Reichert, "Republicans are typically opposed to government regulation and to raising taxes, but can global warming and pollution be addressed without regulating pollution and without raising taxes, e.g., carbon taxes?" This was at the very end of the meeting, and I don't think he had a chance (or maybe the inclination) to respond.

Several times during the meeting Reichert went to some length to criticize the vicious partisanship in Congress. Both Democrats and Republicans try their best to make the other side look bad, he said, even if it means opposing bills that would benefit the country. I enjoyed hearing Reichert's story about trying to talk Democratic congressmen into signing onto one of his environmental bills. They all refused, not because they opposed the bill but because they want to make him look bad. He's the only Republican congressman in the western part of the state, I believe, and the Dems want to get rid of him. Reichert admitted that when given a chance, Republicans do the same sort of thing.

Reichert recalled how Tom DeLay once pressured him on some vote. Reichert seemed to think the

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pressure was unreasonable.

At one point during the meeting, when someone asked about impeachment of Cheney, Reichert said something like "Well, there's a process in Congress for doing that. You should start with trying to get Nancy Pelosi on board." Great response. I groaned, and someone said, "You think it's testy in here between us and you? If we met with Nancy Pelosi, boy would sparks fly!"

So, what's the take away message from this meeting? [Warning: pure commentary from here on down.]

One message, I think, is that the ugly partisanship in Congress really is detrimental to America. Specifically, it causes Republicans to support the Republican leadership, *just for the sake of the Party and despite the harmfulness of the policies*. (On the other hand, the Democrats need to be *more* partisan!) Another message is that – surprise – even Republicans are human. They're not in general monsters, though some of their policies sure are regressive and dangerous.

I am reminded of Hannah Arendt's book, "Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil." One point of the book is that evil deeds are often done by well-meaning, ordinary people. We tend to think that evil is done by sociopaths, monsters and maniacs. Using the Nazis as an example, Arendt claims that in most cases evil is a result of bureaucratic efficiency, patriotism, fear, partisanship, and defensiveness.

I mention Arendt's book because I know that lots of Republicans are, personally, pleasant people. Reichert and his staff seem like ordinary, pleasant people. Heck, even George W is probably a nice guy in person (though someone told me that, in fact, he has a nasty temper). I'm not sure whether Bush is actively evil or just mostly stupid. But, in any case, decent people sometimes support harmful or downright monstrous policies. Decent politicians, by blindly supporting the party leadership, sometimes support terrible leaders. Decent people, by continuing to vote for Republican candidates, sometimes support politicians who support those leaders. Decent people, by their indifference or laziness, sometimes stand by and allow harmful, monstrous policies to continue. Or they allow impeachable presidents and vice-presidents to get off without accountability.

Some of the neighbors on my street are staunch Republicans. It's in their blood and in their upbringing. Though nowadays many such Republicans voice disagreement with some of the Bush Administration's policies, a lot of them will continue to vote for Republican candidates. These neighbors are normal people. I wonder: don't they realize that by voting Republican they're supporting a tyrant who has waged an immoral war, etc, etc?

But how about us? How many of us have done our utmost to demand that Bush be stopped? How many of us have demanded to our congressmen and senators that they support impeachment? Why aren't we lying down in the road, boycotting work, sitting in at government buildings? Are we almost as wimpy as Republicans and Democrats in Congress? Are we too complicit?

Many of us *have* gone to great lengths to oppose Republicans and to support impeachment. But after some point, we, naturally, give up. And at some point we tire of hearing pleas by activists who refuse to give up on the war or on impeachment.

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What's sickening for a progressive-leaning person is that it's so difficult to make a difference. We know that Bush and Cheney are terrible. But Congress -- especially the Republicans but also the Democratic leadership -- have failed to stand up to the Bush administration. So, it is very possible that the current skirmishes with Iran will escalate into a disastrous war. Or it's possible that Bush and Cheney will leave office pretty much unscathed, with no accountability for their many lies and misdeeds.

My attitude towards the political situation is usually, "Oh my God! I can't believe this is happening." I bet a lot of politicians think the same. We're living through a nightmare caused by a dysfunctional, corrupt political and economic system. Even the politicians admit the system is broken.

We citizens now have the responsibility for fixing this mess. We have to stand up to our politicians and hold them accountable. Somehow, even if it takes decades, we have to take back America. If possible, we progressives want to do this withOUT dividing the Left, because the Republicans would like nothing more than for the Left to continue to fight among themselves. But we still need to criticize Democrats who fail to stand up for progressive ideals. (Actually, I don't think that opposing the war in Iraq or a war with Iran counts as a particularly "progressive" ideal, since the reasons given for the wars were bogus.)

I think the best hope for beating Reichert comes from peoples' disgust with Bush and from Reichert's close association with Bush (e.g., by accepting money at the fund-raiser in Bellevue last year). We're not going to have much success at painting Reichert (or the other Republicans) as monsters and extremists per se. But we CAN point out that Reichert has been part of the Republican establishment that has repeatedly defended and enabled Bush and Cheney. Unfortunately, people often make political decisions based on hatred and outrage, rather than on support for candidates and positions. Until 2004, people voted for Republicans because they were "fed up" with perceived "liberal" biases. Republicans managed to convince tens of millions of (gullible) Americans that they, the Republicans, had their best interests in mind. They'd defend them against the decadent, elitist values of liberals and their support for pornography, gays, abortion, secularism, and public schools. Moreover, they'd cut their taxes. ("Vote for me, I'll lower your taxes!") Conservatives like Rush Limbaugh exploited their prejudices and anger, and they voted for Republicans.

Likewise, people are nowadays disgusted with what the Republicans have done -- with the war, with corruption, with uncontrolled spending, and with incompetence -- and on the basis of this disgust, they're supporting the Democrats. Rightly so. But my point is: almost nobody loves the Democrats. They just hate the Republicans more.

Lots of progressives won't even work with the Democratic Party. They say, "Oh, they're as bad as the Republicans." I understand that attitude! Heck, the Democrats even went along with the Republican bill to condemn MoveOn for its ad critical of Gen. Petraeus. So, Democrats condemned their ally, MoveOn, but haven't yet condemned the horrible Republican policies. Dumb. And of course they've continued to fund the war.

Still, I, for one, haven't given up on the Democratic Party, because though it is very imperfect, there are lots of true progressives within the party, and because I think there is hope of pushing the party Leftward. At the grassroots level especially, Democrats tend to be quite progressive. I guess power really does corrupt. As I said, I don't want the Left divided, and I don't want to see a repeat of 2000, when Nader threw the election to Bush. Moreover, the Democratic presidential candidates this year are unusually progressive and competent.

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But in addition to working with the Democrats, I especially want to cultivate the many alternative grassroots and issue-oriented organizations like MoveOn, DFA, Sierra Club, NARAL, Reclaim the Media, Puget Sound Liberals, Northwest Progressive Institute, Washclean, Washington Community Action Network, ACLU, Planned Parenthood, Washington for Impeachment, Evergreen Peace and Justice Community, HorsesAss, and Washblog. My wish is that these various progressive groups will better coordinate their activities in order to increase their effectiveness and, in particular, increase their media footprint. For, what's most needed is a more progressive media. Either the mainstream (corporate) media needs to give more coverage to progressive content, or we need to build a viable, alternative media, perhaps based on the Internet. This will require difficult negotiation and coalition-building on the Left, and it may require years to bring to fruition, but such difficult work is necessary for taking back America.

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